

Blue-sky thinking about TBLT

An interview with Martin Bygate

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TASK: By way of introduction, could you tell us how you got involved with language teaching and with task-based language teaching at the beginning of your career, and then how that evolved and you really got steeped into TBLT?

Martin Bygate: I started off because I was a foreign language student. After graduation, I found myself in France. I was teaching English at the time, in order to stay alive, and learning and sort of perfecting my French. So, I suppose my starting point, like a lot of people's, was the experience of being a language learner. Experiencing the difference between classroom learning as a learner and learning in the community, and at the same time being thrown into a situation where I was also teaching primary children and then secondary school students, and tertiary later. While I was in France, I started studying linguistics and applied linguistics. And from there, I moved into teacher education to qualify as a teacher in the UK. Now, at that point, there were two things that got me interested in task-based language teaching. One was language analysis, because part of what we were doing was linguistics. I got rather interested in the distinction between the ways linguists analysed language into separate components (phonological, grammatical, semantic, etc.), as opposed to a kind of real-world language analysis proposed by a few linguists at the time, which is the kind of language analysis that we perhaps associate now more with discourse analysis: there you find out about how language features function through how they behave in naturally occurring discourse. I found fascinating the whole idea that the learning of language was itself a problem to understand, and in particular how language might be learnt through observing it in use, much as we learn about the nature of everyday objects through seeing them being used. But at the same time, I was also in this teacher education course. And there the emphasis for all of the student teachers was on designing activities to activate communication in the classroom. There, the substance of our entire year was looking at materials and trying to develop materials to teach listening, speaking, reading and writing as communication-based activ-

ities. So I got these two sorts of things going on in parallel: on the one hand a linguist's approach to language as use; on the other hand preparing activities for the classroom engaging language use, and actually trying them out through micro teaching, and then taking them into classes and, and trying them out there. All the time, I was being watched by a teacher, getting feedback. After my teacher education, like many young language teachers at the time, I found myself trying to design a lot of materials as a teacher. I went on to teach in Morocco and Brazil, and later in the UK. A lot of what I was doing was modeled on the training I'd had. I would work with and around textbooks, designing a lot of materials or adapting a lot of materials for use in the classroom. While I was doing that, I started to wonder about what we really knew about how communication-based activities actually worked. Because the emphasis in all the teacher education courses was very prescriptive. The focus of most language teaching methodologists and experts at the time was to explore what we should be doing to bring communication into the classroom. That was fine, but I started asking myself the question: Well, how do we know? How do we know how these activities work? These communication-based activities seem a good idea. They seem theoretically well grounded; they seem to make sense both educationally and in terms of what we know about language. But, where's the empirical evidence about how these things work? We don't know. So that's where I formulated my early research work, which became a Ph.D. project, which was basically exploring how communication activities function. A lot more has been done since, of course, but at the time, I thought not a lot was being done on that. So, I continued to plough that furrow for quite a long time. My interest in task repetition came out of that, because initially, I was looking at the language that people produce. The task repetition studies ask the question: What evidence is there that what students did the first-time round sticks? Does it help in some way? We could of course think of different ways of trying to work out whether anything sticks. One way is obviously via a pretest-posttest design. But it seemed to me that was not consistent with the task-based assumption that by doing a task one should be able to get better at doing it. Consequently, let's look and see what happens when students do the task again. Does anything change? If so, what?

TASK: If you look at the classroom-based research we have today, do you feel that we have made sufficient progress?

Martin Bygate: I think progress has been made. Think about Mike Long's early work. His first paper was published 44 years ago. So, I hope we have made progress! But maybe the progress that has been most evident is perhaps above all in understanding the complexity of the kind of holistic approach that TBLT

actually is. TBLT adopts a fairly comprehensive approach both to the learning of language and to our understanding of what language is. We are not thinking of learning as a single type of process, like for example with the structuralist approaches. We see learning as being a complex endeavor, and so needing a complex range of stimuli of activities within the classroom, and a complex range of types of pedagogical support. The complexity of this approach implies that handling TBLT in the classroom is also fairly complex. Now, I think that the perception of TBLT as being a holistic, comprehensive approach to language education is perhaps progress. Maybe in the early years of TBLT, there was an overreliance on a relatively narrow set of focuses. Negotiation for meaning would be an example, or Peter Skehan and Pauline Foster's work on complexity, accuracy and fluency. Although their approach opens out the scope of task-based work by thinking of it in terms of a number of dimensions and not just a single dimension, it's very much concerned with a limited number of general aspects of online processing. That is also an important part of TBLT, but I think we're moving beyond that. We're also now looking at how tasks can be used to support the acquisition of particular dimensions of language, in different contexts. So, we may be at some sort of a tipping point. Importantly it seems to me that so far there's been less work that has been carried out on how teachers work with tasks. Although, there has been some work that is outstanding in that respect: there is the work that Müller-Hartmann and Schocker-von Ditfurth have been doing: working with teachers who work with tasks. And of course, people like Jonathan Newton, Rosemary Erlam and Natsuko Shintani who have also been working with teachers, and with tasks in classrooms. Nonetheless, I think so far that's not been the headline stuff. More attention has been paid to the studying of language in tasks, rather than how teachers work with tasks in the classroom. So in that respect, we might say that TBL has been in capitals, and the T of teaching has been a small, a relatively small "t", but I'd be rather hopeful that there's going to be a shift.

TASK: Do you think we need specific methodologies to study what happens in classrooms?

Martin Bygate: Well, the word "methodology" is a very good word to bring in because we could say that TBLT is an approach to teaching which has been actually in search of a methodology from the outset. When Mike Long, Teresa Pica and Sue Gass were working on tasks in the early years, they wanted to explore tasks empirically, and they came up with an approach to doing that by focusing on the impact of particular interactive features of tasks on learners' spoken interaction. Then, Peter Skehan and Pauline Foster came up with a related methodology, exploring the impact of task complexity on mainly monologic oral language

production, and Peter Robinson with yet another one. Though crucial contributions to the field, there is a lot more at issue in TBLT. So, the word “methodology” does raise the question of how you empirically explore TBLT in the broader context of the classroom, at different levels of proficiency, in different contexts, and over time. There are methodologies available that researchers in Leuven have been using, that Müller-Hartmann and Schocker-von Ditfurth and that I’ve also used with colleagues at Leeds. Those involve a lot of participant-based research, which is more concerned with exploring the background and the thinking of the teachers, observing what’s going on in the classroom, and then discussing with the teachers afterwards how the tasks worked, how the teachers presented and exploited them, and how such lessons might be developed. This involves bringing together both quantitative and qualitative data sources and methods of interrogating the data. Leuven researchers started off this line of work in the late 1990s, but I think there’s a lot more that needs to be done in trying to develop a methodology which will handle the process and product of TBLT. But in my view, it is not just a question of methodology. One of the really notorious problems in education is resources. I think that resources is a problem throughout, across the whole breadth of education: resources in terms of the amount of time, equipment and support that are available for teachers to explore and develop their approaches; the resources available for teacher educators to manage their teacher education projects and conduct research; and resources to the teachers themselves, to provide them with the space and time to engage with tasks. I think the equipment is there, in a way which it wasn’t 20 years ago, that is to say, the sheer material support that’s available through equipment such as recording devices, software such as data analysis software, and so on. Twenty years ago, you know, everything had to be done manually. We could of course record, but all the transcriptions and the analyses had to be done manually. So we’ve got the equipment, but what’s under resourced is time. Funding seems to be found for intensive comprehensive research into child language acquisition in a way that it isn’t for learning in educational contexts. When we’re thinking in terms of what’s needed, that might be what in the UK they call “Blue Skies Thinking”. The phrase is really very attractive in the UK, because of course there are not a lot of blue skies there! So, when thinking in terms of what will be really needed it would be a lot more research into teachers using tasks in different contexts, working with cohorts of students over time. I think that the opportunities are there. There are courses being carried out. There are teachers who are informed. There are teacher educators who are well-experienced and well-informed. But the problem is actually getting the resources to track groups of learners working with a teacher over time and exploring ways in which tasks can be used. Seriously, if you think of what would be possible if

you had all the resources you want, then, much of the research we've been doing would look trivial in comparison with what's possible.

TASK: Does that imply that the big emphasis researchers often put on investigating the effects of short courses, or even one or two tasks being performed, is at odds with the very idea that language learning takes a lot of time? Do we need more longitudinal research? And what is the role of the teacher in that kind of research?

Martin Bygate: With respect to the second question, I may be stating the obvious, but if we want to understand how tasks work, how they can be used by teachers and exploited by students, then we have to engage teachers in the research. If we want to understand the possibilities and consider the impact of slight differences and changes to task design, understand the differences in the ways in which tasks can be used, this really depends on collaborating with teachers. For me it implies a kind of grounded research with teachers working with their students in the context of their courses. And if that's to happen, then we depend on the teachers to be our allies and collaborators. Now, that doesn't necessarily mean seeing the teachers as being the leaders of the research, although they might. But it does require them to be invited into a collaborative role. Which, of course, is time consuming. It's difficult for teachers to do that, if they're given heavy schedules, if they've got large groups of students to manage. They have little preparation time. That's pretty difficult. If we aren't able to embed the research in real classes in real time, that is, in genuine contexts, we're always going to be getting a fiction, in the sense that we're going to be getting artificial results derived from contrived research, from specially briefed groups of students with specially designed activities, probably outside the normal classroom, and conducted in a one-off kind of way. All these things don't really reflect the use of tasks as ongoing tools within an educational context. This is, of course, a big contrast with a lot of the current child language acquisition studies. Those are typically based on data collected often intensively from children in authentic, real-life contexts. I think what we will be wanting is something rather similar in classrooms, at least that's what I would project. The problem is finding the resources. I think that also relates to the question about longitudinal studies. I felt a very big frustration that I've not been able to do that for myself, and I haven't seen many studies that have tried to do this elsewhere: looking at students working with tasks through schemes of work, in year one, year two, year three, year four, year five; seeing how students at different levels are working with materials and seeing how students develop once they've been working with materials. What's the dynamics? Of course, there are cost implications there.

TASK: Does academia allow for the resources and the time to do that kind of long-term research, or are researchers looking at the use of specifically designed tasks in a classroom for a short time because they have to get their research published? How can we address this?

Martin Bygate: I agree and I don't know. I suspect we would have to look outside education, or in other branches of education, to see if there are instances of longer-term studies that we can model our work on. Some of the sort of more ethnographic work by people like Elaine Tarone, and Lily Wong Fillmore, where she was hanging out in a school over a period of time and watching how kids were working. That's why I think that the work at the Centre for Language and Education in Leuven and by Marita Schocker-von Dittfurth and Andreas Müller-Hartmann in Germany is so unusual, because they have been able to look at TBLT over a long period of time working within a particular institutional context. In the UK, I was able to work along with a small group of colleagues on a project for a short period of time, with six teachers in a secondary school in the Leeds area. The school itself funded us to work with these six teachers over a couple of years. Each of the researchers was able to work with two teachers and we met up and we planned what we were going to do in the class and then the teachers would go into the lesson, we would record it and we would analyze it and we would go back to plan another lesson. So, there was a degree of ongoing interactive work with the teachers there. It wasn't extremely costly. The school itself was able to afford it, but it seems a fairly unusual kind of work.

TASK: We have been talking about language teaching in the classroom all the time, however, in 2020, how unique and how important do you think classrooms still are? So much language learning is taking place outside the classroom, think of online learning for instance. If we also take into account that TBLT is all about learning language while performing authentic tasks, which people usually do outside the classroom, what, then is the unique selling proposition of language classrooms in 2020? Is a classroom still, so to speak, the best place to learn a language, you think?

Martin Bygate: That's a very good question. Where the classroom has an advantage is the possibility that the teacher is able to negotiate and follow the students, which would be difficult to generate given the resources outside the classroom. I would be uneasy about saying that learning online, learning in the real world outside the classroom, is adequate on its own, because I think it becomes potentially significantly harder for the teacher to be able to provide preparatory, online, and post-activity support. It would probably be harder to negotiate the appropriate

follow-up activity. I think that the teacher has got or can have a very significant role to play. It is a role that's really been abstracted out of quite a lot of the TBLT literature. I mean, you can find places where people have claimed that the teacher is essentially irrelevant to TBLT, that the teacher is someone who should be really sitting at the back of the classroom, picking out the tasks, and that giving the task for the students to do really shouldn't be seen as an intervention or a form of interference. Now, I don't follow that idea, I think that the teacher has got a significant role to play. By setting up tasks the teacher is focusing the students on the purpose of the task, on the topics and the themes. The students are picking up on language, language features, language phenomena, as they arise during the task. The teacher is then feeding in, a little bit like Gin Samuda's work was attempting to reflect, feeding into the students at different points during their cycles of work. And on the basis of what they've done, the teacher is following up the task with something appropriate, where again the language that they have been activating can be put to good use in a further cycle of work. Now, that whole role of the teacher – I'm not saying it would be impossible outside the conventional classroom context but it poses fresh challenges. And I don't see quite how those challenges will be surmounted. I would imagine that to a certain extent it is possible to meet those challenges through online work, but I can also imagine that there would be a lot of difficulty in negotiating focus, which seems to me is a very important role for the teacher to achieve.

TASK: What do you see as the major challenges for TBLT today?

Martin Bygate: One of the things that I feel TBLT hasn't really got to grips with is how tasks can provide an interface to the language curriculum. This is a line of thinking that I explored in a recent article in *Language Teaching*. There are two consistent motivations for changes in a language teaching approach. One is the motivation to question whether a given language teaching approach is psycholinguistically adequate. For example, with behaviorist approaches, people in the end felt that such approaches did not represent how language is used and how language is learned. So, there was a need to move on to a more adequate approach to the process of learning. Another motivation for changes of language approach has been to question the extent to which a given approach opens up access to the target language. Again, if we think of audiolingual approaches to language teaching, the way in which they conceptualized language was as a very large but finite number of structures. Essentially, that was seen as the main focus of a language learning course. It was thought at the time that learning these structures would be sufficient. Then people started to think, maybe it's not just a matter of learning the structures. So, there was a move away from a purely structural approach

to language towards incorporating notions and functions. Next, people thought, well you don't just teach people how to be polite and help out, or how to refuse politely. We don't just learn notions or functions; we need to come to grips with discourse more fully. Out of that you get materials offering exposure to different types of discourse, leading also to tasks. However, even now, we don't yet think of a whole curriculum of tasks. So, the question that TBLT needs to address for the wider public is: How do tasks open up all the different facets of language that someone's going to want to learn? How do we use tasks to ensure that people are going to essentially cover an adequate language curriculum?

TASK: Are you referring to the tension between focusing on tasks as holistic communicative activities and devoting focused attention to whatever aspects of discourse, from lexical units to grammar rules to reading strategies to notions and functions?

Martin Bygate: Yes, I think something along those lines, it's about how the breadth of language is activated. We know that there are tasks which can be used for a wide range of different types of discourse: instructional discourse, argumentative discourse, discourse for making things, handling service encounters, discourse for handling scientific research, and so on. However, the TBLT literature is usually neutral with respect to any particular domains of language that are being activated. For instance, when you take modality. In the TBLT literature, you don't often get papers saying this is a study into learners' engagement with modality in receptive tasks. The domains of language are not really presented as an issue. I don't think that TBLT is purely concerned with psycholinguistic processes. It's also concerned with language, and I would expect that one of the things that teachers are going to be looking for is how do tasks engage learners in discovering the language?

TASK: So, what about, for instance, an approach as advocated by Mike Long where the focus on the language comes in a reactive mode. What teachers try to do in their classrooms is to get students to perform a particular task, and then observe what kind of linguistic problems they run into. That's the moment where they start focusing on the modality or the notions or the functions or the lexis that students are struggling with. Are you suggesting that we also should consider a more proactive mode in that respect?

Martin Bygate: Well, if you're thinking of being reactive, then we're thinking of oral tasks. So, you're reacting to what the students are saying. But what about input tasks? I've just been reading about cognitive linguistics and usage-based linguistics, and there is a lot of research on the sheer amount of input that first lan-

guage learners get, on the basis of which they formulate their hypotheses about how language works. So, input is seen within usage-based linguistics as a really essential element in the development of people's linguistic knowledge. In TBLT, perhaps, input would be something which we could do a lot more with. I know Rod Ellis has been consistently speaking about this. It is an important element. It might be an important context for people to be exposed to different linguistic domains. If someone's going to be prepared, trained to work in a particular job context, you can imagine all sorts of input-based tasks in which the vocabulary and the grammatical structures used within those workspaces would be exposed, and students would engage with them. When working with the teachers in the school in the Leeds area, one of the lessons was around the use of the sewing machine. Sewing skills actually were very gender nonspecific there, so the young guys as well as the girls were all very enthusiastic about sewing and about mastering the sewing machine. Now there is a whole field, not just vocabulary, but grammar as well, that's going to be used in order for them to talk about the bits of the sewing machine and giving instructions about how to handle the materials. I think tasks can be used for getting the students to come to grips with context-relevant language and input tasks would help them do so. I remember working with the teacher and finding it quite difficult to get the teacher to see the input phase of the lesson as being important. The teacher saw the most important phase of the lesson, and the phase that students really enjoyed, was when the students got the machines all linked up. It's all plugged in, and they've got the piece of cloth, and they can press on the pedal as fast as possible. Making the machine accelerate. Great fun of course. But what I was trying to say, was: before you get them off operating the pedal, you can engage your students with the language. Because after all that was the purpose of this project and the main reason why we were working with the teachers: how to get the students to engage with the language?

TASK: Building on that, in TBLT a needs analysis would cover those domains by analyzing the actual language use when people are performing relevant tasks and bring that language into the classroom. How do you feel about that? Of course, a needs analysis works really well for a specific group of learners learning the language for a specific context. But, how do you build a curriculum, for example, for Chinese learners of English in primary school in China? Can you really do a needs analysis there?

Martin Bygate: A needs analysis is a very useful thing for people to do anyway. Because I think that for teachers and even experienced teachers, it's a very salutary thing to ask the question: What are the uses that the language will be put to?

We also need to get teachers to think about the question: How do you find out? What is the methodology we can use to describe students' needs? That's a very valuable thing for teachers to be thinking about. It's a way of breaking down this big thing, which is language, into subareas and subdomains. With regard to foreign language learners in the classroom, I haven't got an easy answer to that.

TASK: Are there any other thoughts on TBLT you would like to share?

Martin Bygate: I think that there's an area which I feel uneasy about, which is reading and writing in TBLT. Despite some very interesting publications over the last 15 years or so, I haven't been convinced that the reading and writing materials and activities – at least the ones that I have seen – were always tasks, in other words, that the reading activities and the writing activities were designed for other people to read with a purpose which they were going to respond to meaningfully. I think that we've got reasonably well established that speaking and listening activities can be set up with a need for the listener to know or to understand. With reading and writing, I'm not always convinced that these are presented as reading for a purpose to respond to the writer or writing for a purpose for someone else to read and respond to. It seems to me that very often these activities tend to be basically reading as a comprehension exercise. Writing is sometimes presented as a discourse skill. You need to be able to show that you've mastered the art of writing a letter or the art of writing a report. But are you writing a report because you want somebody to read it? With oral tasks, it is understood that you speak in order to be able to be understood, and you listen in order to understand somebody else so that you can complete the task. Do our students read in order to be able to complete a task? Do students write in order for a task to be completed? So, a slight change in focus in the area of reading and writing may still be worth thinking about, for instance so that reading and writing contribute organically to the achievement of an overall project, perhaps along the lines proposed by Mich Legutke some years ago.

I would like to conclude by thanking you very much for the privilege of inviting me to participate in this interview. I very much look forward to seeing others in the future.

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