Exploring the relationship between TBLT and ISLA

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The relationship between task-based language teaching (TBLT) and instructed second language acquisition (ISLA) is a close one. Both are concerned primarily with facilitating the development of second language (L2) learners' linguistic proficiency. This article begins by providing a brief description of both terms. TBLT has been described as an approach to language teaching, comprised primarily of a needs analysis, development of meaning-focused instructional materials, and assessment. The central construct is the task, which provides opportunities for learners to use their own linguistic resources as they engage in meaning-focused interaction. In contrast, ISLA is a research field encompassing multiple approaches to L2 teaching and learning, based on various theoretical perspectives. As such, ISLA includes TBLT, especially as both have a particular interest in the cognitive-interactionist approach to L2 instruction. Differences between the two terms include a focus on explicit instruction in ISLA that is not present in most versions of TBLT. In addition, ISLA does not constitute an all-encompassing curricular approach to L2 instruction. Finally, ISLA has been less focused on needs analyses and assessment in comparison to TBLT. This article ends with a consideration of areas of mutual concern, as well as perspectives from each that might benefit the other.

Keywords: task, cognitive-interactionist approach, focus on form, SLA theory, L2 pedagogy

Introduction

There is an inextricable relationship between instructed second language acquisition (ISLA) and task-based language teaching (TBLT). The two areas of inquiry share many of the same concerns and have similar goals. For example, at their most basic, both are concerned primarily with how instruction in an additional language (L2) can facilitate the development of L2 learners' linguistic knowledge

and competence (e.g., Ellis et al., 2020; Loewen, 2020; Long, 2015). That is to say, someone (e.g., teachers) or something (e.g., textbooks, tasks) is manipulating the learning environment in ways that are presumed to be beneficial for L2 learning. Indeed, Lambert and Oliver (2020) go so far as to say that "in the last 40 years, the use of 'tasks', at least to some degree, has permeated second language instruction in many diverse contexts around the world" (p.1). Despite these similarities, there are also several important differences between the two. Overall, we consider ISLA to be a research domain, while TBLT is a pedagogic approach within the field of ISLA (e.g., Han & Nassaji, 2019; Loewen, 2020). In this article, we examine these similarities and differences in order to better understand what potential insights ISLA raises for TBLT, and vice versa. We conclude this article with directions that future research can consider for strengthening both TBLT and ISLA.

What is TBLT?

First, we acknowledge that TBLT has developed over several decades, with early writings by multiple researchers (e.g., Breen & Candlin, 1980; Nunan, 1989; Prabhu, 1987; Skehan, 1996; inter alia). It is not our intention to imply that these earlier works are unimportant, but because this article is not a historical overview of TBLT, we will rely on more recent TBLT writings that have built on these early writings.

Characterizing TBLT is somewhat difficult because TBLT is not monolithic, with many scholars proposing various definitions and conceptualizations (e.g., Ellis, 2003, 2017; Ellis et al., 2020; Long, 2015; Skehan, 2018). We do not intend to describe these differences in detail; rather, we wish to point out characteristics that are key to defining TBLT in general. Although several other descriptors have been used, most researchers agree that TBLT is an approach to language teaching (Ellis, 2003; Ellis et al., 2020; Lambert & Oliver, 2020; Long, 2015; Richards & Rogers, 2014). Ellis et al. (2020) state that the approach "prioritizes meaning but does not neglect form. It emphasizes the importance of engaging learners' natural abilities for acquiring language incidentally as they engage with language as a meaning-making tool" (p.1). Similarly, Long (2015) describes TBLT as "an approach to course design, implementation, and evaluation intended to meet the communicative needs of diverse groups of learners" (p.5). According to Harmer (2015), an approach in ISLA "describes how language is used and how its constituent parts interlock – it offers a model of language competence. An approach also describes how people acquire their knowledge of the language and makes statements about the conditions which will promote successful learning" (p.54).

TBLT has been contrasted with other L2 pedagogical approaches, such as a synthetic or structural approach, which focus on teaching discrete grammatical

structures in a step-by-step fashion. Ellis et al. (2020) emphasize that TBLT "contrasts with structural approaches that emphasize language as an object to be systematically taught and intentionally learned" (p. 1). Long (2015) also maintains that a structural approach does not correspond with the way that learners develop their interlanguage system; learners do not merely add linguistic structures in a linear fashion. Rather, they follow their own internal mental processes.

The TBLT approach has several important components. To begin with, course design in TBLT should be guided by a needs analysis in which teachers (or researchers) investigate the ways in which learners need to use the language. Once those needs have been identified, instructional materials that address learners' needs must either be developed or drawn upon; these instructional materials are then used throughout the course. A final TBLT component is assessment, which focuses on how effective the instructional materials have been in facilitating learners' ability to use the L2 for their identified needs.

It is important to note that researchers do not always refer to TBLT as an approach. For example, although Kobayashi Hillman and Long (2020) refer to TBLT as a "viable approach to language training" (p. 123), they also refer to "TBLT methodology and pedagogy" (p. 124). They propose that when only part of the TBLT approach is used, for instance if a needs analysis is not conducted with young L2 learners because they do not have identifiable needs, this constitutes TBLT methodology. In this regard, Kobayashi Hillman and Long imply that TBLT must include all components (i.e., a needs analysis, course design, implementation, and assessment) to be considered an approach. Any instruction that excludes one of the criteria is considered TBLT methodology and pedagogy. Such a distinction conforms to Harmer's (2015) definition of method which is "the practical classroom realization of an approach. The originators of a method have arrived at decisions which will bring the approach they believe in to life. Methods include various procedures and techniques as part of their standard fare" (p. 54).

So, while TBLT as an approach should contain all aspects of the TBLT curriculum, there are some researchers who suggest that it is possible to pick and choose aspects of TBLT without employing the full approach. To account for this possibility, a distinction is sometimes made between TBLT and so-called task-supported language teaching (TSLT), with the latter drawing on aspects of TBLT methodology but also incorporating other methodologies, especially those that have a more explicit focus on linguistic structures. However, within TBLT, there has been some controversy in considering the role of more explicit attention to linguistic form. For example, Long (2015) strongly asserts that such a focus on specific language features goes against the primary principles of TBLT, and thus he rejects it. Others have supported TSLT as a viable choice, with a combina-

tion of communicative interaction and the inclusion of activities that have a more focused linguistic component (Ellis, 2019).[1]

One commonality of TBLT and TSLT is that the way in which learners engage in communication is through *tasks*. In fact, tasks are paramount in TBLT. Long (2015) states that "task is the unit of analysis throughout the design, implementation and evaluation of a TBLT program" (p. 6). It is not an overstatement that the entire TBLT approach rests on the design and implementation of tasks. It is tasks that teachers design for their classes (and researchers design for their research studies). Tasks are completed by learners in the classroom, and tasks are used to evaluate learner performance.

Despite unity around the centrality of the task in TBLT, there have been, as might be expected, different conceptions of what a task is, or what it should be. For example, Long (2015) defines task in its "non-technical, everyday, real-world use of the term" (p. 108). In other words, tasks are things that people do authentically in their daily lives, such as opening a bank account, writing an email, or going grocery shopping. Ellis and others (e.g., Ellis, 2003; Ellis et al., 2020) have provided specific criteria for deciding if something is or is not a task, and there are four main characteristics that most researchers agree are essential for something to be considered a task.

First, tasks must have a primary focus on communication. Learners must use the L2 to express meaning as they discuss task topics with their teacher or fellow classmates. TBLT arose in concert with the Communicative Language Teaching movement in the late 1970s and 1980s in reaction to classroom pedagogy that focused either on repetitive and decontextualized audiolingual drills or on structural, explicit approaches to teaching grammar rules (Ellis, 2003). For TBLT, then, a major task criterion is that learners use the L2 for meaning-focused communication.

A second essential task characteristic is that learners must employ their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources to communicate, rather than relying on linguistic information provided by a teacher, textbook, or other source. In this way, learners' attention is not drawn to specific linguistic structures; consequently, learners do not spend time practicing specific linguistic structures during task performance. Nor should they constantly think about linguistic features during communication. Rather, learners are free to use whatever language, gestures, and other nonverbal communication they need to express their intended meaning.

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1. Both anonymous reviewers of this manuscript suggested that they would like to see more clarity in the discussion of TBLT and TSLT. We would too. To that end, we have tried to acknowledge more nuance in our discussion of the terms, but we argue that it is up to the field to clarify this distinction, and in fact, confusion over terminology is an ongoing issue in TBLT.

A third component of tasks is that there must be some type of gap that necessitates communication. The gap is often created by information that needs to be exchanged or opinions that need to be expressed. For example, learners can be given different sections of a bus schedule, with the instructions to exchange their information in order to complete the schedule. This gap must be meaning-focused so that learners focus on the semantic content of the task, rather than on linguistic structures.

Fourth, there must be a non-linguistic outcome to the task. In the previously mentioned bus schedule example, the non-linguistic outcome might be for learners to determine the best route from A to Z after they have exchanged their information. In this way, the focus of completing the task is not on the use of language forms, but rather on successful communication in order to achieve the non-linguistic goal of the task. The rationale for having a non-linguistic outcome is that it helps ensure that learners are focused on meaning and not on language. If there were a linguistic outcome for the task, learners might treat the task simply as an opportunity to practice the target structure.

TBLT contrasts tasks with *exercises*, although precise definitions of these constructs can be complicated and the boundary between the two is not always clear. Ellis (2003) states that anything that meets the previously mentioned criteria qualifies as a task, while exercises focus more explicitly on language and grammar. For example, an information and opinion gap activity in which learners must decide on which items to take to a deserted island can be considered a task because learners have to communicate their own ideas using their own linguistic resources to reach a non-linguistic outcome. In contrast, an activity in which learners need to fill in blanks with future tense verb forms while listing items they would take to a deserted island is an exercise. Even though there is some attention to meaning if learners get to choose their own items, the fact that learners must provide verb forms shifts the focus of the activity to language forms. Ellis (2003) implies that activities can be more or less task-like, with those that meet fewer of the task criteria being more exercise-like. He also states that some activities cannot be easily classified as a task or an exercise.

At the level of task, the distinction between TBLT and TSLT can be made by referring to tasks as unfocused and focused (Ellis, 2003). Unfocused tasks retain the original TBLT requirement of not having targeted linguistic items or structures that learners need to use. However, focused tasks incorporate specific linguistic items and forms, through seeding the task with particular structures or having the teacher identify specific linguistic features to provide corrective feedback on. Thus, focused tasks are generally associated with TSLT because they incorporate attention to both communication and linguistic structures. In contrast, unfocused tasks conform to a strict TBLT approach. However, it should be

noted that not all researchers maintain such tight distinctions between categories, and there is some fluidity in these categorizations.

What is ISLA?

Although there has always been a pedagogic focus in the field of second language acquisition (SLA), ISLA, as a sub-field of SLA, has concentrated on the instructional aspects of SLA (e.g., Leow, 2019; Loewen, 2020; VanPatten, 2017). Loewen (2020), drawing on previous definitions of ISLA (e.g., Housen & Pierrard, 2005) defined ISLA as a "theoretically and empirically based field of academic inquiry that aims to understand how the systematic manipulation of the mechanisms of learning and/or the conditions under which they occur enable or facilitate the development and acquisition of an additional language" (pp. 2–3). In describing ISLA as its own subfield within SLA, researchers acknowledge that there are certain aspects of more general SLA that do not have direct implications for the L2 classroom. As such, these issues fall outside the primary scope of ISLA. For example, issues pertaining to Universal Grammar and whether or not learners have access to it, are not directly relevant for the classroom. The existence of a critical or sensitive period for L2 learning is another example of a theoretical topic that is not central to ISLA. Although the relationship between age and the effects of instruction is important, whether those age effects are due to an actual critical period or more general maturational constraints is less relevant because such biological constraints lie outside teachers' sphere of influence.

In considering other aspects of Loewen's definition, one of the most important elements pertains to the "systematic manipulation" of learning mechanisms and/or learning conditions. In other words, someone (usually a teacher, textbook, or curriculum) is doing something that they believe is going to facilitate learners' L2 acquisition. That "something" can be any number of things, such as, for example, TBLT. In this regard, ISLA differs in scope from general SLA which investigates L2 acquisition both in instructional and naturalistic contexts. ISLA does not focus on naturalistic L2 acquisition.

Because ISLA is interested in the manipulation of learning conditions and mechanisms, it is interested in L2 approaches as well as L2 methods; however, ISLA itself is not a pedagogical approach. Rather, because it is a research field that seeks to delimit an area of interest, it encompasses all approaches to L2 instruction. In considering taxonomies of ISLA, there are several distinctions that can be made. One is based on Long's (1991, 1996) division between focus on meaning, focus on form, and focus on forms. Focus on meaning involves learners in communicative activities only, while focus on form allows brief attention to language within a larger communicative context. Focus on forms consists of a structural

approach in which grammar and vocabulary are taught explicitly in a step-by-step manner. This tripartite distinction has sometimes been conflated into two general categories, namely meaning-focused instruction (MFI) and form-focused instruction (FFI) (Spada, 1977; Loewen, 2020), with FFI consisting of both focus on form and focus on forms. To differentiate the amount of focus on language versus communication, a continuum of explicitness of instruction has sometimes been included within FFI to differentiate various approaches and methods (e.g., Loewen, 2020; Norris & Ortega, 2000).

In addition to not being an approach or methodology, ISLA is not a theory. Whereas a theory should provide an explanatory account for phenomena associated with a topic (VanPatten & Williams, 2015), ISLA, because it is a research field, encompasses a variety of theories, approaches, and methods. To underscore this point, Long (2017) suggests that ISLA is not a theory because its aim is "to identify the least intrusive, but still efficient, means of achieving the same instructional goals [implicit knowledge]" (p.38). In contrast, an L2 theory would not include components that are not essential to the L2 acquisition process, even if they might make the process more effective or efficient.

Similarities between TBLT and ISLA

As mentioned in the introduction, both TBLT and ISLA are concerned with L2 acquisition in instructed contexts. Specifically, both examine how the systematic manipulation of learning conditions and learning mechanisms can make L2 acquisition more effective and efficient. In fact, it is not an overstatement to say that manipulating the learning conditions and learning mechanisms for optimal L2 development is the primary goal of TBLT. In this regard, the goal of TBLT, and of many working within ISLA, is the development of implicit L2 knowledge which enables learners to use the L2 spontaneously for communication (R. Ellis, 2005; Loewen, 2020; Long, 2015). There are some instances in which implicit knowledge is not the goal of instruction, for example when learners are studying to pass exams that focus primarily on decontextualized grammar and vocabulary. However, TBLT is not concerned with this type of learning or instruction, while ISLA finds it less theoretically interesting.

Theoretical

Theory is important to both TBLT and ISLA. In terms of the manipulation of learning mechanisms, much TBLT research stems from the cognitive-interactionist approach (Gass & Mackey, 2015; Lambert & Oliver, 2020; Loewen

& Sato, 2018; Long, 2015), in which cognitive processes such as noticing, attention, awareness, implicit learning, and explicit learning are important. Part of the goal of TBLT is to move learners away from explicit learning which tends to result in explicit knowledge, which does not contribute much to the development of learners' communicative competence. Thus, by engaging learners in tasks with brief attention to form (Long, 1991, 1996) the goal is that learners' L2 development will occur primarily implicitly. Indeed, one of the primary goals of both ISLA and TBLT is for learners to develop linguistic knowledge that enables them to use the L2 for communication (Loewen, 2020; Long, 2015), what has often been described as implicit L2 knowledge. While Long (2015) strongly supports implicit learning leading to implicit knowledge, there are other researchers (e.g., DeKeyser, 2015; N. Ellis, 2005) who argue that both implicit and explicit learning can result in implicit knowledge.

One other cognitive theory that has been used to support TBLT is skill acquisition theory (SAT) (e.g., DeKeyser, 2015) and its pedagogical method of "present, practice, produce" (PPP). Again, there is disagreement as to the degree of relationship between SAT and TBLT, but some researchers argue that SAT can provide a theoretical rationale, especially for TSLT which comprises both explicit instruction and meaning-focused communication. In the case of PPP, the final production component can consist of communicative tasks, rather than the constrained and decontextualized production that was a hallmark of PPP under behaviorist theories of learning. Thus, what may be described as a modular approach, in which methods from various approaches are employed in the classroom, is a possibility according to some scholars (e.g., Ellis, 2003; Lambert, 2020). However, not everyone agrees that TBLT is compatible with anything other than the cognitive-interactionist approach. For example, Long (2015) argues that SAT does not properly account for how language is learned, which Long says is primarily through implicit learning. From Long's perspective, starting with explicit instruction does not make sense because that is not how an L2 is acquired.

Although much of the theoretical underpinnings of TBLT come from cognitive perspectives, it is also possible to consider TBLT from more social perspectives. For example, Ellis (2003) and Ellis et al. (2020) present sociocultural theory (SCT: Vygotsky, 1978) as support for TBLT. For example, SCT provides direction for teachers on how to implement tasks and task-based interaction in the classroom through concepts such as regulation, in which learners move from needing external help to being self-regulated, and the zone of proximal development, which is the metaphorical space between what learners can achieve on their own versus with a more competent individual (e.g., Lantolf et al., 2015). The premise is that when learners engage in a task, they can interact within the zone of proximal development, which can promote self-regulation and L2 development. However,

Ellis et al. (2020) suggest that SCT provides little guidance on how to structure task-based curricula or tasks themselves.

From the previous descriptions, it is clear that TBLT and ISLA have much in common theoretically. Both are concerned with explaining how L2 learners' language develops. However, TBLT is based, either exclusively or primarily (according to TBLT or TSLT respectively) on the cognitive-interactionist approach. However, ISLA encompasses multiple theoretical perspectives, including socio-cultural theory, and skill acquisition theory, or any theories that account for instructed L2 learning (e.g., Loewen & Sato, 2017).

Pedagogical

In addition to theoretical similarities between TBLT and ISLA, there are also, not surprisingly, pedagogical similarities, with a primary one being focus on form in which brief attention is given to language items during meaning focused communication (Long, 1991, 1996). In TBLT, negotiation of meaning and incidental focus on form are the important components that facilitate the acquisition process. Therefore, it is important to ensure that tasks are structured and implemented in the L2 classroom in ways that provide opportunities for negotiation of meaning to occur. In ISLA, there is a somewhat broader view of focus on form, with negotiation occurring not only because of a breakdown in communication but also because the participants, that is, the teacher and/or learners, wish to focus on language features within the larger communicative context. This expanded description of focus on form has also been used in TSLT.

Empirical

In addition to theoretical and pedagogical similarities, there are also similarities in research findings regarding the effectiveness of TBLT and the approaches and methods found more generally in ISLA. Overall, research concurs that instruction can be beneficial for learners. Several meta-analyses have investigated the effectiveness of TBLT in some form or another. Early on, Keck et al. (2006) examined 14 studies that used communicative tasks; however, the tasks had to be "designed to foster the acquisition of specific grammatical and/or lexical features" (p. 98). Thus, this meta-analysis examined focused tasks which are more associated with TSLT, rather than unfocused tasks and TBLT. Keck et al. found that task-based interaction was more effective than "tasks with little to no interaction" (p. 120). Note that the use of *task* in the last quote does not meet TBLT criteria for a task at all; rather, these activities would instead be considered exercises (e.g., Ellis, 2003). In a more recent meta-analysis, Bryfonski and McKay (2019) found a medium-

large effect of $d = 0.93$ for 29 studies that compared TBLT with either a comparison group or a control group. For a group of ten studies that made within-group comparisons (i.e., pretest-posttest), Bryfonski and McKay found a similar effect size; however, they recommended caution in interpreting this result due to the small sample size and relatively wide 95% confidence intervals for the effect.

Several meta-analyses have investigated either ISLA in general or specific approaches and methods within it. Norris and Ortega (2000), in one of the earliest, meta-analyzed 49 quasi-experimental studies that investigated the effectiveness of L2 instruction, categorizing instruction as either explicit, which they operationalized as involving any type of rule explanation, or implicit, which they operationalized as lacking rule presentation or directions to pay attention to specific linguistic forms. Norris and Ortega found that, overall, explicit instruction was more effective than implicit instruction for L2 development. In a more recent study, Kang et al. (2019) meta-analyzed 54 studies, categorizing L2 instruction on two dimensions: explicit/implicit and focus on form/focus on forms. They found relatively large effect sizes on both immediate and delayed posttests. On immediate tests, implicit and explicit instruction were roughly equally beneficial; however, on delayed posttests, the effect size for implicit instruction was more than double that of explicit instruction.

Differences

In this paper, we have argued that TBLT is an approach and a methodology that fits completely within the field of ISLA. However, ISLA is broader than just TBLT, including other theories, approaches, and methodologies. In addition, while several TBLT constructs are found in other theories and approaches in ISLA, TBLT focuses in detail on some constructs that are not as central to other approaches and methodologies in ISLA. We will now explore these differences.

Implicit versus explicit instruction

One important topic of difference, as well as disagreement and controversy, is the role of implicit and explicit L2 instruction in L2 development. In its strongest form, TBLT advocates implicit instruction, with minimal attention to language forms. However, among researchers who take a task-based approach, there are those who make allowances for more explicit instruction through TSLT. In ISLA, some researchers argue even more strongly for explicit instruction, sometimes even diminishing the role for tasks, learner interaction, and other types of implicit instruction (e.g., Scheffler & Cincała, 2011; Swan, 2005). TBLT does not com-

monly concern itself with these more explicit approaches and methods in ISLA because, from a TBLT perspective, they do not promote the development of implicit L2 knowledge. However, explicit instruction is a pedagogical reality in many contexts, and thus, TBLT will continue to compete with more explicit approaches and methods in trying to convince teachers and learners that TBLT is the best way to develop L2 competence. In some ways, a concession has been made through TSLT, but given the theoretical and pedagogical importance of the roles of implicit and explicit instruction, the relative merits of each type of instruction will continue to be a topic for research and debate.

Curricular

Another difference between ISLA and TBLT is that the latter proposes to be a curricular approach to L2 instruction with all classroom activities centered around tasks. As Van den Branden et al. (2009) state, "tasks might be able to offer all the affordances needed for successful instructed language development" (p. 11). TBLT can be viewed as all-encompassing and sufficient for the classroom. However, not everyone agrees that the TBLT approach is sufficient. For example, Bygate (2020) states that "TBLT is yet to fulfil its promise as a free-standing approach to second language education, endorsed not only by researchers, but also by teachers and other stakeholders" (p. 276).

ISLA on the other hand is not a curricular approach in and of itself. Rather, ISLA is a research domain that includes multiple approaches and methods for L2 teaching and learning. In this way, ISLA is inclusive of different theoretical and pedagogical perspectives, and it is concerned with describing all pedagogical options and considering their effectiveness. Researchers can investigate the effectiveness of a specific approach, based on the implementation of its pedagogical methods; in addition, they can investigate effectiveness comparatively, with different approaches or methods being evaluated against each other.

As a field of inquiry, ISLA is eclectic and somewhat agnostic. It views all theories, approaches, and methods as valid for investigation. ISLA does not promote one approach or method over another. In that regard, one could argue that ISLA is simply a catch-all term for anything related to L2 instruction. Thus, there is no all-encompassing ISLA theory or methodology, which is perhaps both a strength and a weakness of ISLA. It is a strength because such openness allows consideration of any and all L2 theories, approaches, and methods; however, a weakness could be that such agnosticism does not provide practitioners with clear direction about what to do in the L2 classroom. In contrast, TBLT promotes itself as a holistic approach that is superior to other types of instruction, and teachers who take a TBLT approach are encouraged to follow all the tenets of TBLT.

One implication of a curricular approach in TBLT is that there might be some researchers and teachers who do not adhere to TBLT exclusively, but rather call for a combination of different types of instruction in order to facilitate the development of both implicit and explicit types of linguistic knowledge. TSLT is one example; another is Spada and Lightbown's (2008) conception of integrated and isolated FFI. In their view, there should be both implicit instruction, generally in the form of tasks, and some explicit instruction. The question that they raise is whether it is better to have the two different types of instruction occur sequentially in an isolated fashion or combined in a more TSLT manner. The former proposal fits more with a skill-learning approach to L2 learning, while the latter is obviously more consistent with TBLT principles, while still making allowances for some explicit instruction.

Another important issue regarding TBLT as a curricular approach is its appropriateness and effectiveness in contexts, such as East Asia, with more teacher-centered approaches to education (e.g., Shehadeh, 2012; Carless, 2012). As an example, Ji and Pham's (2020) study of TBLT implementation in a Chinese university found that some of the TBLT tenets, including using one's own linguistic resources and communicating in the L2, were difficult for learners. Ji and Pham suggest that adjustments need to be made, with TBLT incorporating activities with a more explicit linguistic focus. Certainly, such a suggestion would not be in line with TBLT, but would be possible with TSLT. Alternatively, such a curriculum might be considered just a combination of different ISLA approaches. It is important to note, however, that an assumption of TBLT, and of much of ISLA, is that one of the learners' goals is the ability to use the L2 for communication; therefore, they need to develop implicit knowledge, which TBLT argues happens primarily through implicit instruction. However, in Ji and Pham's (2020) study, learners' primary goal was not communication but rather "to memorize grammatical knowledge so that they could pass exams" (p. 175). TBLT or other types of implicit ISLA methods are less helpful when the goal of instruction is to help students develop explicit knowledge, which can be gained through explicit instruction. It seems, then, that such contexts might have less of a cultural gap with TBLT, but rather a mismatch between learners' goals (i.e., explicit L2 knowledge) and the type of instruction that does not aim to develop explicit grammatical knowledge (i.e., TBLT).

Needs analysis

An important component of the TBLT approach, according to some researchers (e.g., Long, 2015), is that it starts with a needs analysis. Teachers should investigate learners' L2 needs for communicating, and then design tasks that will enable

learners to use the L2 in ways to meet those needs. One criticism, however, is that this needs analysis does not always occur. For example, Bryfonski and McKay's (2019) TBLT meta-analysis found that only four of the potential 29 studies reported conducting a needs analysis. Some researchers (e.g., Long, 2015) suggest that any task-based curriculum without a needs analysis is merely TSLT, not TBLT.

Because there is no single ISLA theory or approach, it does not make sense to undertake an 'ISLA needs analysis'. However, several researchers (e.g., Loewen, 2020; VanPatten, 2017) stress that it is crucial for teachers and students to be aware of their goals for L2 learning. Then, depending on those goals, teachers can implement instruction that can help learners achieve those goals, rather than instruction that does not facilitate the type of L2 knowledge learners want. A common scenario in which this might occur is when the goal of instruction is the ability to communicate in the L2, but the instruction consists primarily of explicit grammar instruction and vocabulary memorization. Thus, one area where ISLA might benefit is for researchers and teachers to take a step back to consider the needs and goals of their students.

Assessment

Because TBLT can be considered a curricular approach, it is concerned with how it can show that learners are developing their communicative competence, both for research purposes and in the classroom. As such it has an assessment component (e.g., Long, 2015; Skehan & Luo, 2020) that uses tasks to assess if and how learners have benefitted from TBLT. Importantly, there is concern in TBLT that assessments have construct validity so that they are measuring what learners have learned. Thus, it would be unfair to give learners a decontextualized grammatical or lexical assessment when the primary, or even only, activity in class has been communication via tasks. Thus, there needs to be some way in which learners' ability to communicate can be assessed.

In contrast, in ISLA, there has been more of a tendency to draw a distinction between ISLA and language assessment. Not that testing and assessment are not important for ISLA, but rather they are not seen as a central component. Assessment from an ISLA research perspective is more to provide information about the efficacy of a specific treatment rather than to assess a curricular enterprise. It is interesting to note that Loewen's (2020) ISLA definition contains no mention of how L2 development is assessed. Furthermore, assessment seems to play a larger role in TBLT than in other approaches in ISLA. For example, PPP does not have assessment built into its approach. One exception to the lack of focus on assessment in ISLA can be found in SCT's dynamic assessment, which "provides a

powerful framework for integrating assessment and teaching as a dialectical activity aimed at diagnosing and promoting learner development" (Lantolf et al., 2015, p. 215). In dynamic assessment, the teacher provides increasingly explicit feedback in an effort to ascertain what learners can do with and without mediation. The idea is that this type of assessment also serves a pedagogic purpose as the learners are scaffolded in the L2.

Narrow focus

Because TBLT is a pedagogic approach, researchers are necessarily interested in investigating the phenomena within the approach that are hypothesized to facilitate L2 acquisition. Consequently, in TBLT there is considerable research into tasks, their characteristics, and the impact they have on learner performance. However, a connection between task characteristics and L2 development is not always made. While there is nothing wrong with investigating an approach's theoretical and methodological constructs, it might seem at times to someone outside of TBLT that TBLT is more concerned with the granularity and purity of its constructs than with L2 acquisition. That is to say, researchers are often involved in the minutiae of the TBLT approach, so much so that it sometimes seems that the larger picture is lost.

In regards to task characteristics, considerable research has investigated "the effects on second language performance of tasks and task characteristics, on the one hand, and the conditions under with tasks are done, on the other" (Skehan, 2016, p. 34). Researchers have examined the following regarding tasks and their effects: information flow and structure (e.g., Doughty & Pica, 1986), pre-task and online task planning (e.g., Ellis, 2009), task repetition (e.g., Ahmadian & Tavakoli, 2011), task modality (e.g., Gurzynski-Weiss & Baralt, 2014), and task complexity (Révész, 2012). However, in many cases, such studies focus primarily on task performance measures rather than measures of L2 development. Skehan (2016) suggests that a "second posttask stage" would be helpful in facilitating learning based on input, noticing and output, giving learners a chance to make use of their language performance from the first task.

The way in which task performance is measured is typically through the constructs of complexity, accuracy, lexis (lexical complexity), and fluency (CALF). These CALF measures are typically employed to investigate learner performance during tasks, and there are two competing theories to account for the relationships among these constructs. Skehan (2014) proposed the limited attentional capacity (LAC), while Robinson (2015) developed the cognition hypothesis (CH) and the Stabilize, Simplify, Automatize, Restructure, Complexify (SSARC) model. Put somewhat simply, Skehan's LAC model proposes that, because of learners'

limited attentional resources, there is a trade-off among the CALF constructs depending on task characteristics. For example, if learners pay more attention to accuracy while performing a task, it may come at the expense of complexity. In Robinson's model, task complexity is viewed as a key element in affecting the cognitive demands placed on learners. Tasks can be viewed as either resource-directing or resource-dispersing, with the former pushing learners to engage with the language. Thus, numerous research studies have investigated the characteristics of tasks and learner performance to see how CALF would be affected.

This is a relatively limited description of these two models, but our purpose here is not to go into detail, but rather to illustrate the emphasis on CALF in TBLT research. Although there is some attention given to how Skehan's and Robinson's models address acquisition, the primary focus seems to be on describing learners' task performance. For example, in describing these models, Ellis et al. (2020) provide only a paragraph each for their relationship to L2 acquisition within a 40-page chapter. Within TBLT there has been some criticism of CALF measures. For example, Bygate (2020) criticizes CALF measures for being too generic, with "little attention to the acquisition of particular domains of language" (p. 277). He continues: "fluency, accuracy, and complexity are … all qualities of surface performance" (p. 278).

In ISLA research, these CALF measures have been seen as methodological constructs that can help in measuring the effectiveness of L2 treatments. Indeed, as Michel (2017) points out in relation to CALF, "measuring the product of second language performance…is a crucial aspect of research into ISLA" (p. 50). For example, numerous studies have used accuracy measures to investigate learner development. However, outside of TBLT, there is typically less concern for learners' one-shot performance, and more interest in how L2 development occurs over time as reflected in these constructs. Thus, complexity, accuracy, lexical complexity, and fluency are not necessarily viewed within ISLA as needing independent investigation in and of themselves. Rather they are a means by which we can gain insight into the L2 developmental process.

Moving forward: Issues for both ISLA and TBLT

In addition to the similarities and differences that we have discussed, we think there are several issues that are especially important moving forward. This is not to say that these issues have not been addressed; they have. However, they seem especially relevant and timely moving forward (a) in light of recent attention in both TBLT and ISLA, and (b) in response to a world which has seen an increase in online L2 instruction.

Research-pedagogy link

The relationship between research and pedagogy has been a long-standing concern in both TBLT and ISLA (e.g., Crookes, 1998; Lightbown, 1985). For TBLT, the relationship between research and teaching has been especially important because of its curricular component. TBLT theorists want to make sure that teachers understand the methodologies that accompany the TBLT approach and that they are implementing them appropriately in the classroom. In some cases, teachers who have received training and support for implementing TBLT are able to design tasks that meet many of the TBLT criteria (e.g., Erlam, 2016). However, teachers do not always understand or have access to the latest TBLT research. Furthermore, TBLT researchers might not always have teachers in mind when planning and conducting their studies. Thus, there is a danger of TBLT research moving away from real world objectives that teachers have for their classes. To counter this separation of research and pedagogy, Bygate (2020) argues that there needs to be close collaboration between researchers and teachers in order to come up with research that is meaningful to teachers (and presumably students although they do not generally appear in discussions of the research-pedagogy link). Ellis (2003) states "If task-based teaching is to make the shift from theory to practice it will be necessary to go beyond the psycholinguistic rationale…to address the contextual factors that ultimately determine what materials and procedures teachers choose" (p. 337). In other words, there needs to be a close connection between research and teaching.

This call for collaboration and addressing the research-pedagogy link is also gaining momentum in ISLA more generally. Recently ISLA interest in this topic has gone beyond thought pieces and is beginning to be explored empirically (e.g., Marsden & Kasprowicz, 2017; Sato & Loewen, 2019), with the results showing that although teachers are not strictly opposed to engaging with research to inform their classroom practices, there is often little opportunity for them to do so.

It seems, then, that a continued collaboration between researchers and teachers is needed in both realms. And, for better or worse, this effort needs to be ongoing if new cohorts of teachers are to be influenced by research. Paran (2017) talks about ways in which these dialogues can happen, through teacher education in MA or other programs, through professional development, and conferences. These venues are places where teachers and researchers can come together.

However, knowledge should not just flow from researchers to teachers. In order for there to be a true dialogue, researchers must listen to the needs and concerns of teachers. In this way, researchers can address issues that are relevant to teachers rather than primarily addressing questions that are of theoretical concern. There is nothing inherently wrong with theoretical research; however, we

should not expect that such theoretical concerns will have much relevance for the classroom. Not all research needs to address pedagogy; however, for both TBLT and ISLA, an important goal is to increase the dialogue between researchers and teachers.

Technology

Another pressing challenge at the moment is the use of technology, now that much L2 instruction has gone online in response to the worldwide pandemic. Both ISLA and TBLT have fairly robust histories of investigating how technology mediates interaction, instruction, and L2 development (e.g., González-Lloret, 2020a; Reinders & Stockwell, 2017; Ziegler, 2016). However, we have put this topic in the 'moving forward' section because of the intense focus on online language instruction at the moment due to the pandemic. Although it is as yet uncertain what long-term effects the current pandemic will have on L2 instruction, it seems safe to say that online instruction will increase now that more instructors have experience with it. Therefore, there will be even greater need to understand both ISLA and TBLT in an online context (e.g., Gacs et al., 2020). Presumably, the challenges are especially great for task-based teaching programs where the entire curriculum consists of tasks. It is relatively easy for teachers to revert to structural approaches that focus on explicit grammar instruction. Even teachers who are in favor of TBLT or TSLT might have fallen back on those methods due to the rapidity of the transition. However, TBLT, and ISLA, will need to consider what methods will allow learners to pursue the goal of developing implicit knowledge.

The technologies that are most helpful for TBLT are those that engage learners in doing things with the language and with others (González-Lloret, 2020b). For example, there are technologies that allow classroom learners to interact with each other both synchronously (e.g., Zoom, Skype) or asynchronously (e.g., Google docs) (e.g., Guillén et al., 2020). In one instance, Dubriel (2020) explains how a French L2 class used online games for learner interaction after the university moved classes online. Teachers can also take advantage of online materials to connect learners to the target language culture in ways that could not be done previously (González-Lloret, 2020a). In addition, teachers can leverage learning beyond the classroom by encouraging the use of online platforms to bring learners together with target language speakers around the globe (González-Lloret, 2020b; Kessler et al., 2020). While these technologies can provide immediate opportunities for L2 teachers who find themselves forced to teach online, researchers and teachers need to continue to explore how best to take advantage of the affordances that technology brings for L2 interaction generally and TBLT specifically.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this article, we mentioned the critiques that ISLA and TBLT could provide for each other. First, there are several points that TBLT raises for ISLA.

–   ISLA should consider thinking in more curricular ways. It is important to investigate the effectiveness of specific treatments, but it is also important to think of how a series of treatments might best fit together. L2 instruction should not just be a random amalgamation of tasks, activities, and exercises. TBLT has one of the stronger curricular approaches in L2 instruction. However, there is the concept of the post-method classroom, which might challenge a rigid adherence to one approach. Nevertheless, the effects of different approaches and methodologies are empirical questions which can be addressed by research.
–   The needs analysis promoted by TBLT provides an example to ISLA to take a greater effort to consider learners' needs and goals, and how best to help learners achieve their goals. If learners, teachers, and programs have the goal of developing learners who are able to use the L2 spontaneously for communication, then the type of instruction to be investigated will have to match the goal. In this regard, tasks are well-suited to help develop learners' implicit knowledge, although theories and approaches outside of TBLT suggest that explicit knowledge can also be somewhat helpful in developing implicit knowledge.
–   The assessment focus of TBLT provides a good example of L2 assessment that is strongly in line with the overall curriculum. ISLA might wish to consider more carefully how classroom assessment matches curricular goals, as well as research agendas.

There are also issues that ISLA raises for TBLT.

–   TBLT might wish to consider the evidence for or against maintaining a strict TBLT approach, or integrating other approaches and methodologies from ISLA. To a certain extent, an integration has occurred with TSLT in which there is the possibility of having more explicit focus on language. Even if proponents of strong TBLT do not see a role for other approaches or methods, it is important to acknowledge that TBLT is but one approach within the field of ISLA.
–   TBLT might want to consider the intense focus it places on task characteristics and performance measures to make sure that researchers do not lose sight of the ultimate goal of L2 acquisition. While such focused research is not nec-

essarily bad, making sure that there is a clear connection to L2 acquisition would strengthen the impact of the research.

–   Be clear and consistent when referring to TBLT as an approach, a method, or something else. In part this distinction is made by the use of TBLT versus TSLT. However, part of the confusion about what TBLT is may come from a conflation of views, and an inconsistent use of terminology.

Finally, there are issue that both ISLA and TBLT can take up for the future.

–   Both ISLA and TBLT need to continue to be concerned with the relationship between researchers and teachers, in order to make sure that their research is relevant and available to teachers.
–   Both ISLA and TBLT need to increase investigation into the use of technology and online instruction, given that online L2 instruction will probably constitute a larger share of instruction moving forward. For TBLT especially, the difficulties of maintaining an online curriculum that provides learners with opportunities to engage in communication is challenging, but by no means impossible.

In summary, it is clear that TBLT and ISLA have a strong relationship, and we envision this continuing as researchers in both areas endeavor to facilitate L2 development through instruction. Examining the strengths and weaknesses of each area helps us take stock of current realities, with the goal of advancing ISLA and TBLT into the future.

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