

Revisiting the TBLT versus P-P-P Debate: Voices from Hong Kong

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Whilst there is a body of research evidence on task-based language teaching (TBLT) with adults, less is known about its suitability for implementation in secondary schools, particularly in Asian contexts. This study uses interview data from a purposive sample of 12 secondary school teachers and 10 teacher educators based in the Hong Kong context, a setting in which task-based approaches have been adopted since the 1990s. The focus of the paper is to explore informants' perceptions of the pros and cons of TBLT as opposed to long-standing presentation-practice-production (P-P-P) approaches and discuss issues arising. Four main sub-themes are addressed: the extent of reported implementation of TBLT and/or P-P-P in Hong Kong secondary schools; the reasons for preferences for task-based teaching or P-P-P; how well teachers are perceived to understand TBLT and P-P-P; and calls for further evidence on the effectiveness of TBLT for schooling. Following from this, the paper discusses implications for teacher education and suggests some avenues for further research.

Introduction

Task-based approaches continue to stimulate considerable research interest, yet their attractiveness to school teachers is still open to question (Carless, 2007). While Van den Branden (2006a) reports generally successful examples of task-based teaching of Dutch as a second language in schools in Flanders, the feasibility of task-based language teaching (TBLT) for schooling in Asian and other international settings has not yet been convincingly demonstrated. This issue is particularly worth further exploration in that TBLT is increasingly widely promoted within the region (Nunan, 2003), yet many Asian school teachers appear

to prefer long-standing presentation-practice-production (P-P-P) approaches (Tang, 2004; Tong, 2005).

The characteristics of tasks have been exhaustively debated (see Ellis, 2003; Samuda & Bygate, 2008, for authoritative reviews). As this paper focuses mainly on pragmatic school implementation issues, for current purposes it is sufficient to acknowledge that task-based approaches emphasize communication of meaning rather than study of grammatical form as the starting point for learning activities. TBLT variations range from a strong version where learners choose whatever language forms they wish to convey the meaning required by the task (Willis, 1996) to a weak form of task-supported teaching (analogous to P-P-P) through which tasks provide opportunities to practise language items that have been introduced in a traditional way (Ellis, 2003).

Task-based approaches have been promoted in Hong Kong through the relevant curriculum guidelines for a number of years: in primary schools since 1997 (see Carless, 2004) and in secondary schools since 1999 (see Mok, 2001). Curriculum guidelines and definitions related to TBLT in Hong Kong have changed relatively little over the last decade and are reviewed in Carless (2004). A recent example of these guidelines (Curriculum Development Council, 2007) contains advice that teaching through TBLT should be learner-centered and experiential as well as should develop students' communicative competence through purposeful and contextualised interaction. These are sound and familiar exhortations that are often found in curriculum guidelines, but do not necessarily impact significantly on classroom practice. More traditional P-P-P is common in Hong Kong and teachers seem to prefer it to task-based approaches (Tang, 2004). Tong (2005), for example, notes that in the three secondary school case studies she conducted, TBLT was often subsumed under the existing P-P-P approach perceived as highly complex and considered to be distant from current practices.

This paper uses interview data from a purposive sample of teachers and teacher educators to cast light on issues impacting on preferences for TBLT or P-P-P. Whilst an earlier paper from this study (Carless, 2007) suggested how TBLT could be adapted to form a "situated version of TBLT," the current paper focuses specifically on the long-standing debate on the strengths and limitations of TBLT and P-P-P, and their feasibility for implementation in Hong Kong classrooms. Being exploratory in nature, the paper also seeks to generate further lines of enquiry.

P-P-P, TBLT and Their Feasibility for Schooling

P-P-P has been recommended to trainee teachers as a useful teaching procedure from the 1960s onwards (Harmer, 2007). A classic text, such as Byrne (1986) explores typical steps of P-P-P. In short, the teacher *presents* new language items; the learners *practice* the items through drills, individual and choral repetition; and then *produce* the language for themselves, expressing what they want to say rather than what the teacher has directed them to say. Byrne also notes that the sequence does not have to be followed rigidly, and that depending on the level of the students, their needs and the teaching materials being used, it would also be possible to move from production to presentation to practice.

P-P-P has a logic that is appealing to teachers and learners in that it reflects a notion of practice makes perfect, common in many skills; it allows the teacher to control the content and pace of the lesson (Thornbury, 1999); and it provides a clear teacher role, in accordance with power relations often found in classrooms (Skehan, 2003). From the 1990s onwards, however, P-P-P came under sustained attack from academics (e.g., Lewis, 1996; Willis, 1996). P-P-P is seen as lacking a firm basis in second language acquisition (SLA) theory; being too linear and behaviourist in nature, so failing to account for learners' stages of developmental readiness (Ellis, 2003); and is thus unlikely to lead to the successful acquisition of taught forms (Skehan, 1996). It also assumes that accuracy precedes fluency, although this is often not the case (Thornbury, 1999). Finally, it is teacher-centered and fits uneasily with more humanistic learner-centered frameworks (Harmer, 2007). Swan (2005), on the other hand, defends P-P-P as a useful routine for presenting and practicing structural features under semi-controlled conditions.

TBLT is more complex than P-P-P, but its main characteristic is that students use language to carry out communicative tasks. TBLT derives part of its legitimacy and associated rationale for the treatment of grammar from critiques of P-P-P. A key rationale for TBLT is that form is best acquired when the focus is on meaning (Prabhu, 1987). Following from this, the basis of TBLT in SLA theory has been well-articulated (Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 1996). A further strength of a task-based approach is that because it involves students in active learning through communicative use, it is assumed to have a positive impact on motivation. There have, however, been a number of recent articles critiquing task-based approaches and their feasibility for schooling (Bruton, 2005; Klapper,

2003; Swan, 2005). Swan, for example, argues that when classroom time is limited and out-of-class exposure minimal, task-based approaches are unsuitable.

A major issue in TBLT is how form-focused work is managed, particularly in school contexts where the teaching of English grammar is often seen as one of the key roles of teachers. In the well-known Willis (1996) model, a pre-task stage introduces the topic and helps students to activate relevant vocabulary, but does not seek to teach large amounts of new language or one particular grammatical structure. Focus on form occurs instead after the task, in the post-task stage. Willis (1996) calls this stage “language focus,” an opportunity for explicit language instruction through strategies, such as language analysis or language practice. While carrying out the task mainly promotes fluency, the post-task usually focuses on accuracy. This is sometimes referred to as being like “P-P-P in reverse.” Such TBLT strategies are likely to be suitable for adult learners who already have substantial linguistic resources and need mainly to activate this language, but their feasibility with school age learners is still open to debate (Carless, 2007).

An alternative form-focused option which is possibly more suitable for school age students is the focused task (Ellis, 2003). This aims to induce learners to use a particular grammatical structure productively or to process it receptively in the context of a communicative task. Focused tasks have two objectives: to stimulate communicative language use and to target a pre-determined grammatical structure (Ellis, 2003). The focused task is one way of bridging the gap between TBLT and teachers’ wishes to present specific grammatical items.

The different variations and options in TBLT may be one of the reasons why it is not always well-understood by teachers, as indicated by evidence from Hong Kong and elsewhere (e.g., Carless, 2003; Littlewood, 2004). Ellis (2003) acknowledges that TBLT is somewhat complex and suggests strong versions of TBLT may be more theoretically desirable, while task-supported teaching is more likely to be acceptable to teachers.

To sum up, while TBLT is the official methodological recommendation for EFL in Hong Kong schools, it does not appear to be firmly embedded in classroom practices. P-P-P has a longer history in language teaching and relatively few recent papers have explored it. An investigation of some of the key issues impacting on preferences for TBLT or P-P-P appears timely.

Research Method

The key research questions addressed in this paper are:

1. What do informants see as the potential relative advantages of TBLT and P-P-P?
2. What are the main reasons for informants' preferences for TBLT or P-P-P?

The method used was interviewing, the “gold standard” of qualitative research (Silverman, 2000). It was believed that allowing a carefully selected group of educators to speak about TBLT and P-P-P in their own words would be an effective means of addressing these research questions. The content of interviews was focused on the key themes relevant to the research aims, for example: the perceived strengths and weaknesses of TBLT and P-P-P; issues impacting on the suitability of these approaches for schooling; teachers' and students' responses to TBLT and P-P-P. The interview protocols can be found in Carless (2007).

Twelve secondary school teachers from ten different schools were interviewed based on purposive sampling (Patton, 2002), in other words selecting targeted informants who had the potential to provide an informed set of perspectives rather than chosen from a stratified sample. Through contacts in the school community, I identified a sample of teachers ranging in experience from 2–20 years, with 8 years being the average teaching experience. Interviews with teachers lasted around 30–45 minutes and were conducted without recording devices so as to create a comfortable rapport; encouraging frank and open discussion (Warren, 2002). Detailed notes were collected contemporaneously, including verbatim recording of key statements, and fuller notes were written up immediately afterwards.

Teacher educators were also seen as insightful informants in that they are familiar with the research evidence and theories of TBLT, while also through their work with teachers are in touch with practices in schools. Ten teacher educators were interviewed, also based on purposive sampling. Criteria for selecting informants were that they teach on courses for teachers related to TBLT; and had either published articles promoting or critiquing task-based approaches, or had relevant experiences in schools through school-based developmental work related to TBLT. Four of the interviewees were expatriates experienced in working in Hong Kong and six were local academics. Interviews with teacher

educators lasted for around an hour and a half, were taped, transcribed and returned for verification.

Data analysis was carried out through inductive analysis using standard qualitative procedures of coding and categorizing data in order to support the development of an argument (Holliday, 2002). Liberal use of quotations is used in the findings section to allow readers to judge for themselves the comments of informants. Pseudonyms are used to allow the reader to track standpoints of individuals. The trustworthiness of analysis was enhanced through member checking (Erlandson et al., 1993), whereby two selected teacher educators commented in detail on the provisional findings which were then revised based on their feedback.

An interview study of teachers and teacher educators clearly cannot provide more than an impressionistic overview of the issues under discussion. It lacks triangulation with other data sources and provides only anecdotal evidence of what was actually going on in school classrooms. The careful selection of informants from a context rich with expertise in TBLT does, however, provide a range of informed perspectives on the issues addressed in the paper.

Findings

The findings from the interviews are divided into four sub-sections: perspectives on the reported implementation of TBLT or P-P-P; views of the relative advantage of task-based approaches or P-P-P; perspectives related to complexity and teachers' understandings of TBLT and P-P-P; and the perception that task-based approaches remain unproven in Asian schools.

Reported Implementation of TBLT and/or P-P-P

The activities reported in classrooms are relevant to the discussion because they are indicative of teacher preferences for TBLT or P-P-P. I begin the section with a quotation from Denise in response to a question about TBLT implementation in her school:

We are working [toward] the direction of task-based teaching, but some teachers believe that we need to give students more grammar to consolidate the grammatical structures. It is our belief that if we give them more

grammar exercises it will help. But sometimes the grammar is out of context or it can be quite boring for students. Students are more motivated when they learn through tasks, but we still hesitate as to whether students can learn everything through tasks.

This quotation is typical of responses from teachers and highlights some tensions or dilemmas apparent in the data: the perception (1) that grammar is important but potentially boring; and (2) that students find tasks more motivating, but teachers are unsure about the learning outcomes which arise.

Patty gave an example of a task she was doing with her year 7 class:

I am doing a project or task related to food. Students choose a topic under the theme of food and do a mini-research during the recess time. For example, one group is doing a questionnaire on favourite foods in the school. The maths teacher taught them how to analyse the data and do pie-charts and graphs. Another group went to McDonalds to find out the most popular food. Then they do an oral presentation in groups of four which counts as their internal oral examination mark, so they take it seriously. And they do a written report, including a cover page, photographs of food downloaded from the Internet, pictures, graphs and some conclusions.

Patty perceived that this task worked well, particularly with more motivated students, although she also expressed a belief that low achieving students probably learn better through traditional methods, such as P-P-P.

Unsurprisingly there was variability in reported practices. The majority of the teachers reported their practices as being mainly P-P-P, with some TBLT, particularly in years 7 to 9, but less so in years 10 and 11 when examination preparation was paramount. Direct grammar instruction was reported as a major teacher priority, and TBLT was not seen as congruent with that goal. The teachers most positive about TBLT reported greater student and teacher satisfaction and a belief that it worked. Concerns about implementing TBLT were mainly expressed in terms of students' unwillingness or inability to communicate through English; classroom management or discipline problems; additional time needed for preparation for and implementation; and lack of task-based teaching materials. P-P-P, on the other hand, was seen as less challenging in these areas.

Frank, an expatriate teacher educator who frequently observed lessons in schools, characterised classes as involving mainly a "thematic

P-P-P approach” and concluded that “the government recommendations for TBLT are so watered down by the time they are implemented that some lessons would be very hard to recognise as TBLT.”

Overall, the informants reported greater use of P-P-P than TBLT.

Preferences for TBLT or P-P-P

A review of all 12 completed teacher interviews indicates that 6 preferred P-P-P, 3 favoured TBLT, and 3 were undecided or had mixed opinions. One quotation from a teacher preferring TBLT and 3 quotations from teachers favouring P-P-P over TBLT:

Students like TBLT because it gives them a purpose and they play a more active role as they need to communicate. Most students prefer group work or pair work because it is more fun to work with someone.

P-P-P is important, especially in terms of explaining grammar. P-P-P is clear-cut and condensed, you can teach the main points easily.

Students are weak in grammar so we need to use P-P-P to help them improve their grammatical accuracy.

A well-planned grammar lesson is preferable to the principles of TBLT, where you let the grammar flow out.

There are hints in some of these quotations of conceptions of teaching that assume students learn what they are taught. This suggests a connection between incomplete conceptions of language learning and preferences for P-P-P.

In this study, eight of the ten teacher educator informants were more favourably disposed toward TBLT than P-P-P while two informants (Irene and Gladys, both Chinese) seemed more positively orientated toward P-P-P. Joyce saw positive aspects of TBLT being “to speak with a purpose, have some [contextualisation], do some problem-solving ... and students enjoy these kinds of activities.” Eric commented:

The P-P-P approach connects with classroom management, the ability to plan, to feel you are in charge, but it doesn’t really connect well with student learning ... The value of tasks is that they provide a vehicle for personalized language learning, a means for expanding the time available for language learning and [providing] learners a sense of responsibility.

Irene commented as follows:

The teachers are doing P-P-P more than task-based approaches. P-P-P is safe for teachers and they are very familiar with this. In a way, with weaker students (or even with stronger students) what's the harm of using P-P-P? I was taught in this way, although I don't mean because I was taught in this way, teachers should teach in this way. If the teachers can handle P-P-P well, students can benefit, enjoy the lesson and learn a lot. Their motivation can be enhanced incredibly. But if the teacher claims that he or she is doing TBLT, and yet the teacher doesn't do it well, then students will feel bored and their interest and confidence may be shattered.

Irene seems to imply that well-handled P-P-P is preferable to less effective implementation of TBLT and that teachers are more able to implement P-P-P than TBLT. Another issue she raises is the influence of ones' own language learning experiences; sometimes teachers may reproduce the kinds of approaches they were exposed to as students, particularly when those experiences were relatively positive. If one has seldom been exposed as a learner to more experiential approaches to learning, then implementing them oneself is likely to be doubly challenging.

Hilda, a teacher educator, provided a perspective on both the pros and cons of P-P-P:

From the teachers' perspectives, they see P-P-P as more within their control and more easily manageable. But for the less self-motivated students, they tend to switch off when they think it's "grammar again." The students tend to find greater fun and enjoyment in completing tasks.

This represents a possible tension between P-P-P providing the teacher with a clear instructional role and lack of interest from students.

Frank also identified the issue of lack of student engagement as a downside of P-P-P:

What is interesting to me is that methodological reform at the classroom level is being driven by the students. Students are less tolerant of boring things, their attention spans are short and their interest has to be engaged quickly and needs to be sustained by truly interesting work and I don't know whether that can be done with anything but a task-based approach. Students will cause classroom management problems unless the teacher grabs their interest and within most P-P-P approaches that it is not going to happen.

There is, however, some conflict here with earlier views that TBLT causes some disruption to smooth classroom management. Perhaps it has

more to do with particular teacher and student characteristics, rather than the approach per se. It is also possible that those who perceive a certain approach to be favourable may be more likely to notice weaknesses of the less favoured approach.

Gladys, a teacher educator involved in training teachers for implementation of TBLT, commented on the framework espoused in Willis (1996):

The Willis model is not so suitable because the students need exposure to English. The pre-task is about teaching not just about setting the scene or contextualizing the task. The Willis pre-task will not work in Chinese culture. The teacher has to teach; our students need to have the grammatical input because they don't have the exposure like in other foreign countries. The role of students is to listen; they need the knowledge from the teacher. In the P-P-P model, the teacher presents and practices first for accuracy and building up students' confidence; then students do the task.

Gladys believes that the more explicit teacher instructional role in P-P-P makes it more suitable for Asian contexts. A limitation of her comment is the assumption that input is mainly teaching about grammar. She seems to underplay other means of providing task-related input, through means such as listening or reading material.

This sub-section has suggested a teacher preference for P-P-P over TBLT, perhaps because teachers carry out the approach that they feel confident to deliver. It has also raised the possibility that students may favour the reverse. Most teacher educators expressed a preference for TBLT with only two supporting P-P-P.

Complexity and Understanding of TBLT and P-P-P

Derived from Rogers's (2003) seminal work on the diffusion of innovations, complexity is defined as the degree to which an innovation is perceived as difficult to understand and to use. Perceived complexity of TBLT appears to be a factor in teacher preferences for P-P-P. Two teacher commented on teacher understanding of TBLT:

Some teachers can understand TBLT superficially, but they haven't really been able to understand it deeply. Not all teachers are subject-trained; if they don't have subject knowledge, I don't think they can understand TBLT.

One of the main problems with TBLT is that teachers don't really understand it. They use labels such as "tasks" without really carrying it out.

Because reforms are so frequent, teachers always assume something new is on the horizon, and this reduces the motivation for deep engagement with TBLT.

This theme was picked up by Derek, a prolific academic author and writer of task-based materials:

I think the single biggest problem is that a lot of teachers don't really understand what we mean when we talk about TBLT and so they dabble with it alongside a traditional curriculum ... It seems to be complex but I am not sure why. The idea that language is a tool for communication rather than a body of knowledge to be memorised seems not to be very radical. Maybe it is complex at the implementation level, actually doing it when worries about loss of control come in.

In view of this perceived lack of understanding, some teacher educators reflected on the difficulties of preparing pre-service or in-service teachers for TBLT. Irene made what appeared to me to be a key point, "the ideas about TBLT only really sink in when they are really engaged in implementation." This point carries implications for teacher preparation which I return to in the Discussion section.

Eric, an authoritative writer on TBLT, responded to the issue of complexity as follows:

Task-based teaching is complex for teachers to get their heads round and also complex to implement. Even if you are an informed and committed devotee it would still be difficult to implement. It is easy to get your head around P-P-P because the psycholinguistic theory (if there is such a thing) is simple: practice makes perfect. And you have the immense advantage that you can teach a P-P-P approach simply by following the textbook. A big advantage of a P-P-P approach is that it denies differences between learners; it licenses you to downplay those differences. In contrast, for TBLT you have to get your head round a theory that has not yet been fully articulated. A further challenge for a task-based approach is that it forces you to confront the way learners are at different levels and you need to have a methodology that allows you to respond to diversity in your classroom. So a task-based approach forces a teacher to confront difficult problems that are currently not solvable.

Eric acknowledges both the theoretical and practical complexities of TBLT implementation; and indicates some of the pragmatic reasons in favour of P-P-P. His comment also raises a number of challenges: do teachers in Hong Kong and elsewhere typically have the skills to

respond to diversity in the classroom? Is it feasible for busy teachers with large classes to cater for such diversity?

The complexity of TBLT appeared to be a challenge for some teacher educators, as well as teachers. In terms of in-depth understanding of TBLT, for example options for form-focused work, some teacher educators articulated the importance of the post-task stage, while others had a rather limited view of post-task as merely an opportunity for remedial correction. Some of the possibilities for integrating TBLT with grammar instruction (e.g., through focused tasks) were not mentioned by informants.

The general picture from this sub-section is that there are barriers in terms of the perceived complexity of TBLT. Both the teachers and teacher educators believed that teacher understanding of TBLT was at a relatively superficial level. One of the reasons for preferences for P-P-P over TBLT is that the former is easier to understand and less complicated. Not all teacher educators charged with preparing teachers for implementation of TBLT showed a full understanding of the options available within a TBLT approach.

Established Evidence on TBLT or P-P-P

The theme of this sub-section is set by a quotation from Irene:

We don't have any established research findings yet, to support that if we use TBLT then students will necessarily learn English better. So little has been done in school contexts, especially in an Asian context, so why is the Hong Kong government promoting TBLT so enthusiastically? Why should we adopt it? I think as teachers or as teacher educators, we should be critical and try to see whether the ideas can really be implemented to suit our context.

Irene calls for more research evidence on TBLT to justify its implementation, although interestingly she does not seem to require research evidence to support P-P-P which she favours. Perhaps that is because she perceives that P-P-P is a more tried and tested approach as she experienced it successfully at school (as an earlier quotation indicates).

When asked about published evidence supporting TBLT implementation in schools, Eric referred to project work in Spain (e.g., Ribé, 2000):

Examples of successful implementation of task-based approaches are not exactly numerous. I would see them as effectively implemented in the form of project work. Those who were successful in Spain say that at the beginning it was incredibly difficult and they didn't think it was going to work, but it did. It requires persistence and the wider school to be supportive.... And what is important is the preparation phase which required that learners are being taught to take responsibility for their own learning, because fundamentally a teacher cannot cope with a TBLT class if it contains too many dependent students. So an early phase of task-based implementation has got to be inducing learners to take responsibility for their own learning.

If students in Hong Kong and elsewhere in Asia are accustomed to being dependent on the teacher (see Littlewood, 1999, for a discussion) then this represents a barrier to wide-scale school implementation of TBLT.

Eric also alluded to early work done on the task-based syllabus (Prabhu, 1987):

We could say Prabhu in Bangalore is encouraging but not definitive. It's also worth saying that this happened a long time ago and it is astonishing that it has not been repeated. To Prabhu's immense credit he chose to implement his project in deliberately difficult circumstances. It is fundamentally odd that it hasn't been followed up more.

Another related theme was risk-taking. Gladys commented as follows:

Teachers dare not take the risk of bringing new things into the classroom, the risk of getting worse results. They stick to the methods that have been used in the past, whatever results have been achieved they dare not task the risk unless you can show them that TBLT works.

If P-P-P achieves certain results (which may be good, bad or indifferent) and enables teachers to maintain control over lesson content, textbook coverage and classroom discipline, why would teachers want to turn to a different approach that may or may not bring benefits? It might be interesting to speculate on what means government or schools might use to encourage teachers to take these risks.

Summarising this sub-section, some teacher educators questioned whether there was sufficient evidence in favour of TBLT and called for more empirical data, particularly from schools in Asia. Further research data from schools might provide an increased body of evidence to indicate relative advantages of TBLT or P-P-P.

Discussion

This paper sought to analyse perceptions of the relative advantages of TBLT and P-P-P with respect to schooling in the Hong Kong context. The data suggest that teacher informants generally believed that teachers prefer P-P-P as opposed to TBLT. It appears to be more easily understandable, more manageable and provides a clearer teacher instructional role. P-P-P was also generally perceived by teachers as more effective in facilitating direct grammar instruction. TBLT is, however, seen as potentially providing a more active role for students and, if implemented successfully, more motivating.

Teacher educators, on the other hand, generally voiced greater support for TBLT than P-P-P, perhaps in view of their more in-depth understanding of issues, such as the limitations of P-P-P or direct grammar instruction; and their knowledge of SLA theory. Teacher educators generally showed awareness of some of the theoretical points in favour of TBLT but acknowledged the complexities of implementation in the school classroom.

The evidence from the interviews bolsters other studies (e.g., Carless, 2004; Tong, 2005) which indicate that despite being government policy, more still needs to be done for TBLT to be accepted by Hong Kong teachers and implemented in the classroom. This is the situation in Hong Kong, but, as Littlewood (2007) argues, the issues themselves resonate for many other comparable contexts both in East Asia and beyond. The findings support the views put forward in Ellis (2003) that there are a number of challenges facing large-scale adoption of TBLT.

The findings also provide further perspectives on the issue of teacher understandings of TBLT and its perceived complexity, conceptually and of implementation. Derek's comment, "it seems to be complex but I am not sure why," may be interpreted as illustrative of a potential disjunction between teacher educators (those trying to explain and promote TBLT) and teachers (those trying to understand and implement it). For example, the range of grammatical options in TBLT may contribute to both flexibility and perceived complexity. There were indications in the data that teachers and even some of the teacher educators did not articulate more than a modest awareness of the principles and practice of some of the options for handling focus on form in TBLT. A conundrum facing task-based approaches is this tension between flexibility and complexity.

The different variations in TBLT provide potential for skilful teachers to access the most suitable options for a given teaching situation, but this may increase the complexity for less well-prepared teachers and accentuate the difficulty of clarifying what exactly TBLT means and involves (c.f., Littlewood, 2004). For example, a version of P-P-P in which structures are contextualised in real-life situations may not be easily distinguishable from task-supported teaching (c.f., Ellis, 2003; Swan, 2005).

Whilst Van den Branden's (2006a) work in Flanders is becoming increasingly influential, and Willis and Willis (2007) include some examples of practice from schools, there remains a need for further empirical data collection on TBLT in school EFL settings. Research into TBLT within schools in the region is, however, likely to be constrained by the reality that there may not be much genuine TBLT implementation to observe. Given that a finding from this paper is that teacher understanding of the principles and practice of TBLT is generally perceived to be relatively limited, a fruitful area for further research might be into teacher education for TBLT. The effectiveness of TBLT teacher education could be further investigated, for example, the extent to which it is itself using a task-based approach or is predominantly transmissive in orientation. Perhaps the way the relevant teacher education is approached may be a barrier to teacher understanding and that following from this, TBLT teacher preparation may itself be in need of innovation. Van den Branden (2006b), for example, articulates the value of school-based practice-oriented coaching in supporting the development of TBLT. Such an approach can contribute to tackling the gulf between having knowledge of what TBLT is about and actually implementing it successfully in the classroom. One of the most powerful ways of extending implementation of TBLT could be exemplars of good classroom practice resulting from such developmental work (c.f., Willis & Willis, 2007).

In view of the preference of some informants for P-P-P over TBLT, it too may be in need of further research. For some national systems, it might be more productive to enhance the effectiveness of P-P-P rather than introducing TBLT. If teachers hold a relatively simplistic conception of learning which tends to assume that students learn what they are taught, teachers may not be aware of the limitations of P-P-P. This can be particularly the case when learners are able to use a structure reasonably accurately at the time of teaching, but have not sufficiently internalised it to use in later free production. A key risk in P-P-P is that it is superficially attractive, but not leading to long-term acquisition of the

target grammatical forms. More attention could be devoted to the development and dissemination of productive versions of P-P-P. For example, in what ways might P-P-P be implemented so as to minimize some of its limitations? How might it be usefully combined with aspects of TBLT?

Conclusion

In the final analysis, what is required is probably what good teachers have always known and done; namely, a balance of a variety of activities and different approaches adapted to the needs of a particular group of students in a specific setting. Some students may learn well through P-P-P, others through TBLT, others through some combination of the two. Despite the status of TBLT as an emerging orthodoxy (Littlewood, 2004), P-P-P is enduring, not easily dismissed, particularly because of its perceived pragmatic advantages, and meriting further analyses. Future research into TBLT might be particularly focused on teacher education, its effectiveness and the extent to which it utilises experiential task-based principles.

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