ELSEVIER

The suitability of task-based approaches for secondary schools: Perspectives from Hong Kong

David Carless

Faculty of Education, University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam, Hong Kong

Abstract

Task-based teaching has a high profile within contemporary ELT, yet there are few analyses of the appropriateness of task-based approaches for school contexts. This paper aims to analyse the suitability of task-based teaching for Hong Kong secondary schools; and to derive some suggestions for the development of a version of task-based approaches feasible for this and other comparable school contexts. The research method for the study involved semi-structured interviews with 11 secondary school teachers and 10 teacher educators based on purposive sampling. An overarching finding is the need for adaptation and a flexible 'situated version of task-based teaching'. The proposed adaptation includes: clarifying or enhancing the role of grammar instruction; integrating tasks with the requirements of examinations; and emphasizing reading and writing tasks in addition to oral ones. The study suggests a weak version of task-based teaching is likely to be most suitable for schooling and reinforces claims for the desirability of context-sensitive approaches.
© 2007 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Task-based teaching; Context; Situated task-based approaches

1. Introduction

Task-based teaching can be viewed as a new orthodoxy within contemporary ELT (Littlewood, 2004), falls within the general umbrella of communicative language teaching (CLT) and can be seen as an offshoot from it (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). There is a wide and rapidly expanding literature on task-based language teaching (TBLT), with many studies

E-mail address: dcarless@hku.hk

focused on post-compulsory schooling age groups, often in ESL contexts (e.g. Skehan and Foster, 2005) and a few based in schools (e.g. Van den Branden, 2006). There is a need for more critical scrutiny of the suitability of task-based approaches for schooling, particularly in Confucian-heritage culture contexts where task-based teaching may prove to be in conflict with traditional educational norms. This paper uses data, drawn from interviews with teachers and teacher educators in Hong Kong, to cast light on task-based teaching from a perspective of its feasibility for implementation in schools.

The characteristics of tasks have been exhaustively debated (see Ellis, 2003, for a review). For a paper focusing on pragmatic school implementation issues, it is deemed sufficient for current purposes to acknowledge that task-based approaches emphasize communication of meaning rather than study of grammatical form as the starting point for learning activities. Different versions of task-based approaches have been discussed in the literature. Skehan (1996) distinguishes between strong forms of TBLT in which transacting tasks is the main focus and everything else is subsidiary; and weak forms similar to 'general CLT'. Willis (1996) advocates task-based learning (TBL), a strong version of task-based approaches, which provides greater opportunity than weak variations for student choice of language. Task-supported teaching (Ellis, 2003) is a weak version which facilitates the communicative practice of language items that have been introduced in a traditional way. The existence of different variations of TBLT can be useful in offering flexibility but also potentially problematic in terms of being confusing or even contradictory.

The focus of this study is to gauge teachers' and teacher educators' (identified as key stakeholders) viewpoints on task-based approaches. The main aims of the paper are to analyse the suitability of task-based teaching for Hong Kong secondary schools; and to propose some features of a version of task-based approaches that might also have relevance to schooling in other contexts, particularly those that share with Hong Kong a Confucian-heritage culture. The Hong Kong context represents an appropriate site for the study of task-based approaches for a number of reasons. Firstly, task-based teaching has been adopted in the official syllabi for some time now, in primary schools (see Carless, 2003) since the mid 1990s and in secondary schools since 2001. Secondly, in Hong Kong within its eight universities, there are both a number of internationally renowned academics publishing on task-based approaches and also scholars with particular interest in the implementation of TBLT in local schools. Thirdly, Candlin (2001) praises the Hong Kong documentation as useful exemplars of how task-based teaching can be promoted in a mass educational system; this paper seeks to go beyond documentation to explore perceptions of classroom realities.

Despite being the official syllabus in Hong Kong, task-based teaching does not seem to have become firmly embedded. Inhibiting factors include: large class sizes, competitive examinations systems and lack of teaching expertise in task-based approaches (Walker, 2000); a preference for Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) modes of teaching (Tong, 2005); and an emphasis on direct grammar instruction (Andrews, 2003). Mok (2001, p. 127) suggests that despite the adoption of task-based approaches, "teaching has remained teacher-centred, didactic and non-interactive". One of the motivations for this paper is to explore why the official syllabus does not seem to be implemented widely. In addition, as the values and beliefs of teachers in Hong Kong may not be congruent with the principles of TBLT, it is worthwhile soliciting their views.

The significance of the paper lies in probing stakeholders' conceptions of task-based teaching and its suitability for state school systems. In particular, mapping a number of

possible adaptations to task-based approaches has potential to enhance their implementation by end-users. Whilst the immediate focus of the paper is on Hong Kong, it is suggested that there are implications for other contexts, especially those in which English is a foreign language.

2. The suitability of task-based approaches for schooling

An overarching concept framing the paper is the need for interplay between any methodology being promoted and the particular context in which it is being implemented (Bax, 2004). It is acknowledged that task-based approaches are of Anglo-American origin and that this may bring them into conflict with cultural contexts outside the western world (Ellis, 2003). For example, in Chinese settings this may involve a compromise between communication-oriented approaches and traditional methodologies, where for example, language teaching is generally seen as the delivery of knowledge rather than the development of communicative skills (Hu, 2005).

There are various critiques of task-based approaches relevant to schooling. A key problem is where the linguistic input comes from in task-based teaching and how new knowledge is developed (Bruton, 2005; Swan, 2005), particularly if the pre-task stage is as Willis (1996) suggests, a short stage comprising mainly 'Introducing the topic' and 'Identifying topic language'. Language acquisition in TBLT is also sometimes seen as being too close to L1 processes to be applicable in EFL contexts (Klapper, 2003). Bruton (2005) concludes that task-based teaching has limited applicability for secondary school foreign language classrooms and similarly Swan (2005) suggests that task-based teaching is most suitable for advanced learners. Whilst detailed and impressively referenced, Bruton, Klapper and Swan do not provide empirical data to support their expert commentary.

The relationship between grammar instruction and task-based approaches is often a cause of concern for teachers and an issue impacting on teachers' perceptions of the feasibility of task-based instruction (Loumpourdi, 2005). Task-based approaches can provide a way to integrate grammar instruction with meaning-focused language use through performance of communicative tasks (Fotos, 2002). One strategy involves focused tasks which target the use of a particular pre-determined linguistic feature whilst still maintaining a concern for message communication and student choice of linguistic resources (Ellis, 2003). In TBL, grammatical form is often emphasized in the post-task stage as part of a 'focus on form' to counter the danger that learners develop fluency at the expense of accuracy (Skehan, 1996). In the model proposed by Willis (1996, p. 101), language focus and language practice are recommended in the post-task phase as "an opportunity for explicit language instruction". A possible tension is that Hong Kong teachers generally present grammar deductively with an emphasis on form rather than meaning (Andrews, 2003). On the basis of her Hong Kong experiences, Tang (2004) claims that PPP is predominant in Asia as it fulfils the need for a clear and direct teacher instructional role and she questions whether Asian teachers are attracted to the notion of covering grammar in the post-task phase.

Examinations have long been identified as an important influence on what goes on in the classroom and a potential constraint to the implementation of communicative pedagogies (e.g. Li, 1998). A key issue impacting on the prospects for the implementation of task-based approaches is the extent of synergy or mismatch between examinations and the kind of activities carried out in TBLT. Trying to stimulate changes in pedagogy through

modifying the content or format of a high-stakes test has been a common strategy in Hong Kong (e.g. Cheng, 2005) and elsewhere (e.g. Wall, 2000), but has revealed that washback is complex and often works relatively slowly. In a test-dominated context, such as Hong Kong, teacher beliefs about the role of assessment clearly play an important role in influencing the pedagogies that teachers are willing to attempt (Carless, 2005).

Whilst task-based teaching can include various modes, there is a risk that task-based approaches place too much emphasis on oracy. The literature often seems to take it for granted that oral pair or group work will be deployed (e.g. Skehan, 1998; Willis, 1996). In schools in Confucian-heritage contexts, such modes of interaction risk leading to noise and indiscipline not welcomed by teachers (Carless, 2004; Li, 1998). There is also some evidence (Swain and Lapkin, 2001) that a written task can be more successful than an oral task in promoting student attention to form. In Chinese settings, a focus on written texts may be valued more highly than verbal dexterity, with reading and writing often receiving particular emphasis (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996).

This section underpins the focus of the study on the suitability of task-based teaching for schooling in Hong Kong by foregrounding three issues: the role of grammar teaching; the impact of examinations; and whether oral production is over-emphasized.

3. Method

The paper seeks to address the following issues:

- How suitable is TBLT for secondary schooling in Hong Kong?
- What adaptations might make it more feasible to implement?

The chosen research method is through semi-structured interviews in order to permit informants to express their perspectives on task-based approaches in their own words. Whilst a single method study using only interviews carries obvious limitations, intra-method triangulation was achieved through interviewing two different groups: teachers and teacher educators. Teachers are, or are supposed to be, carrying out task-based teaching, so can provide perspectives from the practical viewpoint of the classroom in the micro-climate of a specific school context. Teacher educators are in contact with numerous pre-service and in-service teachers which enables them to view the terrain from a wider angle to complement the more narrowly (single-school) focused perspectives of the teachers. The interview protocols used as a stimulus for discussion are included in Appendices 1 and 2. Somewhat different but complementary questions are used with the two sets of informants in order to elicit most fruitfully their views on the relevant issues.

Eleven secondary school teachers from nine different schools were interviewed based on purposive sampling (Patton, 1990). In other words through recommendations from contacts in the school community, I identified a sample of teachers ranging in experience from 2 to 20 years and from a variety of schools. On the basis of the completed interviews, I would characterise the orientation of interviewees towards task-based teaching as follows: largely negative (three teachers), interested but sceptical (three), positive with reservations (three) and largely positive (two). Interviews with teachers were conducted without tape recorders so as to create a comfortable rapport; the tape recorder can inhibit frank and open discussion (Warren, 2002), particularly with informants not accustomed to research procedures and when comments may be critical of government policy. Detailed notes were

collected contemporaneously, including extensive verbatim recording of key statements, and fuller notes were written up within 24 hours of interviews.

Ten Hong Kong-based teacher educators were also interviewed based on purposive sampling with the key criterion being a demonstrated critical interest in the theory and practice of task-based approaches. Four of these scholars were selected mainly on the basis of having published articles promoting or critiquing task-based approaches and six were principally chosen on the basis of their experience of teaching courses for teachers related to task-based teaching. Interviews with scholars were tape-recorded, transcribed and returned for verification. Data collection proceeded until theoretical saturation was reached, in other words when data no longer seemed to lead to significant refinement of insights (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Overall, although the sampling procedures may not reflect the entire spectrum of views in Hong Kong, I believed that 21 carefully chosen interviewees were sufficient to provide a wide range of informed opinions and rich perspectives on the practice of task-based approaches in schools.

Data were analysed using the principles of inductive analysis. Analysis proceeded concurrently with interviews so that propositions and interpretations gleaned from earlier interviews could be put to later informants. In other words, themes or categories are developing in the researcher's mind during the data collection process (Holliday, 2002). Two main strategies were adopted to enhance the trustworthiness of the research. Firstly, member checking (Erlandson et al., 1993) whereby selected informants and other interested parties responded to provisional findings, bringing a pivotal self-correcting step into the data analysis process (Charmaz, 2002). Secondly, I attempt to demarcate interview data from interpretation to indicate what is stated by informants and what are researcher interpretations and argument (Holliday, 2002). This paper is my own organized construction and other researchers' interpretations would undoubtedly be different.

In terms of limitations of the study, classroom observation would obviously provide additional insights into the implementation of task-based teaching. My earlier research (Carless, 2004) involved extensive longitudinal observations of the task-based classroom and unless an observational database is very comprehensive, it may only provide isolated snapshots of classroom implementation. Although interviews only provide perceptions of what is happening, the design of the study was based on a belief that the purposive selection of a range of informed practitioners and scholars were effective means of addressing the research aims.

4. Findings

In the first sub-section below I briefly summarize informants' views of some of the challenges for implementation of task-based approaches in schools and report their perspectives on the need for adaptations to task-based teaching. Then I discuss three themes which were central to proposals for adaptation: the role of direct grammar instruction, including PPP; the impact of examinations on task-based teaching; and alternatives to oral tasks.

4.1. The need for adaptation

As a first step in presenting informants' views related to adaptations of task-based approaches, I summarize some of their perspectives on the main challenges for

implementation. Concerns were expressed by both teachers and teacher educators that task-based activities may give rise to loss of control, for example, noise or discipline problems not considered acceptable within the structures of secondary schooling. Related to this were teachers' fears that students might make excessive or off-task use of the mother tongue during pair or group work. Another issue was a stated priority of completing the assigned textbook and task-based activities were often interpreted as time-consuming and so not easy to fit into the teaching schedule.

In view of these practical constraints, a number of informants commented on the need for adapting task-based teaching, what one teacher educator termed 'An eclectic compromise' and another 'TBL with local characteristics'. Teachers also argued for the need for compromise and adaptation, for example, "We need to find some other method, not a task-based one and not a traditional one, something between the two". Different emphases were put on the call for adaptation, for example, one teacher educator commented as follows:

> Make task-based realistic, give it a reality check. Try to understand what is in the literature first, but then afterwards, don't just stick to it blindly or adhere to it. Look at your own teaching situation, what works best for your students? What are the obstacles? What are the constraints?

This teacher educator emphasizes the need for realism and flexibility. Similarly, another stressed the idea of choosing suitable variations as follows:

> Teachers would actually have a lot more confidence if they can see variations suited to the TBLT framework, for example, with the language focus coming in right at the beginning. ... My impression is most teachers will tend to be more in favour of a 'soft' TBLT approach where they would feel that language input has to be given at quite an early stage even before they introduce the task, topic and context.

This seems to be a counter-argument to the notion of language focus in the post-task stage (Willis, 1996) and support for a weak version of task-based approaches referred to earlier.

Informants called for different kinds of flexibility in implementing task-based approaches. A teacher, positive about TBLT, felt that in view of the tight teaching schedule she could complete some units through traditional teaching and some through a task-based approach. Some teacher educators argued for variation in terms of what might be suitable for different ability levels; they saw task-based approaches as being more productive with band 1 (higher achieving) students and believed that band 3 (lower achieving) students would need more support before or during tasks. Teachers of band 3 students mentioned the kind of things students liked doing, for example: "the nature of the activity is quite important. They quite like gap-filling, they like things they are able to do and get some feeling of success". My interpretation is that this sense of achievement was perceived as harder for students to develop through TBLT which may be more open-ended, process-oriented or may not provide specific written outcomes.

The data in this sub-section indicate that informants believed task-based implementation faces a number of challenges, needs to be adapted flexibly and requires variations tailored to suit local teachers and students.

4.2. Direct grammar instruction

All the teacher informants and several of the teacher educators commented on the need for teachers to provide students with direct grammar instruction. Indeed, one teacher educator referred to ''a deeply ingrained attitude that language teaching is grammar teaching''. Some informants stated preferences for approaches such as PPP and the need for direct grammar instruction either as part of a pre-task stage or as a self-contained teaching process in itself. The following comments are illustrative:

> Teachers think that students are not given enough grammatical input. If students could choose grammatical items, they will get them wrong ... we think previous teaching approaches like PPP are better. It is difficult to integrate grammar teaching and task-based teaching. (teacher)

> Why not spend more time on more traditional language approaches? Students need to be given more help with basic English grammar before they adopt the task-based approach. You can't expect them to be able to perform a task successfully without giving them input. (teacher educator)

Such orientations (which may be caricatures or misinterpretations of TBLT) represent potential inhibiting factors for the implementation of meaning-focused approaches.

One teacher educator made specific reference to the unsuitability of the framework set out in Willis (1996):

> The Willis model has never been done in Hong Kong classrooms. You need a combination of a traditional one and a TBL cycle. So in the pre-task, instead of the things that Willis mentions like setting the context, I would go for the PPP model so the teacher presents and practices first for accuracy and building up students' confidence ... and then when the students are ready with adequate input, they do the task.

This informant sees Willis's approach (with students activating their pre-existing linguistic resources) as being unsuitable in view of the perceived need to provide students more presentation and practice prior to the task.

One of the teacher educators addressed the issue of grammar by emphasizing the potential of post-task language work as follows:

> A key issue is how to engender a focus on form. The post-task phase is key, to demonstrate to the kids that the task was there and it might have been fun but fun is not the main reason. So it is crucial that the children see the connection between the task they have just done and some language work which is only worthwhile doing if they apply themselves to the task.

For this teacher educator the post-task stage provides an opportunity for focus on form, along the lines of Willis's model. Teachers, however, did not highlight the pivotal nature of the post-task phase. Some informants noted that this stage could be used for remediation, error correction or feedback but examples of a systematic post-task focus on form were not mentioned. One teacher educator saw this as a key issue:

> The problem with Hong Kong teachers is that they do a lot of feeding in of language at the beginning of the task cycle but very rarely language analysis at the end. This is something that I always recommend, not just for remediation but for extension.

This sub-section has indicated that informants perceived grammar to be a key focus of teaching and has highlighted teachers' emphasis on providing such instruction for students. The feasibility for schooling of Willis's model has been questioned and the post-task phase highlighted as an issue requiring further attention.

4.3. The role of examinations

Not surprisingly, examinations were seen as a key factor impacting on what goes on in the classroom. A teacher educator set the scene as follows, "Teachers normally see TBL as something you can experiment with spasmodically in years 7–9, but hands off years 10 and 11, because those forms are the preserve of public examination preparation". Both internal school tests and external public examinations were seen as influencing the implementation of task-based approaches. Whilst the impact of the former seemed to discourage task-based approaches, the role of the latter seemed to be becoming more ambiguous.

Teacher respondents all stated that examinations act as a barrier towards the implementation of task-based approaches. The following comments are illustrative:

> In this school the test format is still traditional, for example, we test grammar such as knowledge of prepositions, gerunds and infinitives. . . . It is not integrated and not contextualized.

> The exams play quite an influence. Even if the classroom teaching may be approaching TBLT, students are still given traditional tests.

These teacher comments seem to be referring to internal school examinations and the teacher educators most familiar with these kinds of test also identified them as comprising 'mechanical kinds of drills', 'substitution' or 'filling in the blanks'. In sum, the consensus appeared to be that internal examinations were generally not task-based with an emphasis on traditional testing formats being expressed.

The impact of external examinations was also perceived as impacting on task-based implementation. Some teacher educators, however, noted that external examinations had become increasingly integrative and task-based in recent years. Related to this, the idea that the examination system might have potential to be more of an opportunity than a threat to the implementation of task-based teaching was articulated as follows:

> If task-based learning could be tied really firmly with assessment, preparing for exams, passing the test, passing a paper at Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE), then we would get more teachers actively engaging with TBL. For the reading paper at HKCEE, let's have some tasks focused on reading.

The positive potential of the external examinations on classroom interaction was underscored by a teacher who commented that it was often difficult to get students to speak in English, but "oral interaction does occur when a class is preparing for a specific external oral examination".

The comments of the informants reported in this sub-section indicate that internal examinations were traditional in format and hence a barrier to the implementation of task-based approaches. These internal examinations lagged behind external examination developments, with recent innovations in the latter seeming to have potential for increased integration with task-based teaching.

4.4. Moving beyond oral tasks

One of the issues I raised with interviewees was on the balance in task-based teaching between oral and other modes of communication. Two illustrative comments are as follows:

> I think task-based approaches put too much emphasis on oral work. When students are attempting a task, they are all talking and we can't guarantee the quality of their group discussion. (teacher)

> Task-based approaches probably put too much emphasis on speaking. There is a bias towards oral approaches and perhaps this reflects the Anglo-American bias. If you look at the textbooks it is often around 80% oral skills and the reading and writing is for reinforcement. (teacher educator)

The majority of informants indicated that task-based approaches put too much emphasis on the oral dimension. Cultural issues were also raised, with a teacher educator observing that "Chinese are not so auditory; because of their writing system, they need to base things on a text, so I think this also impacts on their approach to ELT". Another teacher educator presented a counter-argument, "Because we don't have so much emphasis traditionally on oral communication, then I think it is a good thing to emphasize the oral aspects".

Teachers in band 3 schools also emphasized how difficult it was to get students to speak in English and that they were more co-operative in individual reading and writing tasks. One teacher commented as follows, "The form of the exam system and students' future needs are on reading and writing, there is no need for an emphasis on speaking". A teacher educator also put a case for more reading and writing tasks:

> Task-based approaches need to focus not just on speaking but on the other skills, too. If we could get more tasks out there on reading or writing, it would be very healthy. And that kind of task would cohere better with assessment and the nature of Hong Kong schools.

Whilst some informants saw similar value in emphasizing reading and writing tasks, it was also acknowledged that this could reduce student enjoyment. As a teacher educator put it:

> One problem for the band 3 classes is that students are bored with reading and writing tasks. I think a lot of students just think reading and writing in English is challenging for them, so they will associate it with boredom. Oral activities could be more fun for a lot of learners.

Another teacher educator raised the issue of the relationship between task-based approaches and oral group work as follows, "I don't know why exactly, but TBL seems to have become equated with group work. It doesn't have to be so and I think all teachers should realize this". Related to this was the concern that group work often failed to work well in a monolingual secondary school context because of student overuse of the mother tongue.

This sub-section has reported concerns that TBLT places too much emphasis on oral work and although a clear consensus did not emerge, there were suggestions that individ-

ual reading and writing tasks might be worth highlighting more within task-based approaches.

5. Discussion

This paper discusses interview data casting light on the feasibility of task-based teaching for Hong Kong secondary schools. The data suggest that there is a need for a pragmatic interplay between methodological principles and the dynamics of school classrooms. A soft or weak version of task-based teaching seems to be a preferred option in the Hong Kong school context, with 'task' being interpreted modestly along the lines of communicative practice (Carless, 2004; Tong, 2005). The kind of flexible methods that may prove most feasible could be termed 'situated task-based approaches', drawing on the cultures and settings in which they occur so that they can be context-sensitive. The study suggests that features of a situated task-based approach could include the following: grammar instruction in the pre-task stage of a task cycle; task-supported teaching along the lines of the PPP approach; tasks related to examination requirements; and alternatives to oral tasks, including highlighting reading and writing.

In terms of the critiques put forward by Bruton (2005) and Swan (2005), cited earlier in the paper, the core issue of the source of input in task-based teaching seemed to be tackled by teachers providing direct grammar instruction in the pre-task stage or as part of a PPP sequence. Informants who advocated PPP did not address, however, its limitations, for example, its failure to account for learners' developmental readiness (Ellis, 2003) and students' ability to use forms correctly in controlled practice but not in later free production. Furthermore, such teaching strategies may not be compatible with task-based teaching as conceived in the literature and may indicate that teacher education has not been successful in resolving myths or fallacies about TBLT and CLT (cf. Thompson, 1996). The potential of listening and reading tasks, for example, in providing learners with input was a strategy that seemed to be underplayed.

I now make some suggestions for the further development of task-based teaching for schools in Hong Kong and elsewhere, at the level of principles of pedagogic practice; and outline some associated issues requiring further investigation. Firstly, more clarification is still required concerning the role of grammar instruction in task-based approaches, an area that seems to be simultaneously confusing and a fundamental part of teachers' instructional roles. For example, more attention could be afforded to the post-task phase of the task cycle – an aspect that the data indicated was not being well-exploited. The post-task stage, with its explicit focus on form, might also be integrated with more varied approaches to grammar instruction, including inductive and consciousness-raising tasks (e.g. Mohamed, 2004). The post-task phase can also contribute to reminding students of the solid learning that should have been accomplished and that while the task may have been enjoyable, there were serious learning aims underpinning it. More analyses are needed of the post-task stage in school contexts, particularly as adolescents' interest may be waning by this stage and in view of the constraints of lessons of short duration, such as 35–40 minutes.

Secondly, more explicit links could be built and articulated between tasks and examinations. Teachers' suggestions that examinations were a barrier to task-based approaches were not fully convincing to me in that high-stakes public examinations in Hong Kong have been moving in a more task-based direction for some years. For example, a high pro-

file recent innovation involves school-based assessment in which students read books and view movies then carry out oral tasks through individual presentations and group interactions (Davison, 2007); these tasks are assessed by the students' own teachers and count for 15% of the public examination mark. Such a development may have immediate impact on the teachers of examination classes (i.e. years 10 and 11) but may take longer to impact on the earlier years of secondary schooling, underscoring the notion that washback may operate quite slowly (Cheng, 2005).

Potential synergies between TBLT and exams could be reinforced if tasks are developed that embody some of the principles of task-based approaches and also serve as practicing the skills and sub-skills demanded by high-stakes tests. This might support a more direct relationship between examinations and task-based teaching. Issues requiring further investigation include the extent to which teachers may use examination requirements as a pretext or justification for the kind of approach that they personally favour; is most accepted in their social setting; or is most practical to implement. A useful point of reference may be the Japanese context, where teachers have prepared their students through a grammar-translation method even though no translation is required in the key exam (O'Donnell, 2005) and as Watanabe (1996) suggests, teacher factors may outweigh the influence of examinations. In other words, it may be teacher beliefs and school practicalities rather than examinations that are a more significant barrier to task-based approaches. Has the role of examinations as a constraint to communicative pedagogies sometimes been over-stated? Related to this is the issue of the relationship between an examination and how teachers prepare students for it. The extent to which teachers use or need to use a task-based mode of instruction to train students for a task-based examination requires further investigation.

Thirdly, the balance between oral and other types of task requires further consideration and investigation. Task-based research has predominantly focused on oral production which may have contributed to teachers' misinterpretations of the primacy of oral tasks, particularly through pair or group work. Group work, in particular, has limitations in monolingual school language classrooms in view of issues, such as noise, off-task behaviour and regression to the mother tongue (Carless, 2002). A situated task-based approach may demand a varied repertoire of activities, including greater attention to individual tasks. A useful strategy might be to focus more on reading and writing tasks to cohere better with examinations and contribute to a clarification of the perception that task-based approaches overemphasize speaking. Whilst the task-based literature does include discussion of other modes, for example, narrative writing (Ellis and Yuan, 2004) or extensive reading (Green, 2005), more analyses relevant to schooling still need undertaking.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper bolsters claims that we need context-sensitive teaching methods or what has been termed here as situated task-based approaches, in which culture, setting and teachers' existing beliefs, values and practices interact with the principles of task-based teaching. Task-based approaches could be feasible in diverse school contexts if, for example, grammar options are strengthened and better understood; task-based teaching is integrated better with requirements of examinations; and an appropriate balance can be found between oral and other task modes. In view of their origins in adult contexts, there is clearly more conceptual and empirical work required in the development of versions of task-based approaches suitable for schooling.

Appendix 1. Interview protocol (teachers)

1. In terms of ELT approaches, what do you think Hong Kong teachers are good at doing?
2. What do teachers usually do in their English lessons?
3. What are the positive elements of task-based teaching?
4. What are the negative elements of task-based teaching?
5. What do you think are teachers' main objections to task-based teaching?
6. What do you understand by the term task-based teaching?
7. How well do you think teachers in your school understand task-based teaching?
8. Do you think task-based approaches are culturally suitable for Hong Kong?
9. Do you think how you learn your first language plays a big role in learning a second language?
10. Do you think task-based approaches put too much emphasis on oral communication?
11. Have you been able to get your students to interact much in English?
12. To what extent are your school tests and examinations task-based?
13. Do you think examinations play a role in the acceptability of task-based approaches?
14. To what extent is task-based teaching actually being implemented in your school?
15. Can you give an example of a task you have carried out with your students?
16. What do you do in the post-task stage of the task cycle?
17. How do you see the relationship between task-based teaching and grammar?
18. Can you give an example of a task you integrated with grammar?
19. What are the main issues in the classroom implementation of tasks?
20. What might make task-based teaching more manageable or feasible for your school context?

Appendix 2. Interview protocol (teacher educators)

1. What do you think are the main factors facilitating or inhibiting the implementation of task-based approaches in Hong Kong secondary schools?
2. What do you think Hong Kong teachers would see as the pros and cons of task-based teaching?
3. To what extent do you think that they have a good understanding of task-based teaching?
4. To what extent do you consider task-based teaching to be complex?
5. If you compare task-based approaches with P-P-P, what would you see as the strengths and weaknesses of each?
6. Does task-based teaching put too much emphasis on oral communication?
7. Do you think it would be useful to enhance the role of reading and writing tasks in task-based approaches?
8. To what extent do you think a task-based approach is being implemented in Hong Kong secondary schools?
9. To what extent is a task-based approach congruent with Hong Kong teachers' strengths?

10. Do you have a sense of the possible characteristics of a teacher able to implement task-based teaching?
11. In the classroom, what do you think are the main challenges for teachers trying to implement task-based teaching?
12. Task-based approaches in other countries are often implemented with (young) adults, to what extent do you think task-based approaches are appropriate for schools?
13. To what extent do you think task-based teaching is suitable for secondary schools in Hong Kong?
14. If curriculum development specialists or teacher educators were trying to make task-based teaching more manageable, how might they go about this?
15. How do you see the role of grammar in task-based teaching? How do you think that role might be strengthened?
16. How do you see the role of examinations in relation to task-based teaching? Do you think that recent changes to examinations might facilitate task-based teaching?
17. Are there any elements of Chinese culture which facilitate or inhibit the implementation of task-based approaches?
18. Do you think task-based approaches are culturally suitable for Hong Kong?
19. Do you have any thoughts on a possible version of task-based approaches suitable for schools in Hong Kong?

References

Andrews, S., 2003. Just like instant noodles – L2 teachers and their beliefs about grammar pedagogy. Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice 9 (4), 351–376.

Bax, S., 2004. The end of CLT: a context approach to language learning. ELT Journal 57, 278–287.

Bruton, A., 2005. Task-based language teaching for the state secondary FL classroom. Language Learning Journal 31, 55–68.

Candlin, C.N., 2001. Afterword: taking the curriculum to task. In: Bygate, M., Skehan, P., Swain, M. (Eds.), Researching Pedagogic Tasks: Second Language Learning, Teaching and Testing. Longman, Harlow, pp. 229–243.

Carless, D., 2002. Implementing task-based learning with young learners. English Language Teaching Journal 56 (4), 389–396.

Carless, D., 2003. Factors in the implementation of task-based teaching in primary schools. System 31, 485–500.

Carless, D., 2004. Issues in teachers' re-interpretation of a task-based innovation in primary schools. TESOL Quarterly 38, 639–662.

Carless, D., 2005. Prospects for the implementation of assessment for learning. Assessment in Education 12 (1), 39–54.

Charmaz, K., 2002. Qualitative interviewing and grounded theory analysis. In: Gubrium, J., Holstein, J. (Eds.), Handbook of Interview Research: Context and Method. Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, pp. 675–694.

Cheng, L.Y., 2005. Changing Language Teaching Through Language Testing: A Washback Study. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Cortazzi, M., Jin, L., 1996. Cultures of learning: language classrooms in China. In: Coleman, H. (Ed.), Society and the Language Classroom. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 169–208.

Davison, C., 2007. Views from the chalkface: English language school-based assessment in Hong Kong. Language Assessment Quarterly 4 (1), 37–68.

Ellis, R., 2003. Task-based Language Learning and Teaching. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Ellis, R., Yuan, F., 2004. The effects of planning on fluency, complexity and accuracy in second language narrative writing. Studies in Second Language Acquisition 26, 59–84.

Erlandson, D., Harris, E., Skipper, B., Allen, S., 1993. Doing Naturalistic Inquiry: A Guide to Methods. Sage, Newbury Park, CA.

Fotos, S., 2002. Structure-based interactive tasks for the EFL grammar learner. In: Hinkel, E., Fotos, S. (Eds.), New Perspectives on Grammar Teaching in Second Language Classrooms. Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ, pp. 135–154.

Green, C., 2005. Integrating extensive reading in the task-based curriculum. ELT Journal 59 (4), 306–311.

Holliday, A., 2002. Doing and Writing Qualitative Research. Sage, London.

Hu, G.W., 2005. Contextual influences on instructional practices: a Chinese case for an ecological approach to ELT. TESOL Quarterly 39, 635–660.

Klapper, J., 2003. Taking communication to task? A critical review of recent trends in language teaching. Language Learning Journal 27, 33–42.

Kumaravadivelu, B., 2006. TESOL methods: changing tracks, challenging trends. TESOL Quarterly 40, 59–81.

Li, D.F., 1998. "It's always more difficult than you plan and imagine": teachers' perceived difficulties in introducing the communicative approach in South Korea. TESOL Quarterly 32, 677–703.

Littlewood, W., 2004. The task-based approach: some questions and suggestions. ELT Journal 58, 319–326.

Loumpourdi, L., 2005. Developing from P-P-P to TBL: a focused grammar task. In: Edwards, C., Willis, J. (Eds.), Teachers Exploring Tasks in English Language Teaching. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.

Mohamed, N., 2004. Consciousness-raising tasks: a learner perspective. ELT Journal 58, 228–237.

Mok, A.H.M., 2001. The missing element of rational pedagogical reform: a critical analysis of the task-based learning English language syllabus. Asia Pacific Journal of Teacher Education and Development 4 (2), 189–211.

O'Donnell, K., 2005. Japanese secondary English teachers: negotiation of educational roles in the face of curricular reform. Language, Culture and Curriculum 18 (3), 300–315.

Patton, M.Q., 1990. Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods, second ed. Sage, London.

Skehan, P., 1996. A framework for the implementation of task-based instruction. Applied Linguistics 17, 38–62.

Skehan, P., 1998. Task-based instruction. Annual Review of Applied Linguistics 18, 268–286.

Skehan, P., Foster, P., 2005. Strategic and on-line planning: the influence of surprise information and task time on second language performance. In: Ellis, R. (Ed.), Planning and Task Performance in a Second Language. John Benjamins Publishing, Philadelphia, pp. 193–218.

Strauss, A., Corbin, J., 1990. Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques. Sage, London.

Swain, M., Lapkin, S., 2001. Focus on form through collaborative dialogue: exploring task effects. In: Bygate, M., Skehan, P., Swain, M. (Eds.), Researching Pedagogic Tasks: Second Language Learning, Teaching and Testing. Longman, Harlow, pp. 99–118.

Swan, M., 2005. Legislation by hypothesis: the case of task-based instruction. Applied Linguistics 26, 376–401.

Tang, E., 2004. Task-based learning in the Asian classroom. Guidelines 26 (1), 14–18.

Thompson, G., 1996. Some misconceptions about communicative language teaching. ELT Journal 50, 9–15.

Tong, S.Y.A., 2005. Task-based learning in English language in Hong Kong secondary schools. Unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of Hong Kong.

Van den Branden, K. (Ed.), 2006. Task-based Language Education: From Theory to Practice. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Walker, E., 2000. An analysis of changes in the aims and objectives of the secondary English syllabi (1975–1999). In: Cheng, Y.C., Chow, K.W., Tsui, K.T. (Eds.), School Curriculum Change and Development in Hong Kong. Hong Kong Institute of Education, Hong Kong.

Wall, D., 2000. The impact of high-stakes testing on teaching and learning: can this be predicted or controlled? System 28, 499–509.

Warren, C., 2002. Qualitative interviewing. In: Gubrium, J., Holstein, J. (Eds.), Handbook of Interview Research: Context and Method. Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, pp. 83–101.

Watanabe, Y., 1996. Does grammar translation come from the entrance examination? Preliminary findings from classroom-based research. Language Testing 13 (3), 318–333.

Willis, J., 1996. A Framework for Task-based Learning. Longman, Harlow.