CHAPTER 15

TBLT in EFL settings

Looking back and moving forward

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This final chapter builds on issues which have been discussed implicitly or explicitly within the volume. I address five themes: research methodology; contextual adaptations; TBLT in Chinese contexts; assessment; and teacher education. I conclude by speculating on some possible future directions for TBLT and some avenues for further research.

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to identify some themes arising in this book, to include some related commentary, and to chart some issues for further exploration. As the title suggests, the chapter looks back at this volume and also at what might come next. The chapters have already been admirably summarized in Shehadeh's introduction, so one of my aims is to indicate some common themes. My choice of issues is necessarily something of a subjective enterprise, and I should first acknowledge that the realities of my role as a teacher educator and researcher in the Faculty of Education, University of Hong Kong bias me towards issues in Chinese (and wider East Asian) contexts and those related to the implementation of TBLT in state school systems.

The contributors to this book all researched TBLT in EFL contexts, and bringing together the chapters in a single volume is a highly valuable extension of the existing literature. Part of the editors' rationale for the volume is that it provides alternative perspectives to the current knowledge base on TBLT which, at least in its first decades, has been dominated by studies conducted in Anglophone settings. Given that context is an issue I discuss later in the chapter, the geographical spread of the contributions is worth some comment. The majority of the chapters come from Asian settings, a fitting echo to the seminal early work on task-based teaching in the Bangalore Communicational Teaching Project (Prabhu, 1987). The multiple contributions from Japan are also a noteworthy feature. Europe is comparatively under-represented in the collection with just three chapters from Turkey, Spain, and France. This balance of contributions provokes some mild surprise in view of the solid body of work on TBLT emanating

from Western Europe. Examples include studies of task complexity (Kuiken & Vedder, 2007) from scholars based in Amsterdam; Ramon Ribé's account of project work in Catalonia (e.g., Ribé, 2000); and the edited collection compiled by Garcia Mayo (2007), to name but a few.

Not surprisingly, the majority of the contributions focus on TBLT with young adults, mainly in university settings. This is the dominant trend, presumably for the pragmatic reason that many of us in the higher education sector are involved in advancing the English language skills of students of this type and age-group. The literature on TBLT in relation to schooling remains comparatively modest. A notable exception is Kris Van den Branden's careful and insightful analysis of the teaching of Dutch as a second language in Flanders (Van den Branden, 2006a). It is probably fair to say that the implementation of TBLT is even more complex with school-age students than adults, in view of challenges, such as large class sizes, classroom management, limited resources, the needs of school examination systems, and the teacher factors of attitudes, understanding, and capacities. Three noteworthy chapters in the collection focus on the school sector: Chapter 2 by Sasayama and Izumi using data from Japanese high school students; Chapter 9 by Chan focused on primary schooling in Hong Kong; and Chapter 10 by Park based on data from a Korean secondary school.

In what follows, I discuss five themes which occur in the collection and on which I feel qualified to comment. The first, research methodology, has already been highlighted by Shehadeh in Chapter 1. Secondly, context has been signaled as an issue above in my discussion of the geographical spread in the collection and under this theme I address the need for contextual adaptations to TBLT. Thirdly, I discuss progress in implementing TBLT in Chinese settings. The fourth theme of assessment is addressed because it is often a powerful force impacting on what teachers and students perceive as being important in the teaching and learning process. The fifth issue I address is teacher education, a key issue for the development of TBLT in EFL settings. Finally, I sketch some possible future developments.

Research methodologies used

The knowledge base on TBLT is obviously most effectively advanced by rigorous studies which are a good fit for the issues they are exploring. A distinctive feature of the current collection is the range of carefully designed research methods in use. Many of the chapters use quantitative methods, including: questionnaire surveys; various procedures involving the counting and classification of classroom interaction data or the analysis of oral production; and the use of various statistical means to present data, for example, Weaver's use of multi-faceted Rasch analysis to explore student peer assessment of a PowerPoint presentation task.

Qualitative approaches are also featured, but not as frequently as quantitative ones. Chan (Chapter 9) analyzed 20 lessons in Hong Kong primary schools facilitated by

multiple data sources: classroom observations; interviews with teachers; interviews with students; and documentary analysis of artifacts, such as lesson plans, teaching materials, and student work. Chacón (Chapter 11) studied issues related to a series of film tasks through focus group interviews, reflective student diaries, and audio-recordings of student presentations.

Mixed method approaches are often thought to be a sensible way of combining quantitative and qualitative approaches and thus exploiting assets of both. A difficulty lies in a single researcher possessing approximately equivalent expertise in both approaches. Jackson (Chapter 12) negotiates these issues well in his analysis of a course on a teacher education program in Japan. His chosen methods are written retrospective comments on student perceptions of gains from a task; analysis of classroom discourse; and a questionnaire gauging student attitudes towards TBLT in comparison with a parallel control group.

This brief review of research methods used in the collection amply illustrates the range of approaches deployed. The chapters demonstrate both rigor and carefully designed research which meets the aims of a particular study. The detailed discussions of research methods serve to distinguish this collection from an earlier one by Edwards and Willis (2005) and a more recent one by Shehadeh and Coombe (2010), which mainly place emphasis on valuable accounts of practice, with data collection being less at the forefront. My own methodological bias is towards qualitative research involving naturalistic classroom observations and associated interviews with participants. More studies of this nature would, in my view, advance research on TBLT in EFL settings, but it is heartening to see in this volume researchers delving into some of the complexities of practice that are in need of empirical attention.

Contextual adaptations to TBLT

The need to identify teaching approaches which are grounded in local needs and values has been well-established over the last couple of decades. Influential within this theme is research on the interplay between methodology and social context (Holliday, 1994), and the notion of context-sensitivity (Bax, 2003) in relation to communicative language teaching (CLT). Resonating with this line of thinking, an important issue lies in considering how TBLT might be adapted to suit the EFL settings in which it is being implemented, or vice versa, the extent to which educational traditions may need to change in order for effective language learning to occur. A possible repercussion is that adaptations of TBLT may involve some form of merging the global with localized methodologies (Littlewood, 2011). Implicit in such perspectives is the need for inclusive non-doctrinaire approaches to TBLT. Within such an orientation, it would be useful to identify key features central to all forms of TBLT, and explore further those aspects amenable to contextual adaptation.

In a number of chapters, authors refer to contextual features of their setting at macro and/or micro levels. Iwashita and Li (Chapter 7), for example, review some of the challenges for the implementation of CLT or TBLT in China, including a view of teaching predicated on a process of transmitting knowledge, information, or skill from the teacher to the student. Park (Chapter 10) notes issues, such as heavy focus on preparation for college entrance exams, rigid national curricula, and conventional teaching methods, which act as challenges for the implementation of TBLT in the Korean context.

A theme which arises in relation to Chinese settings is how TBLT can be adapted to make it fit with the exigencies of the prevailing educational culture. Hu (2002, 2005), for example, has written insightfully about the interplay between cultural norms in Chinese settings, which prescribe well-established expected roles of classroom participants and their potentially different roles under CLT. Whilst caution has to be applied to avoid cultural stereotyping, TBLT in many EFL settings requires changes to conventional roles of the teacher and possibly the student.

For example, TBLT approaches the acquisition of grammatical form in a different way to the more explicit teacher-fronted explanation practiced by many teachers. The chapters in Section 1 of this volume all examine how different variables impact on task-based language processing. This presages an aspect of contextual adaptations in relation to how grammar is perceived and how it is normally treated in a specific locale. This aspect may involve some move away from conventional presentation-practice-production (P-P-P) routines, containing limitations which have been well-articulated by scholars (e.g., Ellis, 2003; Lewis, 1996), if not always accepted by classroom teachers. However, there may still be potential for developing productive versions of P-P-P (Carless, 2009), possibly through some form of reconciliation with task-supported teaching (Ellis, 2003; Samuda & Bygate, 2008). This may include further exploration of the complementary functions of analytic and experiential strategies, as highlighted by Littlewood (2011).

The role of context in the implementation of TBLT is an issue I addressed in Carless (2007) when, on the basis of interview data from teachers and teacher educators, I proposed three dimensions of what I referred to as situated task-based approaches. These comprised: the issue (noted above) of clarifying or enhancing the role of explicit grammar instruction; integrating tasks with the needs of examinations (a theme I return to later in the chapter); and a need for balance in the modes of task interaction. For example, the latter could entail careful planning of balance between reading and writing tasks, as opposed to oral ones. The current collection seems to contain further indications that studies of TBLT tend to be dominated by a focus on oral production, although a notable exception is Chapter 5 in which Horiba and Fukaya focus on the processing of written texts, whilst in Chapter 4 Genc explores both written and oral tasks.

TBLT in Chinese contexts

Two of the chapters in the volume are set within Chinese settings. Within this theme, I make reference to developments in Hong Kong over the last two decades and more recent ones in the People's Republic of China.

Hong Kong

The story of TBLT in Hong Kong is set against the backdrop of a predominantly conventional teaching culture in which grammar has generally been taught through explicit explanation and controlled practice (Andrews, 2007). My own work has particularly focused on the implementation of TBLT in Hong Kong schools, and I address selected issues within this theme, in the belief that they carry messages for other contexts. A task-based curriculum was proposed for implementation in primary schools from the mid-1990s onwards and in secondary schools from 1999. In an analysis of the Hong Kong guidelines for TBLT, Candlin (2001) put forward the case that the documentation of the educational authorities in Hong Kong was exemplary. The reality at the chalk-face revealed, however, different issues to the more idealized picture presented in curriculum guidelines.

My doctoral research, conducted in the late 1990s, involved detailed case studies of teachers' attempting to implement some version of TBLT in primary schools. The ensuing publications (Carless, 2002, 2004) highlighted three main challenges in the classrooms under discussion. These features were student use (or overuse) of the mother tongue; tensions between teacher desire for an orderly, well-disciplined environment and a 'noisier' activity-based classroom; and concerns about the quality and quantity of student English language production. Chan (this volume), also basing her study in Hong Kong primary schools, discusses pedagogic issues which illustrate some of the complexities of teacher enactment of tasks with young learners. She includes a detailed analysis of aspects, such as strategic use of visual input, scaffolding, and creating conditions for noticing salient features of form.

TBLT was introduced in Hong Kong secondary schools from 1999 onwards. Secondary school case studies (Adamson & Tong, 2008) indicated that the version of TBLT being implemented in schools was less 'strong' (cf. Skehan, 1996) than that envisaged by the official government documentation and guidelines. In current manifestations of the Hong Kong school curriculum, TBLT is embedded within a "New Senior Secondary Curriculum" which involves changes to the structure and content of the curriculum. The structural element involves a move from a four-year to a three-year course of study with students entering university one year earlier than previously. In terms of content, TBLT is supposed to be embedded within a core focused mainly on grammar, communicative functions, vocabulary and text-types; and electives, such as learning English through drama, short stories, popular culture, or social issues. A further feature is school-based assessment (SBA), explored in more detail

later in the chapter, whereby teacher marks awarded for work done in schools count towards the overall grade in the key high-stakes examination. Part of the rationale for SBA rests on an assumption that reforming assessment is an effective way of stimulating pedagogic change. The interplay between TBLT and SBA under the new Hong Kong curriculum at senior secondary level is an issue for ongoing attention, with the possibility that the newer examination-focused SBA will attract more resources and attention than TBLT.

China

In the last few years, China has designed and promoted a so-called New Curriculum Standards (Wang, 2007) in which TBLT forms a part of an agenda for change across the school curriculum. In their contribution to this volume, Iwashita and Li investigate patterns of interaction in a task-based oral English class at the university level in China. A useful addition to our understanding of TBLT in China would be further studies in the school and university sectors.

Recent research on TBLT in China reinforces some of the challenges of introducing TBLT in a mass school system. Zhang (2007), for example, found that whilst teachers claimed to be carrying out tasks, what was going on in the classrooms she researched did not contain features of what one would normally consider as TBLT. More recent case studies conducted by Deng (2011) on the implementation of TBLT in primary schools in Guangdong province used Littlewood's (2004) communicative continuum to gauge the extent of task-based activities in the classrooms of four teachers in two contrasting schools. A significant (although hardly surprising) finding was that in the lessons observed, there were more activities which focused on forms rather than on meaning. Such activities were perceived by teacher participants as easier to manage and more effective in preparing students for examinations (Deng & Carless, 2009). One of the case study teachers (pseudonym, Jane) was, however, found to possess confidence in the effectiveness of communicative language teaching and her lessons evidenced more focus on meaning than in the lessons of the other three teachers. Jane seems to share some similar characteristics with Debbie (Iwashita & Li, this volume) who was able to promote an interactive classroom, despite contextual limitations such as a large class size. A facilitating factor, common to both the cases of Jane and Debbie, is a belief in and well-developed understanding of the potentials of communicative interaction for both language development and student motivation.

Examinations are often seen as a barrier to the implementation in schools of such as communicative or task-based approaches (Deng & Carless, 2010; Littlewood, 2007). This is clearly the case in China (Iwashita & Li, this volume), although the issues are complex and interwoven with contextual factors, such as those related to teachers' values. An analysis of changes to the writing section of the NMET (the National Matriculation English Test) used for university entrance indicated that teachers may utilise their own preferred approaches, whilst side-stepping the more communicative

aspirations of the test developers (Qi, 2007). It seems that teachers' values and beliefs about pedagogy are even more influential than the examinations, and there is considerable variation in how teachers respond to the tension between a communicative curriculum and a more traditional examination-system (Deng & Carless, 2010). The relationship between test preparation and communicative language teaching remains an important issue for further research. This leads me to consider, in the next subsection, assessment in relation to TBLT.

Assessment and TBLT

Only one chapter in the collection focuses explicitly on the important dimension of assessment in TBLT (Weaver, Chapter 13). We know that in formal mainstream educational situations where certification is at stake, assessment is what most powerfully captures the minds, or at least the study behaviors, of students. This is largely the case everywhere, but particularly so in China given its long history of examinations, dating back to the Han dynasty. This history of large-scale public testing in China is noted by Iwashita and Li (Chapter 7) as being a contextual barrier to the implementation of communicative and task-based approaches.

Weaver (Chapter 13), researching Japanese business students, provides an account of the incorporation of a formative assessment cycle into a TBLT curriculum in relation to a task with a strong sense of authenticity: a PowerPoint presentation aiming to persuade peers to invest in a particular company. A positive aspect of the study involves student engagement with exemplars of performance in association with the application of explicit assessment criteria. Student engagement with exemplars and criteria is an important step in developing self-evaluative capacities which lie at the heart of formative assessment.

An issue bubbling under the surface of the chapter, but not addressed in much detail, is the extent to which the processes described by Weaver actually acted formatively. In other words, to what extent did the cycle support the development of wider student learning capacities or more narrowly help them to improve their PowerPoint presentations? As the seminal work of Black and Wiliam (1998, 2003) has argued, an assessment process can only be said to have acted formatively if it advances student learning. It may be that a way forward for formative assessment in relation to TBLT is to engage more with the expanding educational literature on formative assessment (e.g., Andrade & Cizek, 2010) and developments in dynamic assessment (e.g., Poehner, 2008). Indeed, along these lines and within the TBLT literature, Norris (2009) has highlighted the formative as well as summative and other uses for task-based language assessment in his overview of task-based teaching and testing, and a handful of examples (e.g., Byrnes, 2002; Byrnes, Maxim, & Norris, 2010) point to the potential of task-based assessment as a core element of curriculum renewal initiatives.

A lesson from innovation theory (e.g., Barnes, Clarke, & Stephens. 2000) is that attempts to reform pedagogy often have limited impact, unless there is also change to how students are assessed. Again I wish to return to developments in Hong Kong. To stimulate the implementation of CLT and TBLT, high-stakes examinations have over the last twenty years increased the weighting awarded to oral performance, and the examinations have become increasingly task-based. The high-profile introduction of SBA involves students carrying out oral tasks within the school which are graded by the teacher and count for 15% of the English mark in the high-stakes examination at the end of secondary schooling (Davison, 2007; Davison & Hamp-Lyons, 2010). The oral tasks are either group discussions or oral presentations, in both cases responses to a print or non-print 'text', such as a book or movie.

The use of teacher assessment in a traditionally examination-oriented system is both a powerful impetus for change and a challenge to teachers' workloads and mind-sets. In such a setting, there is a likelihood that test-takers (often with the assistance of the ubiquitous after-hours tutorial sector) may seek to subvert the aims of the test developers. A careful analysis of the discourse of test interaction (Luk, 2010) shows how students colluded in producing utterances aimed at creating the impression of being effective interlocutors for the purpose of scoring marks rather than for authentic communication. In contrast, Gan, Davison, and Hamp-Lyons (2009) analyzed the discourse derived from a task which in their particular case was based on choosing a gift for the main character in the movie Forrest Gump. They found that peer group discussion as an oral assessment format has the potential to provide opportunities for students to demonstrate 'real-life' spoken interactional abilities. Discourse analysis of oral production in SBA tasks looks like an emerging research interest in Hong Kong.

Some form of synergy, or at least peaceful co-existence, between the needs of assessment in specific locales and communicative pedagogy is an important ongoing dilemma for TBLT in EFL settings. Some possible ways forward relevant to task-based assessment include: further development of assessment literacy amongst stakeholders, including Education Ministry officials, school and university managers, teachers, and teacher educators; greater alignment of high-stakes assessment with curriculum and pedagogy; and a focus on productive student learning to be made explicit in all forms of assessment, including high-stakes examinations (Carless, 2011).

Teacher education and TBLT

For teachers to be able to develop the full potential from TBLT they are likely to need a variety of opportunities to learn about and engage with communicative and task-based teaching. Two chapters in this volume are indicative of some of the potentials and challenges for task-based teacher education. In the study by Jackson (Chapter 12), Japanese student teachers expressed positive responses to TBLT concepts, although the extent to which they would use these notions in their future teaching was beyond

the scope of the study. Chacón's contribution (Chapter 11), set in Venezuela, indicated positive participant perceptions of working in pairs or groups. The Venezuelan trainee teachers in the study reported that they would be willing to implement TBLT with their own students in the future. Two key issues arise from these cases, both of them in relation to support in the school context. First, to what extent would the prevailing school cultures in the two settings encourage the adoption of task-based activities? Second, what kind of quality and depth of support would novice teachers receive in implementing TBLT?

A related theme in many EFL contexts is the broader background to innovation, and in particular the difficulty of providing sufficiently in-depth teacher education to illuminate the key issues in implementing TBLT successfully. This challenge is exacerbated, for example, in a setting as vast and widely dispersed as China. A further issue for China is the disparity between the mainly advanced metropolitan and coastal areas versus the rural hinterland (Hu, 2003; Iwashita & Li, this volume). In such situations, mass centralized short-term training programs are unlikely to do more than provide a basic introduction to some of the issues in TBLT. These limitations can be compounded by the perceived complexity of TBLT, an issue I have discussed elsewhere (Carless, 2009). The mode of teacher training also merits further consideration. The argument that TBLT teacher education should itself be experiential and task-based is a good one (see Van den Branden, 2006b), but this might be difficult to achieve on the scale required by China in view of the enormous numbers of teachers and sites involved. That is not to say that smaller-scale pockets of exploratory developmental work could not be attempted. For example, the 'lesson study' or 'research lesson' is a professional development method practiced extensively in Japan (see, for example, Fernandez, 2002) through which a team of colleagues analyze a taught lesson and seek ways to improve it. This could be a contextually grounded source of professional development in collectivist East Asian societies, such as China (Carless, 2011).

Future developments in TBLT

The literature on educational change indicates that many innovations last only a relatively short time because they are replaced by other innovations (Waks, 2007); conditions are not receptive to the proposed change (Datnow, 2002); or they are reinvented and rebranded (Snyder, Acker-Hocevar, & Snyder, 2008). Reinvention can have positive connotations when it encourages customization of the innovation to fit it more appropriately to local conditions (Rogers, 2003), or more negative ones when it leads to dilution of its underlying principles.

TBLT seems to have stood the test of time, and as Shehadeh indicates in the introduction, it possesses many markers of a well-established field of study. Its vitality, richly illustrated in this volume, is indicative of enduring interest in different facets of TBLT. In terms of future research agendas, a particularly useful and comprehensive

discussion has already been compiled by Samuda and Bygate (2008) in the final chapter of their book. Here I comment on selected issues which resonate with the discussion in this chapter.

Although it is notoriously problematic to try to demonstrate the superiority of one teaching approach over another, it might be worth attempting a quasi-experimental research design in which experimental groups taught through TBLT are compared with control groups taught by the existing approaches being used in that setting. In a discussion of the well-known Pennsylvania project, Lynch (1996) discusses some of the myriad challenges of this kind of research: the optimum number and characteristics of teacher participants; unwanted variability in teacher implementation of the approach they are supposed to be using; and developing achievement tests that do not favor one group or another. Nonetheless, studies of this kind could help to explore differences both in process and outcome, and with due sensitivity to local context could yield valuable information. This is a research challenge awaiting a team brave enough to take it on, although clearly the lessons learned from evaluations of the Bangalore Project (e.g., Beretta, 1992) could be utilized as a starting point for such an endeavor.

The acquisition of grammatical form within meaning-focused activities is at the heart of TBLT. A classic example of the interweaving of form within meaning intentions is Samuda (2001). As Samuda notes, the role of the teacher in mediating task-based language development is well-worth further exploration (see also Van Avermaet, Colpin, Van Gorp, Bogaert, & Van den Branden, 2006). I have already alluded to the chapters in Section 1 which investigated a number of variables impacting on task-based performance. Although Moore (Chapter 8) touches on awareness-raising activities, the current volume does not include a detailed discussion of the role of consciousness-raising (CR) tasks as a productive way of encouraging a focus on language form. This line of research within a TBLT framework does not seem to have advanced as much as one might have anticipated. CR could represent the task itself or it could be an option to encourage language analysis in the post-task stage. The post-task is a critical stage of the task cycle and seems particularly under-researched within school settings.

Students' perceptions of tasks are a further area which merits future inquiry. A general question arises: to what extent do students in different geographical settings appreciate communicative tasks as much as some proponents of TBLT appear to do? For example, a study of South African secondary school students (Barkhuizen, 1998) asked respondents to evaluate a list of fifteen language learning activities; a surprising finding for the teachers concerned was that students preferred mechanical written activities rather than oral communicative tasks. A sample of students of different proficiency levels in a private Brazilian language school, surveyed by Garrett and Shortall (2002), indicated that students perceived peer work in groups to be enjoyable but that teacher-fronted work was thought to be more likely to enhance their learning. This study also reinforces the value of attending to the voice of the learner. More on what university and/or school students think about TBLT and their perceptions of tasks

would be valuable extensions of the existing literature. Particularly valuable would be longitudinal studies, as there is some evidence (e.g. McDonough & Chaikitmongkol, 2007) that students become more favorably disposed towards TBLT, after they have some time to engage with its practice.

Both Chacón (Chapter 11) and the Hong Kong SBA tasks use film as a stimulus for task-based teaching. Notable features of Chacón's study include: co-operative work in groups of four; peer and self-assessment; and careful design of a post-task (here a Film Guide containing some of the features often found in reviews of movies). Film as a stimulus for tasks could be an area for further research. The use of audio-visual input could be extended in various ways to build on new literacies and the development of technologies associated with Web 2.0. As a final pointer to the future, a new generation of tasks may well be inspired by analysis of discourse from YouTube or other digital media in line with changes in authentic language use.

In conclusion, this volume has made useful steps in developing the knowledge base on TBLT in EFL settings. The points I have made suggest the need for the following: more reports on the implementation of TBLT from different EFL settings; detailed qualitative accounts of what is really taking place in classrooms in which the teacher is trying to implement some version of TBLT; further research on contextual adaptations to TBLT; continued scrutiny of the interface between assessment and TBLT; and a search for appropriate forms of teacher education and support for the implementation of TBLT.

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