CHAPTER 8

Conclusion

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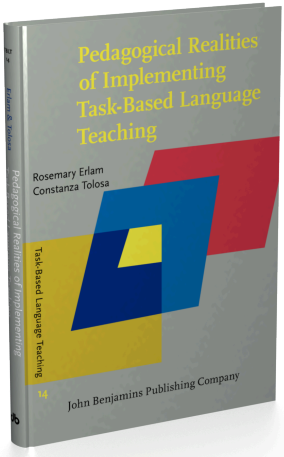

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Rosemary Erlam and Constanza Tolosa
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CHAPTER 8

Conclusion

Introduction

The research presented in this book is situated in the vast literature on TBLT, specifically within pedagogically informed research into the real world of TBLT practices. We addressed two main issues. We started by investigating how teachers learned and developed understandings of tasks and TBLT during an in-service teacher education programme. We next moved inside real classrooms to document whether, and how, teachers implemented TBLT. As we documented in some detail how these teachers used tasks, we also investigated how their use might support learning outcomes for students. In acknowledging the crucial role that teachers play in implementing TBLT as an innovation, we aimed to contribute to bridging the divide that often exists between theory and practice.

Based on the literature on teacher learning and TBLT, as well as on our experience as researchers and language teacher educators, we identified the following gaps that we aimed to address. Firstly, the study is situated in a foreign language learning context which we describe as acquisition-poor, where access to, and learning of, the target language is typically limited to the classroom context. Secondly, we investigated the implementation of TBLT and use of tasks across a range of foreign languages; this may be the first TBLT study of this nature to have such wide coverage across languages. Thirdly, the educational context of this book is the school setting, an underrepresented sector in TBLT studies. Finally, these learners were all operating at beginner level, which provided both opportunities for, and constraints on, the use of tasks. While the study was conducted in New Zealand school classrooms, the characteristics of this context are not unique to New Zealand and the results of our study are applicable to many other foreign language contexts. As we have emphasised throughout the book, the gaps we describe above are realities worth investigating if we want to understand the different factors that either enable or constrain teachers in implementing TBLT.

Part 1 of the book focused on documenting teacher learning about tasks and TBLT. Our participants were language teachers who had been in a year-long professional development programme (TPDL) which included a university course aiming to integrate disciplinary knowledge into pedagogical practice. Teachers were positioned as reflective professionals who judiciously translate new ideas into their own

systems of practice (Scarino, 2014). The programme presented TBLT as an approach to language teaching strongly aligned with the expectations of the New Zealand national languages curriculum, the main goal of which is the development of communicative competence. In the programme, tasks were presented as ways to embody Ellis's (2005) Principles of Instructed Second Language Acquisition in classroom practice. By analysing two of the course assignments, we examined how teachers understood "task-in-theory" and then how they enacted this understanding into their own practice, thus implementing "tasks-in-action." We then followed up with some of these teachers in the year immediately following the TPDL programme, drawing on both self-report and classroom observation data, to establish whether they were using tasks and, if so, how they used them in their teaching contexts. In other words, we examined how TBLT as an innovation was being brought to classrooms after the in-service programme. By grounding our examination of TBLT in the activities of teaching and learning in real classrooms, we were able to examine the factors that both enabled and constrained initial implementation of TBLT.

In Part 2 of the book, we embarked on a more comprehensive examination of the implementation of TBLT with a different group of teachers, all eight of whom had completed the TPDL programme (on average, 4 years) previously. We investigated their understanding and use of TBLT and tasks through observing their classroom practice. For those classrooms where we considered, according to criteria we used (Ellis & Shintani, 2014), that we saw evidence of a task, we investigated opportunities for student learning. Our data set included transcripts of classroom discourse and information from student questionnaires, the latter providing us with student perspectives. Our investigation also included teacher interview data so that we could gain information beyond that afforded by the brief investigation into their practice. We explored their viewpoints on tasks and TBLT, its relevance in their teaching contexts, and those factors which they also considered might enable or constrain its implementation. Part 2 therefore gave insight into how tasks and TBLT might be evidenced in classroom practice in a time frame considerably distanced from the professional development opportunity in which the teachers had previously learnt about and used tasks.

Learning about tasks

As described earlier, Part 1 of the book used the lens of professional learning to describe how volunteer participants drawn from a cohort of teachers who participated in an in-service education programme (TPDL) learned about and understood TBLT and tasks. As practising teachers, they began the 1-year programme with a range of experience and expertise in learning and teaching languages. Documentation

of these teachers' learning about tasks started by examining how they developed initial understandings of tasks and TBLT in a university course, specifically by responding to a reflective reading log and by reporting on a small-scale inquiry into their own teaching with tasks. From the cohort of 43 teachers, 14 agreed to us using this coursework for research purposes. Our analysis indicated that, for many of the participant teachers, coursework and readings presented new understandings about language learning and teaching that required professional reflection and challenged some of their own approaches to practice.

Analysis of the reading log assignment (see Chapter 2) provided evidence of the processes by which the participating teachers started to incorporate their emerging understandings of theory and research into their existing knowledge and practice (Loughran, 2010). Firstly, as reflective practitioners, these teachers developed awareness of their own, often tacit, theories about language learning and language teaching while they were interpreting new content presented in the readings (Borg, 2006; East, 2014a; Loughran, 2010). Secondly, the analysis indicated that the teachers were critically reflecting on their own practices and expressed willingness to extend their professional knowledge and consider using tasks and principles of TBLT in their teaching. Thirdly, they articulated their initial understandings of TBLT and started to realise that, compared to their established practices, implementing TBLT meant that both teachers and learners were more focused on using the language for communication. Fourthly, the teachers recognised the alignment between TBLT and the *New Zealand Curriculum* in that both are experiential, student-centred, and promote learning by doing. Although identifying pedagogical alignment did not, in itself, guarantee the teachers' uptake of tasks, it was an important professional realisation that could support the implementation of TBLT as an innovation to their established practices (Andon & Eckerth, 2009). We concluded in our analysis of the reading logs that, at this stage, the teachers were at the "task-in-theory" stage in their learning with some glimpses into the potential role they saw that tasks could play in their practices.

Towards the end of the 1-year course, the teachers wrote reports on a small-scale inquiry into their classroom practice. In the New Zealand context, professional inquiry is seen as a mindset and a characteristic of effective pedagogy, and teachers are encouraged and supported to embark on inquiries into their own teaching. For research purposes, we examined the participant teachers' inquiry reports (see Chapter 3), analysing them according to the stages followed by the teachers: identification of a focus for the inquiry, planning, implementing, evaluating, and revising. We considered that their reflections on the learning process, afforded by their inquiries, provided evidence of their understanding of tasks, as well as initial perspectives on the opportunities and limitations of implementing TBLT in their teaching contexts.

Not surprisingly, given the contextualised and situated nature of inquiries, the design and implementation of these varied widely, precluding the drawing of any generalisations. However, guided by our first research question, we were most interested in establishing what the teachers' learned through the inquiry process. There appeared to be two main stages in the teachers' learning processes. The first was identifying aspects of their teaching that could be improved or enhanced by the use of tasks. As Timperley (2011) suggested, the teachers seemed to be open to being challenged. The second stage was to highlight ways in which the tasks could be modified after they had been taught. Our examination of the design and implementation of the tasks indicated that the teachers were still developing their understandings about tasks, given that, in our analysis, many did not meet task criteria. We then examined the teachers' own evaluation of their tasks. Some teachers had set ambitious, but unrealistic, targets for their inquiries, such as comparisons between TBLT and other approaches. However, a consistent focus was interest in examining how students responded to, and engaged with, tasks. Reports of higher student motivation and engagement seemed to have resulted from those tasks where the students had opportunities to use the language to interact with peers and to share personal information, often for the first time. From what we gleaned in the inquiry reports, these emerging illustrations of interactional authenticity (Ellis et al., 2020) resulted from careful task design on the part of the teachers.

Our analysis of the teachers' conclusions indicated that their inquiries were catalysts for an awareness of the range of pedagogical issues that they would need to address when designing and implementing tasks. The process of going through an inquiry cycle to collect evidence on the impact of using a task (or what they considered a task) in their language teaching allowed the teachers to experience first-hand the connection between theory and practice as well as their role as inquiring professionals. As documented in the literature (Wedell, 2009; Wyatt & Borg, 2011), the inquiries allowed teachers to implement their learning in their instructional contexts. They provided an opportunity for the teachers to develop insight into the potential tasks might have for their language teaching practice as well as a better understanding of how to implement tasks so as to maximise students' learning.

In a professional learning programme with a focus on tasks and on TBLT, as teacher educators we would have wanted the teachers' inquiries to demonstrate more robust knowledge in understanding the construct of task and using the criteria for task design. The implications for teacher education are twofold. Firstly, teachers may need more guidance at key stages in their inquiries. In our case, we think that, with more time, we would have better supported teachers in setting the scope of their inquiries and in ensuring that their tasks had met the criteria. Additionally, we learned that the inquiry cycle is most successful when teachers have the time to identify and make revisions to how their task is implemented. In other words,

as with all teaching, they need to have the opportunity to refine their practice by redesigning and reteaching.

The experience of teaching a task, observing their learners' positive responses, and, in some cases, encouraging indications of language learning outcomes, provided a foundation for the teachers' learning. The final conclusions drawn by the majority of the participating teachers in their inquiry reports indicated that most of them had finished the course with a positive view of the potential of implementing tasks and TBLT in their language teaching practices. As we explained in Chapter 1, the way TPDL and the pedagogical course were framed did not mandate TBLT as the approach that the teachers should adopt in their classroom practice. Therefore, the teachers' interest in incorporating tasks in their practice indicated that they were taking ownership of tasks and planning how to implement change in their contexts (Van den Branden, 2006). At the same time, however, as they indicated willingness to use tasks, they also clearly identified challenges, including lack of time to design tasks, as well as curriculum or assessment demands.

We followed some of these teachers the year after the course in order to document the realities of implementing TBLT in contexts where teacher autonomy is severely limited by factors beyond their control. After the scaffolded experience of using tasks in their inquiries, we wanted to establish whether, and to what extent, the participating teachers had decided to implement TBLT within their classroom contexts. From the 14 teacher participants in Chapters 2 and 3, nine agreed to participate in interviews in the year following TPDL. At the end of these interviews, we asked those teachers who said they were using tasks if we could observe them. From five who accepted, we were able to observe the practices of three. Our analysis of the interview data showed that teachers reported using tasks as pedagogic tools. In other words, they reported using tasks with different degrees of regularity; at the same time, these seemed embedded in teaching sequences that also included other types of language learning activities. The implementation of tasks was impacted by different factors. Teachers considered lack of time to design and resource tasks to be the most influential barrier to their use of tasks, one that is significant in school contexts where time for learning languages is so limited.

In relation to what the teachers learned, perhaps the most salient finding in Part 1 of the study was that the teachers demonstrated a shift to seeing language learning as focused on communication with the students' use of the language as paramount. The teachers seemed to have become acutely aware of the importance of using the target language (a key focus of their professional learning programme) and of incorporating tasks where students used the language for communicative purposes. These changes in the teachers' practices were acknowledged by the students whose voices we documented in the three classrooms we observed (see Chapter 4). Furthermore, our analysis of the tasks taught confirmed that the teachers had

learned to design tasks that met the task criteria. In particular, they were able to design tasks that, arguably, embodied the three most crucial criteria, that is, focus on meaning, a communication gap, and an outcome.

In Part 1 of the book, we investigated the processes of learning about, and implementation of, TBLT by teachers in FL programmes in schools, thus contributing to evidence of seeing the transition from task-in-theory to task-in-action (East, 2018). We drew mostly on data from the teachers' coursework, self-reported reflections, and practices as a way of understanding the teachers' perspectives on their own learning. Our interest was to explore how real teachers went through processes of learning, given that a focus on teacher learning is fundamental to the growth of TBLT as a researched pedagogy (Samuda et al., 2018). We also presented some data showing how this learning was evident in the emerging practice of a small number of these teachers (see Chapter 4). We, therefore, started collecting evidence of the challenges involved in putting TBLT principles into practice in real classrooms. We could already see glimpses of the practices, demands, and perspectives of teachers as they implemented TBLT to meet the characteristics and needs of students in their own instructional contexts (Ellis et al., 2020). We examine some of these later in this chapter.

Implementing tasks in the classroom

In Part 2 of the book, we investigated the practice of eight teachers, on average 4 years after the professional development opportunity (TPDL) where they learnt about tasks and TBLT. All but one of these teachers reported that learning about TBLT during the TPDL programme had been significant for their learning and/or practice. From observing the classroom practice of these teachers, we concluded that the majority ($n = 6$) had been able to retain knowledge of the salient features of tasks and use this knowledge to design and use tasks in their classroom practice. A significant finding was that they did not always use tasks consistent with recommendations made in some of the TBLT literature. At the same time, we argue that these teachers used tasks to create a "rich pedagogical space" (Van den Branden, 2009, p. 264). In this pedagogical space, described as one which teachers and students construct and "navigate" together as a task unfolds (Andon et al., 2018, p. 238), there were, we claim, many opportunities for language learning. In the following section, we will explore the ways in which teachers used tasks to create learning opportunities for their students, also drawing on some of the class observation data from Part 1 of this study (where teachers used tasks in the year following their professional learning).

Tasks opening up "pedagogical spaces" for language learning

Communicating with the language: Giving learners control

Firstly, the teachers in our study used tasks to give students opportunities to use the language they had been focusing on in class as a tool for communication. They therefore tended to design focused tasks which predisposed students to use either specific language structures or specific language domains, consistent with the classroom focus that had pre-dated the implementation of the task. The use of focused tasks, where students had opportunities to reuse language they had previously learnt, is explained by the fact that these learners were beginners. Even where a task appeared to be unfocused in its language use (e.g., Task 2: Conversation, Chapter 5), students still needed to use language they had previously learned in class, because of the limited nature of their language repertoire.

At the same time, however, these focused tasks did not limit students to using only the preselected and predetermined language forms chosen by the teacher. They opened up opportunities for the use of unpredicted language, and in these instances of unpredictable and creative language use, we found examples of the many kinds of interactions known to drive language learning. We found (see Chapters 5 and 6) examples of the teacher providing elaborated and extended input (see also Chapter 4) and giving explicit metalinguistic information. We documented instances of learners negotiating meaning, and receiving, from their peers and/or from the teacher, corrective feedback and scaffolded support to produce language output. In all of these examples, we argue that there were opportunities for learners to attend to language in a meaningful context and that these had the potential to drive language acquisition.

We acknowledge the role of student agency in the different ways that learners approached tasks to construct opportunities for language learning. The learner's decision about how to complete a given task interacted with their limited competence (i.e., the limited range of target language forms available to them) and their capacity to make use of both predictable and less predictable language. At the same time, the teacher played a crucial role in being an active conversational partner with students, moving around the class, monitoring and supporting them in their interactions with each other. As a result, learning opportunities were co-constructed between the teacher and the learner (as well as between learners, as mentioned above). We documented many of these learning opportunities in the "language related episodes" that we found in the classroom discourse. For example, in Margaret's class, we claim that the incidence of language-related episodes was high (Erlam & Pimentel-Hellier, 2017), at a rate of nearly two per minute of the classroom discourse which we were able to record (a sample which we claim was potentially under-representative). This

high incidence of attention to language in Margaret's classroom was all the more surprising in that the tasks were highly oriented to the learning of specific language forms (i.e., the *imparfait* in French). In other words, in a context where the teacher was very intent on learners having opportunities to use a specific grammatical structure, there were still many opportunities for learners to focus on language, both the targeted language, but other language as well, in a meaningful context.

The practice we observed was consistent with what teachers said about tasks in the interviews. They acknowledged the importance of giving learners opportunities to use the language to communicate and highlighted the fact that tasks allowed them to do so. Indeed, for them, allowing learners the opportunity to become users of the language they were learning and to use it for authentic purposes was the second most significant benefit for the use of tasks in the classroom. Tasks led to interactional authenticity (Ellis et al., 2020), because they allowed for language to be used similarly to how it is used in the world outside the classroom. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, the characteristic that was most salient for them when they were asked to describe a task, was that it gave learners a purpose for using language.

At the same time, using tasks in this way was rewarding for teachers because it was highly motivating for learners. This was the most significant benefit for using tasks identified by our teacher participants. For learners, being able to use language communicatively, meaningfully, and creatively, made language learning fun and enjoyable. Undoubtedly, a key factor was the use of language for social interaction; the opportunity to work with peers is highly motivating for adolescent learners (Philp et al., 2014), a finding endorsed by the questionnaire data we collected. Several teachers (Toby and Emily, for example) described increased class sizes resulting from their use of tasks.

While teachers were very aware of the motivational impact of ensuring that, within the classroom, language be treated as a tool for communication and not just as an object of study, they also acknowledged that this type of language use could drive language acquisition. Two teachers, in particular, recounted the astonishment of discovering just how much students learnt or gave back when teachers allowed them freedom to use the language they wanted to, or stopped holding it from them. They were aware of the potential for learning of allowing students opportunities to experiment with and use language that went beyond what they had been introduced to in class.

Repeated encounters: Recycling the language

The second main way in which teachers used tasks was to give learners repeated exposure to the same language in a meaningful context. We differentiate this from the use of tasks we describe earlier because, in the lessons in which we observed tasks used in this way, we found fewer opportunities for incidental language learning and for creative language use. However, we claim that this second way in which tasks opened up pedagogical spaces also drove language learning. We describe tasks that allowed learners repeated exposure to the same language input (see Tasks 7 and 9, Working With Mazes and How Well Do You Know Your Classmate?, Chapter 5). We argue that these tasks, which could be seen by some to be "structure trapping" (having learners practise and display language formS, Skehan, 1998) catered to an important second language acquisition principle. Researchers claim that language learning is gradual, that learners need to be exposed to massive amounts of input so that linguistic items are reinforced in the learner's cognitive system (Ellis & Larsen-Freeman, 2009). These tasks were designed so that learners could have repeated exposure to preselected language structures in a context in which they had to process them for meaning and provide some sort of response, in the same way that task repetition functions to promote opportunities for learning (Bygate, 2018). We would claim then, that in these tasks, the use of language was far from being structure trapping. Learners were not just practising and displaying language forms for their own sake, they were processing language for meaning. In so doing, they had many opportunities to encounter the same meaning-form-function relationships (Dupuy, 1999; N. C. Ellis & Wulff, 2015; Keenan & MacWhinney, 1987; Lightbown, 2014). Furthermore, because the students who worked at these tasks had no, or a very limited, linguistic repertoire, repeated exposure to this language was an acquisition-enriching, rather than stultifying, experience.

We also provide examples of how teachers moved learners from working at tasks where they processed language input in meaningful contexts to output-based tasks where they used the same preselected language forms meaningfully in either spoken or written output. An example of a carefully planned task sequence which had students repeatedly encountering the same forms in language input and then led them to use these language forms in output as they interacted in pairs was demonstrated in Emily's classroom (see Working With Mazes, Chapter 5). We claim that these output tasks also opened up "pedagogical spaces" for language learning (Samuda et al., 2018, p. 15) because they gave learners the chance to recycle, by engaging in meaningful practice, the language they had started to acquire (DeKeyser, 2007; Ortega, 2007). As the students in Emily's class, for example, worked at these tasks, they used the language of directions over and over again with progressively

less scaffolded support (although we suggested in Chapter 5 that the scaffolding could have been reduced even further). In some of the TBLT literature, the use of focused tasks in this way has been portrayed as limiting (as previously discussed) or, even, potentially ineffective. Ellis (2003), for example, claims that it is very difficult to design focused tasks that can only be completed if learners use a particular linguistic feature. This is because, he claims, learners will invariably find a different way of expressing themselves. This was not a possibility in this study because these beginner learners did not have, at their disposal, other linguistic forms allowing them to express the meaning that the tasks required. Rather they needed the opportunity to recycle the same language that the repetition of these similar tasks allowed (Bygate, 2018).

Task as the context for both language learning and language use

In this third use of task, a target task established the context both for the teaching and learning of specific language formS, and also for the meaningful use of these. The best example was Shona's classroom and her Murder Mystery unit (see Chapter 5). Learners in Shona's class had to establish which teacher had murdered their deputy principal, and in order to do so, needed to learn specific language. For example, they needed to learn the language of descriptions in Japanese to draw up a list of potential murder suspects. Consequently, they worked at a series of decontextualised grammar exercises or activities, characteristic of a focus on formS approach. They then used this language to solve clues, in this way working with contextualised meaning, as they completed pedagogical tasks. In these instances, where they were using the language in context to help them solve the mystery, they were no longer completing exercises, or activities, but using tasks (Widdowson, 1998). We argue that these students moved back and forwards between engaging with language as an object, and with language as a tool for communication. The two were highly interdependent, and the activities fed into or informed the tasks. It was in the interlocking, then, of both, that conditions were created that were favourable for acquisition. There are a number of important points to make, drawing on the data we have from her classroom, about Shona's approach to using tasks. Firstly, the students worked mainly with input tasks, where they were decoding written Japanese (and using this language to solve clues); this means that they were not under pressure to use language orally they had previously encountered for the first time. Indeed, a feature of Shona's classroom was that there was no requirement for students to speak Japanese, although she had set up the expectation that they speak to her in Japanese. We argue, in a later section of this chapter, that it is not realistic to expect learners to use communicatively, in output, language to which they have just been introduced. This is especially the case for oral language output, where there is a

greater time pressure, than for written output. A solution is for teachers to use input-based tasks. In this way, learners are provided with language from which to decode meaning, rather than having to retrieve forms that may not be established in their linguistic repertoire. The second important point about Shona's classroom is that her target task, solving the mystery, was extremely cognitively demanding for students. This challenge may have been crucial in motivating students to work independently in the way that they did, at both grammar exercises or activities and language tasks. Shona's use of task challenges the framing, in some of the research literature, of TBLT as an approach that promotes engagement with language as a communicative resource, and that precludes engagement with language formS in a controlled and intentional manner.

The task as assessment

The last main way in which teachers in this study used tasks was for assessment purposes. There were teachers who described use of tasks in this way in both Parts 1 and 2 of the study. At least two teachers, whose practice we observed, designed target tasks which were used as the assessment for the unit. These were presented to students at the beginning of a unit and were a focus as they worked through the unit. Both these teachers, Linda and Margaret, were teaching students in Year 11, who would be participating in external exams. This fact was important in explaining why teachers started by thinking about the task when planning their teaching, a step, we claim, towards the use of a task-based syllabus. The national assessment system is one which is criterion-referenced, rather than norm-referenced, and so particularly suited to the use of tasks where the achievement measures are behavioural outcomes (Long et al., 2019). The use of tasks for assessment purposes was very much aligned to the teaching context of the New Zealand education system.

In this next section, we claim that the way that teachers used tasks in this study needs to be interpreted in relation to the specific teaching context in which they were working, described in some detail in Chapter 1.

The context behind the use of tasks and TBLT

The beginner language learner

The learners in our study were beginners, most in their first or second full year of study of the target language. Furthermore, they were learning in an acquisition-poor context, where they had limited exposure to the target language. The challenge for the teachers was that they had to design and use tasks for learners who had no, or

very little, knowledge of the L2 (Ellis et al., 2020). We have explained that our definition of beginner may differ from the way that this term is understood in the literature. The Year 10 students in our study would not all have been able to "understand and use basic everyday expressions while making conversation on topics related to their personal life" (Vandommele et al., 2018, p. 169). We believe that this context is one that is underrepresented in the literature. Much that is written about tasks and the way that TBLT is implemented assumes that learners already have a repertoire of the language that they are learning. In the beginner language classrooms we observed, learners had no, or an extremely limited, repertoire of language. For this reason, we claim that these tasks, which aimed to have learners processing and using preselected language forms, were particularly suited to the classroom contexts we observed. We would argue, therefore, that in an acquisition-poor context, language learning, at least for the ab initio learner, is likely to be most effective when learners have the chance to encounter the same language forms in a meaningful context, and both notice and re-notice these forms as they are recycled with progressively less scaffolded support.

The New Zealand Curriculum and assessment context

We have argued in Chapter 1 that the *New Zealand Curriculum*, with its emphasis on meaningful communication, and the assessment system (NCEA) which was designed to align with this emphasis could, on one level, be seen as providing a context which was favourable to the implementation of TBLT. Another factor that could also contribute to teacher uptake of TBLT, given that tasks were seen as being highly motivating, was the factor that, for most students, learning a language was an option rather than a requirement. Teachers were keen to have classes that students enjoyed and found motivating. This was necessary, because if students did not choose to continue language study, school management would not continue to support the teaching of languages.

At the same time, we claim that it was this context that also acted as some constraint to the implementation of TBLT. The fact that the assessment system, while privileging the use of language for communicative purposes, continued to provide teachers with lists of language that examiners could draw on in writing exams, mitigated against the implementation of a TBLT syllabus. We will argue below, that, in a context such as this one, which is not atypical of many contexts in which learners are first introduced to language learning, the use of a TBLT syllabus may not be realistic.

Blurring the dichotomies

In this next section, we consider some of the ways in which the teachers in our study tended to blur dichotomies that are used, in some of the research literature, to differentiate TBLT and tasks from other approaches. Long et al. (2019) differentiate grammar-based and task-based approaches. The key foci of the former are: "L2 as the object of instruction, intentional learning, and explicit knowledge". In contrast, the foci of TBLT are: "L2 as medium of instruction, incidental learning, and implicit knowledge" (Long et al., 2019, p. 501). While these distinctions are intended to describe broad differences and do not preclude allowing for a variety of types of instructional activities that can take place within TBLT (e.g., see Long, 2015), it is important to see how the teachers in our study used TBLT in conjunction with a wider range of learning processes (Bygate, 2020) than might normally be attributed to the TBLT approach.

Object or medium of instruction

In Shona's classroom, as in some of the other classrooms we visited, language was both an object of learning, and a medium for learning (see Chapter 5, Task 8, Murder Mystery). We document how Shona had students working at grammar exercises, in which they were introduced to and practised language formS. They then used these language formS to solve clues which took them closer to establishing who had murdered their Deputy Principal. At this point the language became a tool for communication and the medium for learning. For Shona, task operated at two levels, at the level of target task and at the level of pedagogic task. We explain how, in operating at both these levels, the task provided a context for both language learning and language use. We have data to demonstrate that students were highly motivated to work with language in this way.

Incidental or intentional learning

Similarly, in the present study, we document how teachers planned and used tasks with a language agenda in mind (Bygate, 2020). We found teachers who were focused on covering aspects of grammar that they thought their students needed to learn. In Margaret's classroom (Tasks 3 and 4, The Teacher at Age 6, My Childhood), tasks were designed primarily, from Margaret's point of view, so that students would have the chance to learn the imperfect tense in French. For her, the main aim was intentional learning. However, at the same time, we have documented the fact that, in Margaret's classroom there were many opportunities for incidental learning of aspects of language other than the target structure. In other words, the highly focused

tasks that Margaret taught allowed for a wider range of learning opportunities than could have been determined by the teacher. We documented examples of intentional and incidental learning in other classrooms as well (e.g., Task 1, Categorising Sports).

Teachers also used tasks where there was no intentional language focus (e.g., Task 2, Conversation; Task 5, Making Predictions) and where the attention to language form was incidental. However, there was a greater emphasis in the way teachers planned tasks, in our data set, on intentional learning. Yet even when students appropriated language forms highlighted in advance and which they knew were a focus for their learning, there were opportunities for incidental learning. In this way, the teachers demonstrated the use of TBLT as a pedagogy that has potential for both types of learning.

Implicit knowledge or explicit knowledge

Some of the literature recommends that, in focused tasks, the linguistic focus is hidden (Ellis & Shintani, 2014). However, in our data, learners were often aware of the language forms that the teacher intended them to use. For example, the 6-year-old students in Sara's class (see Chapter 4) were able to list, in response to the questionnaire, in Spanish, the words that they had learnt during their task, Set the Table. In Margaret's class (Tasks 3 and 4, Chapter 5), the learners were told that a focus of learning was the French *imparfait* and their attention was repeatedly drawn to this language form. It was clear from the questionnaire results that they were very aware of this structure as a target for their learning. It seems, therefore, that there was a focus on explicit knowledge and explicit learning in these lessons. And yet, as we have described above (with reference to Margaret's lessons), learners also had the chance to learn implicitly.

Another example of how there could be a focus on both explicit knowledge and implicit knowledge in the same task is demonstrated by data which shows how task performance and outcome is very much determined by the student. The same task will be approached in different ways by different learners and so may result in very different kinds of activity, or be performed in different ways (Ellis, 2003). Furthermore, the same task can lead to very different outcomes, as documented by Breen (1987). We saw, in Chapter 5, how one task (e.g., Task 2, Conversation) resulted in communicative outcomes for some students, where, for example, they learnt interesting facts about their classmates, and language outcomes for other students, where they described an aspect of language form that they had noticed or learnt. This task had message or communicative potential for some students and code or metacommunicative potential for others (Breen, 1987). The teachers in our data set seemed, therefore, in the way that they used tasks, to engage both explicit and implicit learning processes.

In concluding this section, we claim that the fluidity of the real-life classroom and the engagement that it affords with language accounted for the nuanced way in which teachers incorporated TBLT into their practice and for how they combined it with those processes of language learning, such as intentional learning and explicit language instruction, that are not normally associated with a TBLT approach.

The challenge for TBLT

The TB syllabus – realistic or not?

In TBLT, a syllabus which specifies a predetermined sequence of language structures that are to be taught, is deemed to be inappropriate, given that such an approach is unlikely to respect learners' internal syllabi (Corder, 1967). The teachers in our study, however, all working within the school system in New Zealand, did not adopt a task-based approach to implementing a language syllabus. In planning for using tasks in their language classrooms, most started first with the language that they wanted their students to learn, moving from this to task design. Margaret conceived of her tasks at two levels, explaining that they (Tasks 3 and 4, Chapter 5) had two outcomes. One outcome (for her), was grammatical, while the outcome for the students was communicative (they would learn about each other's lives when they were 6 years old). Interestingly, though, the grammatical outcome was the one that was clearly explained to learners before they engaged with the task. Shona described, in her planning, starting with the task and then thinking about language. It would seem, then, that some of the teachers in this study were able to hold both task and text in tension in their planning. This is another example of how a differentiated view of whether the primary focus in task design is the task or text (i.e., language), might not be sufficient to depict the reality of the classroom.

From the evidence we gathered, however, no teacher worked with a syllabus which was determined by tasks. On the one hand, this could be seen to be surprising in that most of the teachers in our project felt that TBLT aligned well with the *New Zealand Curriculum* which does not constrain or prescribe the language that students should learn. However, teachers believed that they needed to ensure, in their teaching, that they had covered the language students would need in order to be able to progress in their language learning and eventually succeed at external assessments. This language, was, as we have explained, determined by lists of vocabulary and language structures that examiners could draw on when writing these assessments (East, 2012). The only teachers who did not feel constrained in this way by the demands of the external assessment system, were the two teachers described in Part 1, Sara and Melissa, who were teaching in a primary school context.

We wonder to what extent it is appropriate, even feasible, for teachers to use a task-based syllabus in a context where they feel constrained to teach a list of language forms that correspond to external assessment demands. This issue is not unique to our research context – other literature has identified that there are few examples of the implementation of a task-based syllabus (Nation & Macalister, 2010) and, in particular, that teachers feel that a syllabus determined by tasks is not compatible with a national external examination system (Dao, 2016; Hu, 2013; Yim, 2009; Zheng & Borg, 2014). We, therefore, suggest that teachers may need support in judiciously integrating TBLT with a syllabus which is predicated upon a requirement that learners will learn certain language forms. It is important, furthermore, firstly, that there is more of an acknowledgement in TBLT literature that this is a reality for many learning contexts. Secondly, it would seem to be crucial that there is ongoing investigation and validation of how tasks might be used in these contexts for positive language learning outcomes. We have demonstrated, we claim, that teachers *do* use tasks in these contexts. We have also shown that these tasks feed into a rich and dynamic pedagogical space, and, that learners recontextualise and make use of the opportunities they are provided with for language learning.

TBLT needs to account for a wider range of language learning requirements

In the lessons in which we found tasks, in both Parts One and Two of this book, the time spent on completing the task accounted for only a proportion of the total time of the lesson. In Part 2, the time spent on the task accounted for, on average, 32 minutes, or just over half of the lesson time. We explain that this is not surprising in a school classroom context where there is attention to routines and to the development of different types of skills. One aspect of classroom practice that was salient in the practice of two of our Japanese teachers was katakana practice, aimed at having learners develop literacy in Japanese. This rote learning, which several students reported as a lesson highlight, is an example of one of the aspects of classroom practice about which Bygate (2020) claims TBLT has little to say or offer. It is also, perhaps, an example of how much TBLT research has often been more interested in processes of language learning than in how learners might cope with the breadth of learning required in acquiring another language (Bygate, 2020). It is not necessarily clear how a TBLT approach to language learning might help learners acquire literacy in a language which has a different writing system. We suggest that teachers need to know how to incorporate a TBLT approach to other aspects of classroom practice. Maybe the first step is that, as Bygate (2020) says, research needs to engage more fully with the practices and demands of the classroom.

The applicability of task criteria

Tasks are defined in reference to a set of criteria. While there are several sets of criteria that can be used, in this study we have focused on the criteria set out by Ellis and Shintani (2014). Ellis and Shintani's (2014, p. 198) Criterion 3 has been problematic for teachers in our work with TPDL. It reads: "learners should largely have to rely on their own resources (linguistic and non-Linguistic) in order to complete the activity." The problem with this criterion, is that, as outlined above, in the context in which we were working, the beginner language learners had very few resources and a very limited language repertoire on which to draw.

We therefore interpreted, as we have explained earlier, this criterion to mean that:

a. in working at output-based tasks, students used language they had already been taught, that is, they were not expected to use meaningfully language to which they had just been introduced. This applied to rule-based learning rather than item-based learning. For input-based tasks, the input needed to be structured to allow students to access meaning for themselves or with scaffolded help.
b. in working at a task, students had to rely on the limited linguistic repertoire they had established and to draw on their memory for this language resource. In other words, they should not have all the language needed to complete the task provided for them in written form. At the same time, this did not mean that this language would not be available to them if they needed it. For example, they might consult a book or other resource, refer to the board, or ask a teacher for language they required.

The aim with (a) was that, in order to focus on meaning and use language communicatively, students needed to be familiar already with the language structures they needed to complete the task. Or, in the case of input-based tasks, the task needed to be structured in such a way that they could process meaning with effort, or with scaffolded help. The aim with (b) was that students would have opportunity to draw on the repertoire of language that they were building up for themselves, notice where there might be gaps, and have opportunity to develop fluency with and automatise language they had learnt.

Our conclusion here is that the construct of task is something that needs to be interpreted according to pedagogical context.

Equipping teachers to implement TBLT and use tasks in their instructional contexts

In this next section, drawing on our findings, we make recommendations for how teachers may better be prepared to implement TBLT and use tasks in their instructional contexts.

Time for professional learning

We have documented throughout this book, our involvement with the TPDL professional development programme that introduced the participants in our study to tasks and to TBLT. We were, throughout our contact with these teachers, aware of the limited time that the programme afforded us to introduce them to these new concepts. There were many occasions where we would have liked to do more than we could to help the teachers with their learning. For example, we would have liked to provide them with feedback on the tasks they designed for their learning inquiries, before they taught these. We would have liked to introduce them to a greater number and range of tasks, in particular, input-based tasks. Unfortunately, neither was possible. A recommendation that we would make is that a programme that aims to introduce teachers to an innovation such as TBLT, needs to plan for the time that would be needed for teachers to learn and implement this new learning in their practice. At the same time, however, the TPDL programme was the best opportunity for in-service teachers to learn about tasks and TBLT in the New Zealand context. Over the period of a year, participants received 40 hours of instruction and approximately 10 hours with a TPDL Facilitator (see Appendix 1 for more information about this aspect of the programme). There was no other professional development programme available to practising teachers that offered as many hours of contact over a comparable time frame. While we claim that we would have liked more time, the literature suggests that it is possible to achieve lasting effects for programmes extending more than 30 hours spread out over 6–12 months (Yoon et al., 2007). Furthermore, we suggest that the time limitations that we faced may well be the reality for other professional development initiatives that would aim to equip teachers to implement TBLT.

The recommendations we make below for teacher educators, in terms of how teachers may better be prepared to implement TBLT and use tasks in their instructional contexts, are made in the spirit of the ideal, rather than what might be possible, given time constraints. Had we had the time we would have liked, we may have been able to deal with some of these issues ourselves.

Preparing students for the language demands of the task

As we have documented, teachers tended to use focused tasks in their classroom practice. However, designing and teaching focused tasks was not easy for all the teachers in our study. The criterion, documented here and elsewhere (Erlam, 2016a) as most difficult for teachers to implement in task design, was that of having students rely on their own linguistic and nonlinguistic resources. Teachers need help when designing tasks for beginner learners which encourage meaningful communication rather than the practice and display of language.

We noticed three problematic tendencies in the way that teachers in this study dealt with language in relation to the tasks or activities that they used. We use the term "activity" here because at times we considered that we had not seen evidence of a task in classroom practice, for the very reason that the criterion of having students rely on their own linguistic and/or nonlinguistic resources was one that had not been fulfilled. The first tendency (as already discussed) is that teachers tended to use tasks or activities that required learners to produce language output rather than allowing them to process language input. Arguably, here, as also found in Erlam (2016a), learners may not have been at an appropriate stage in the learning process where it was reasonable to expect them to use output meaningfully. The second tendency was that teachers pre-taught the language that students needed immediately prior to performing a task or activity, where they were required to use this language (most often in oral production). This entailed the risk that, as they performed the task, learners were focused on these forms rather than on meaning. Educating teachers about the principle of "task dependency" (Nunan, 2004) may help them understand that a task should grow out of those that have preceded it. Similarly, teaching teachers about the receptive to productive principle could be beneficial. This would help teachers understand that using input-based tasks before output-based tasks would better sequence tasks in relation to student learning (Erlam, 2016a). The third tendency was that teachers provided too much language support, often giving students, in written form, the exact language that they needed to complete the task. In such cases, students did not need to challenge themselves to independently access and draw on the repertoire of language that they were slowly building up for themselves, nor were they challenged to access other language forms that might have been appropriate for task completion. In our opinion, teachers needed help to know how to scaffold, and also withdraw scaffolded assistance gradually, so that students had opportunity to use language independently.

We had already been aware of difficulties that teachers had with this criterion, and had tried to address these in the TPDL programme. We had taught teachers that providing students with vocabulary and phrases (item-based learning) they might need to complete a task was appropriate but that requiring them to use

new grammatical structures (rule-based learning) was not. However, this emphasis in the TPDL programme was an initiative that postdated the involvement of the teachers whose practice we observed in Part 2 of this study, who had not been given this advice.

In documenting the challenges we observed for how teachers tended to deal with the language demands of tasks, we feel that there is a tension for teachers and one which they do not always find easy to navigate. It speaks to the need to ensure that students have the language they need to complete a task, and at the same time have freedom to use the language that they want to. Some of the teachers in our study documented that learning about TBLT had taught them the importance of not restricting the language to which they exposed their learners. They recounted examples of how they had been "blown away" by what the students gave back, that is, how they used language, when they had been allowed freedom to access the language that they wanted to. Teachers seem to need help to learn how to allow students this freedom and, at the same time, support them with the language they need to complete tasks. Failing to do the latter runs the risk of having students revert to use of the L1 as they work at task completion, or even giving up because the task is too difficult. It is for these reasons that we suggest that assisting teachers of beginner learners with how to deal with the language demands of tasks would be an important aspect of professional development.

Input-based tasks

One of the key reasons for the fact that teachers have difficulty designing tasks that fulfil the criterion that learners rely on their own linguistic resources, is that they tend to focus on output-based tasks (Erlam, 2016a). In the present study there were some examples of input-based tasks, but relatively few, especially given the context of the beginner language learner. We would claim that one way in which TBLT can be made to work for ab initio learners, who have no established language repertoire on which to draw, is for teachers to use more input-based tasks in relation to output-prompting tasks. There are, increasingly, examples in the literature of how input-based tasks can be designed and used and of the impact that they can have on language acquisition (Erlam & Ellis, 2018, 2019; Shintani, 2016). One change we would make to an in-service professional development programme that aimed to introduce teachers to TBLT and tasks would be to have a greater emphasis on input-based tasks, helping teachers to understand why they are important and equipping them to design these. They would also need to know when and how it might be best to transition from input-based to output-prompting tasks. However, the challenge going forward could be similar to the one we faced, that is, how, in the

limited time that practising teachers (most of whom were teaching full time) can make available for professional development, we can adequately equip teachers to understand, design, and use tasks that are appropriate for their individual contexts.

Focus on form in relation to task

Teachers in our study reported that they had changed their classroom practice in how they dealt with focus on form or the teaching of grammar. They attributed this to learning as a result of completing the TPDL programme where they had been introduced to TBLT. Some of them documented moving from a focus on formS, with an initial focus on decontextualised language, to a focus-on-form approach, with a focus on language form arising out of a context where the initial attention was on meaning. Others referred to a discovery and inductive approach to learning about language form. At the same time, classroom observations did not always demonstrate that the teacher's claims about their change in classroom practice were substantiated. This was perhaps an area that teachers in our study needed more support and help with during their professional learning. In particular, teachers may have needed more education about the different ways in which a focus on form may be incorporated during the task cycle. We observed only one example of a post-task being used as an opportunity to focus on form.

Helping teachers to understand task

Some teachers indicated that they had trouble understanding the notion of task, a finding from the interview data of both Parts 1 and 2 of this study. This difficulty was also evident in the practice of one of the eight teachers in Part 2. Obviously, for this teacher, the emphasis in the TPDL programme on the notion of task construct, had not been sufficient for her to feel equipped to either understand or implement tasks in her classroom. At the same time, other teachers were both confident and proficient in their use of tasks. It is not immediately obvious why there would be this difference in terms of learning. In teacher development, we would underline the importance of giving teachers opportunities to be language learners and to experience tasks for themselves. In the TPDL programme (which covered content other than TBLT), a constant regret was the lack of time needed to reinforce the learning that we were facilitating for teachers.

At the same time, some of the teachers in our study, in whose classrooms we observed many opportunities for language learning, were less concerned about the "taskness" of the tasks they were using, and more focused on evidence of learning. We would endorse this emphasis, which was consistent with our approach to educating

teachers about tasks and TBLT. We had started with a broad focus on principles of language learning (Ellis, 2005) and then introduced tasks and TBLT as a way of incorporating these principles in classroom practice. At all times, we wanted our teachers to look for evidence of these principles in their practice and in student learning.

Access to resources

A constant theme running through this study and through the literature (Erlam, 2015a) is that, for TBLT to be successful as an innovation, teachers need to be provided with resources. In the interviews we conducted, teachers continually referred to a lack of resources and a lack of time to make these resources, as impacting negatively on their ability to implement TBLT. As argued elsewhere (Ellis, 1997), an innovation like TBLT is likely to be more successful if it does not require a high degree of originality on the part of teachers. The teachers in this study mostly designed and taught their own tasks, because they did not have task-based resources available to them. This is a constraint, going forward, to the successful implementation of TBLT in the context we describe.

Differentiating for the learner

We identified opposing viewpoints on how teachers saw the potential of TBLT to cater for individual learner needs. Some teachers felt that TBLT did not cater sufficiently for individual learner differences. Two teachers had implemented a flipped mastery approach to language teaching, to allow learners to work at their own pace and according to their individual learning styles and preferences. However, as we have described, one of these teachers, Shona, with her Murder Mystery task, had adapted TBLT to fit with this teaching approach. Interestingly, however, teachers in Part 1 of this study reported that they thought that TBLT was particularly suited to a pedagogy that catered for differentiating individual learner needs, and they suggested how the tasks they had taught as part of their inquiries might be adapted for this purpose. Overall, we conclude that enabling teachers to implement TBLT in their classrooms needs to include a focus on helping them adapt tasks for individual learner differences.

Limitations

This study has been able to provide a small snapshot of teacher learning and practice. It has focused only on how individual teachers used tasks within a sequence of no more than two lessons. It is therefore only able to provide limited information about the use of tasks within a language curriculum. Furthermore, we cannot claim that our participant sample is representative of the wider cohort of teachers who have, over the years, participated in the TPDL programme. Those teachers who were involved in Part 1 of the study volunteered their participation; those who were approached for possible participation in Part 2 were specifically selected because they were known to embody best practice and/or knew the researchers. For these reasons, therefore, it is very possible that we are presenting a view of teacher understanding and practice that is biased for best.

Another limitation is that, while we were able to identify, as students worked at language tasks, processes from the literature that are known to promote language acquisition, we were unable to provide empirical evidence of student learning or acquisition as a result of completing these tasks. A reason for this is that we were keen, as much as possible, to observe regular lessons in regular classroom practice, and so told our participants as little as possible about what we hoped to see. Investigating student learning would most likely have involved our knowing ahead of time about the lesson we would be observing and preparation of some measure of learning in relation to that lesson.

The limitations we describe are largely due to the fact that we wanted the impact of our investigations to impose as little as possible on our teacher participants. In our experience it is very hard to get extremely busy classroom teachers to agree to participate in research of any nature, and even harder to get access to their classrooms. In another study (Erlam, 2016b), only two teachers volunteered participation out of the 65 who were invited and who were enrolled in the TPDL programme. Of these, only one met the research criteria. Teacher participation was an issue we faced in the present study. In particular, fewer participants allowed us access to their classrooms in Part 1, than we would have liked. We were not always sure why we faced this problem, although we know how busy teachers are. We were, therefore, fully appreciative of the opportunities we were given and keen to minimise the impact of our investigation as much as possible.

In summary

Our intent with this book was to contribute to TBLT scholarship by documenting how teachers of foreign languages other than English learn about and implement tasks and TBLT in intact school classrooms, a context which, we claim, is underrepresented in the literature. In the professional learning programme that served as the context for the book, the primary and secondary school teachers we studied first focused on principles underlying effective instructed language learning (Ellis, 2005) and then learnt about tasks and TBLT, as a way of implementing these principles in practice. In observing the practice of these teachers, following on from their learning about TBLT and tasks, we found, as documented elsewhere (e.g., Andon & Eckerth, 2009; Oliver & Bogachenko, 2018; Van den Branden, 2006), that they shaped tasks in different ways so as to open up pedagogical spaces for language learning.

The findings of the study show that teachers incorporated TBLT and tasks into their classroom practice in combination with instructional and learning processes that are not normally associated with TBLT. In so doing, some of the dichotomies that have differentiated TBLT from other approaches to language teaching and learning were blurred. We suggest that TBLT theory needs to continue to engage with the realities of actual classroom practice, and to consider how this approach to language teaching may be maximally relevant to the different instructional contexts in which teachers are operating.

Our book also contributes to language teacher education by providing further illustrations of the realities of the support that teachers need to implement curricular innovations. We made a number of recommendations to better prepare and support teachers to implement TBLT in their instructional contexts. We conclude with the words of one of our teacher participants:

> You have to structure things quite carefully… I don't feel that everything can be done task-based and I don't think everything should be done task-based… so you try to do task-based as much as you can, as long as it fits in with what you can do… and the more you think about it, the more you realise that actually the more things that you actually can do in a task-based manner. But it takes time. It takes time to think about how you're going to present it in a task-based fashion [and] to build the resources.