

## Author's preface

 <https://doi.org/10.1075/tblt.3.preface>

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**Task-Based Language Teaching from the Teachers' Perspective:  
Insights from New Zealand**

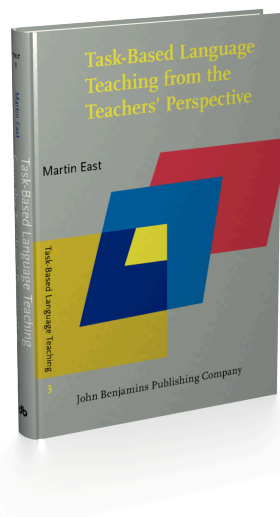
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[Task-Based Language Teaching, 3] 2012. xix, 259 pp.

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In the opening volume of this book series dedicated to task-based language teaching, Van den Branden, Bygate, and Norris (2009), the three editors of the series, provide a justification for why a series of books focusing on the phenomenon of TBLT is worthwhile. They argue:

Over the past several decades, task-based language teaching (TBLT) has increasingly attracted the worldwide attention of SLA researchers, curriculum developers, educationalists, teacher trainers, language testers, and language teachers. In the 1980s, the term was coined, and the concept developed, by SLA researchers and language pedagogues, largely in reaction to a broad consensus that had emerged around what were seen as shortcomings in teacher-centered, form-oriented second language classroom practice. (p. 1)

Seen in this light, a book series dedicated to TBLT issues, research, and practice has considerable value for a wide range of people. Van den Branden et al. (2009) conclude that “[t]oday, task-based language teaching is being promoted in many countries around the globe as a potentially very powerful language pedagogy” (p. 1). However, despite a growing interest in the power of TBLT to transform language pedagogy, introducing TBLT into language teaching and learning programmes is, as is the case with any innovation, not a straightforward or easy matter. Teachers are often uncertain about what TBLT is, unsure about how they are to realise TBLT in their classrooms, and unclear about whether, how, and to what extent TBLT fits with their existing beliefs and practices. It is one thing for theorists, researchers, and curriculum developers to promote and investigate TBLT for its potential power as a beneficial language pedagogy; it may be quite another for teachers to make it work at the grassroots level of the language classroom.

My primary interest in this contribution to the book series, informed by my own professional responsibilities as a language teacher educator, is how teachers interpret the range of messages they receive about TBLT. My focus is language teachers in schools – *their* beliefs, *their* interpretations, *their* concerns – and how each of these leads to individual and often different pedagogical choices in unique and diverse circumstances. Teachers’ perspectives provide an important vantage point from which to consider the extent to which concepts such as TBLT and ‘task’ are being understood and enacted in real-world contexts. They also help to

identify the areas of teachers' thinking and practice that might be enhanced by greater theoretical and practical knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon of TBLT.

The book takes as its starting point the particular situation of New Zealand. It is arguably fitting that a book about TBLT in New Zealand should be published to coincide with the Fourth Biennial International Conference on Task-Based Language Teaching, which New Zealand has the pleasure of hosting. In this light, a book that looks at the New Zealand context provides the opportunity to showcase an aspect of New Zealand's real interest in TBLT, and to highlight its genuine struggles with operationalising TBLT thus far.

More pertinently, however, this is a significant time for language teaching and learning in New Zealand. A substantially revised national school curriculum has recently been introduced, and, within that curriculum, a brand new learning area has been launched, specifically dedicated to the teaching and learning of additional languages.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, as part of putting the aims and intentions of this new learning area into practice, teachers are receiving messages from a variety of sources that tell them that they should take a close look at what TBLT has to offer. There is a very real sense in which Littlewood's (2004) claim regarding TBLT, that "teachers in a wide range of settings are being told by curriculum leaders that this is how they should teach" (p. 319), is reflected in the New Zealand context.

Despite the messages being promulgated by 'curriculum leaders', for many teachers of additional languages in New Zealand's schools, TBLT is a somewhat new and unfamiliar concept. This makes the teacher perspective important to consider because it provides the opportunity to investigate teachers' understandings at an early stage in the implementation of TBLT in school-based programmes. My particular focus is on those additional languages that have been defined in the New Zealand setting as 'international' (Waite, 1992) – so-called foreign languages or FLs other than English. This book presents the findings of a series of one-to-one interviews, not only with practising high school FL teachers (those who are charged with making the new learning area work at the level of the students), but also with teacher advisors (those who are among the curriculum leaders, and whose responsibility is to support teachers with initiating the new learning area). This book therefore provides both teacher and advisor viewpoints on FL teaching in New Zealand, in the context of a new learning area and the encouragement of teachers to consider TBLT.

Long (2000) provides a useful perspective when he suggests that although the methodological principle is important, the most effective *pedagogy* for putting that principle into practice will vary according to what the *teacher* believes is appropriate in the local context. That teacher is "the expert on the local classroom situation, after all, not someone writing about language teaching thousands

of miles away in an office in Honolulu or a commercial materials writer sipping martinis on a beach in the Bahamas" (p. 188). Although many practising teachers in New Zealand might well welcome the opportunity to join the materials writers, and to be sipping a cocktail in one of the many local pacific island paradises virtually on our doorstep, the reality is that theirs is the responsibility (at least in term time) to make language teaching effective for their charges. Interviews with practitioners (as the classroom experts) will reveal something of the richness and diversity of their interpretations and practical applications of the theoretical standpoints and methodological approaches they are presented with, and something of the challenges that lie ahead if TBLT innovation is to be successful in real-world classrooms.

In keeping with the principal emphasis of this book, it is not my aim to present a comprehensive analysis or review of the theory and research associated with TBLT. Others have written extensively on theoretical perspectives that inform TBLT (and the first book in the series provides a useful overview). Although I do draw on certain key theoretical constructs and background arguments throughout the book, to help readers contextualise the teachers' stories, readers who would like more detailed accounts of the background issues raised are encouraged to refer to the works I cite in the text, alongside Volume 1 of the series.

Which brings me to a crucial consideration for this Preface – for whom is this book designed? The book, whilst rooted in a particular local context, has value for a wide range of people working in a wide variety of contexts. It will be of particular interest to university undergraduate and graduate students currently undertaking study in language teaching and related fields, especially those who are in training to become languages teachers themselves, and who wish to increase their understanding of effective FL pedagogy as interpreted by experienced classroom practitioners. It will also be of interest to those conducting research in language teaching and learning, and policy makers who have a stake in how language teaching and learning is understood and operationalised in specific domains. Most particularly, those who are interested in TBLT innovation in school contexts and seen from the perspective of classroom practitioners will find this work to be a valuable sourcebook of teacher stories. Although the stories I record are those of teachers of specific international languages other than English, the issues they raise, and the examples they give, should have relevance for those who are teaching any additional language, including English as a second or foreign language.

I hope that readers will enjoy the stories of New Zealand teachers. More importantly, I hope that readers will come away from reading New Zealand teachers' accounts with a greater understanding and appreciation not only of the New Zealand situation, with regard to FL teaching and learning in schools, but also of how

TBLT may or may not fit into their own circumstances. The lessons learnt from these practitioners' accounts have relevance in many environments where teachers struggle with implementing meaningful, productive, and motivating language programmes.

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September 2011