

## REVIEW OF NOTION AND FRAMEWORK OF TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper is one in series of papers related to secondary school teacher cognition of Task-Based Language Teaching and of the new series of textbooks of English officially passed by in Vietnam in 2006. The purpose of this paper is to make a proposal on how task and TBLT model should be put/understood/viewed to fit the literature and the context of research project. In order to do this, the argumentation is set in three steps: firstly a review of notions of tasks and TBLT is made; secondly, the author proposes a proper understanding of task and TBLT framework to fit the research context; at last endeavor, the author explain reasons for the use of task notion and TBLT framework by making an overview of research setting relating to objectives, methods, background of research.*

**KEYWORDS:** Task, Notion of Task, TBLT, Framework

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### INTRODUCTION

Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has determined to foster the teaching quality of English in the orientation of accessing regional and international proficiency with the hope that students can communicate well with foreigners in everyday situations. Consequently, the series of new textbooks of English for secondary schools was passed by and officially implemented in 2006 with the innovated direction was paid to TBLT. This set of textbooks was designed by experienced ELT specialists in Vietnam led by Dr. Hoang Van Van. The set of textbooks were based on the implementation of task-based syllabus design, CLT and TBLT and learner-centeredness approach (Van, 2011). However, since series of new textbooks of English was in use, few researches have been done to investigate learning and teaching issues related to the textbooks (Canh & Barnard, 2009; Barnard & Viet, 2010). Therefore, a research project on the secondary school teacher cognition of the new textbooks and TBLT has been in progress to uncover facts and raises persuasive voices in necessary matters. As the matter of fact, the review of notions of task and TBLT model is required.

TBLT which is now considered as most favorable and modern language teaching method in the world still attracts lots of attentions from Vietnamese secondary school teachers. Yet, there are divergences in notion of task and TBLT framework which may hinder teachers' ability of applying this method. Studies from researchers (Carless, 2003, 2004, 2007; Littlewood, 2007) have found that conceptual uncertainty about tasks and TBLT has affected teachers' implementation in many East Asian EFL contexts. Thus, the author's effort in the argumentation to find out a proposal of using an appropriate term of task and TBLT so as to fit literature as well as the implementation in textbooks is needed.

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## **REVIEW OF NOTIONS AND FRAMEWORK OF TASKS AND TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING IN LITERATURE**

Task-based learning can be regarded as one particular approach to implementing the broader “communicative approach” and, as with the communicative approach in general. TBL was first applauded by Prabhu (1987); however, it was only shaped into careful framework later by other methodologists. This part is, therefore, to introduce briefly the history of development of TBL researches on both the concept and its framework.

### **Notion of tasks**

The definition of task has been very various in the literature (e.g., Prabhu, 1987; Bygate, 2001; Ellis, 2000, 2003; Lee, 2000; Long, 1985, 1991, 1997, 2005; Nunan, 2004; Richards and Rodgers, 2001; Salaberry, 2001; Skehan, 1998a, 1998b, 2003; Willis, 1996a, 1996b, 1998). Prabhu (1987), one of the first methodologists raising interest and support for TBL, considers a task is “an activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process”. He credited that the task-based teaching and learning is a good way of education and language practice as effective learning occurs when students are fully engaged in a language task, rather than just learning about language (p.17). In the work of Swales (1990), tasks are “...sequenceable goal-directed activities...relatable to the acquisition of pre-genre and genre skills appropriate to a foreseen or emerging... situation” (p. 76). Lee (2000) defines a task is “(1) a classroom activity or exercise that has: (a) an objective obtainable only by interaction among participants, (b) a mechanism for structuring and sequencing interaction, and (c) a focus on meaning exchange; (2) a language learning endeavor that requires learners to comprehend, manipulate, and/or produce the target language as they perform some sets of work plans”. Bygate, Skehan, and Swain (2001) view ‘A task is an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective’. Long (1985) defined a task as “... a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward . . . By 'task' is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in between” (p. 89). More circumscribed is the following from Willis (1996), and then in Willis and Willis (2001): “a classroom undertaking where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome” (p. 173). Here the notion of meaning is subsumed in ‘outcome’. Language in a communicative task is seen as bringing about an outcome through the exchange of meanings. In Willis & Willis (2009): a task has a number of defining characteristics, among them: does it engage the learners’ interest; is there a primary focus on meaning; is success measured in terms of non-linguistic outcome rather than accurate use of language forms; and does it relate to real world activities? The more confidently we can answer yes to each of these questions the more task-like the activity (p.4). Skehan (1996), drawing on a number of other writers, puts forward four key characteristics of a task in a pedagogical aspect: (1) meaning is primary, (2) there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities, (3) task completion has some priority, and (4) the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome. Ellis (2003, p. 16) provides a composite definition:

A task is a workplan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed. To this end, it requires them to give primary attention to meaning and to make use of their own linguistic resources, although the design of the task may predispose them to choose particular forms. A task is intended to result in

language use that bears a resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world. Like other language activities, a task can engage productive or receptive, and oral or written skills, and also various cognitive processes.

In short, number of definitions of a task and TBLT runs on to infinity; each researcher has his/her own way of putting the notion.

### **Framework for TBLT**

TBLT framework is in fact the favourable way to sequence tasks or to sequence elements within tasks proposed by researchers and methodologists. According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), sequencing is a major issue in a task-based syllabus. Salaberry (2001) argued that a successful task sequence leads learners to: (a) communicate with limited resources, (b) become aware of apparent limitations in their knowledge about linguistic structures that are necessary to convey the message appropriately and accurately, and finally, (c) look for alternatives to overcome such limitations. In this section, framework of TBLT will in turn present. Johnson (1996), Skehan (1998b), and Willis (1996b) discussed sequencing of tasks according to methodological task features, such as extent of communication (negotiation of meaning), task difficulty, and amount of planning allowed. Others have discussed how to sequence tasks to reflect the developmental sequence of language acquisition. Foster & Skehan (1999) suggested targeting a range of structures rather than a single one and using the criterion of usefulness rather than necessity as a sequencing criterion. The review in this part categorizes the way of task sequence in step or stages.

Commonly, the sequence with three stages have been highly mentioned and approved in literature. Prabu who is considered the first language educator launching task-based approach, proposed a model of three stages in his work published in 1987. These three stages includes (a) pre-task (preparatory), (b) task (meaning-focused, interactive process), (c) post-task (discussion - attending to form). This original proposal was then inherited by Willis (1996); she made a rigorous work that have affected very much to this field in literature. Jane Willis (1996a, 1996b, 1998, 2001, 2007, 2009) designed precisely and approved the framework for TBLT, which was then advocated by many other writers (Richards Frost, 2006; ....). Three stages includes (1) preparation for the task (pre-task), (2) the task itself (task-cycle), and (3) follow-up or language focus (post-task). Pre-task phase is when teacher introduce topic and task, and students get exposures of linguistic chunks. The task cycle can be subdivided into three task stages, including task stage, planning stage, and report stage. This is the main task phase in which students use the target language the most to accomplish task requirements; the fluency and meaning-focus is main attended. The last phase is language focus, in which teacher, basing on what learners have done in the previous phase, helps learners to enrich linguistic items with more focus on accuracy. Skehan (1996) also sequences task in three steps known as “weak” forms of task-based teaching (p.39). In a weak approach, tasks are roughly comparable to the production stage of a presentation-practice-production instruction model (PPP).

Regarding four stages, Salaberry (2001), building on the work of McCarthy (1998), offered a pedagogical sequence of four stages for students and for teachers. Stages for students include involvement, inquiry, induction, incorporation; and stages for teachers consist four-step sequence is introduction of the topic, illustration, implementation, and integration.

Given five stages, Ellis (2003) presented a five stage sequence of tasks for helping learners become more grammatical as the goal of mastery. The sequence includes: (1) Listening task, in which students listen to a text for meaning, (2) Noticing task, in which students listen to the same text to fill in the missing words in gaps, (3) Consciousness-raising task, in which students analyze the authentic materials provided by the listening text to find out the way the target grammar structure works, (4) Checking task, in which students complete an activity to check whether they know how the target structure works or not, and (5) Production task, in which students produce their own sentences with the target structure. In this work, Ellis (2003) also distinguished between (a) unfocused tasks (e.g., ordinary listening tasks or interactions) and (b) focused tasks, which are used to elicit a specific linguistic feature or to focus on language as task content. He proposed three principal designs for focused tasks: comprehension tasks, consciousness-raising tasks, and structure-based production tasks.

In another regard, six stages sequence was mentioned in Nunan (2004). He argued in favor of units based on topics of Halliday's (1985) in which three groups of macrofunctions are divided into microfunctions, each linked with certain grammatical structures. Six stages sequence of Nunan's task-based syllabus are: (1) schema building, (2) Controlled practice embedded in a context (unlike traditional controlled practice), (3) Authentic receptive skills work, (4) A focus on form (lexical and/or grammatical), (5) Freer practice (communicative activities), and the last (6) The (communicative) task itself. In Nunan's model, the task is a culmination of all other work. In this sense, as noted by Feeney (2006), this is not too far from the PPP format, except that Nunan's controlled practice occurs within more of a communicative context than is usual with the PPP arrangement. Nunan's focus on form occurs before both freer practice and the task, whereas Willis's (1996b) model employs a focus on form after the task.

Finally, task-based language teaching model from Long (1985, 1991, 1997, 2005) refers to the focus on form with main involvement of meaning, structure, and the context of communication. The instruction model organizes the sequence from task development to task implementation and then to assessment/evaluation; it consists of following seven stages: (1) Needs analysis to identify target tasks, (2) Classify into target task types, (3) Derive pedagogic tasks, (4) Sequence to form a task-based syllabus, (5) Implement with appropriate methodology and pedagogy, (6) Assess with task-based, criterion-referenced, performance tests, (7) Evaluate program. In Long's model, tasks are selected based on analysis of real-world communication needs. Such tasks are particularly important for second language learning because they can generate useful forms of communication breakdown (Long, 1985). The teacher offers some kind of assistance to help the learner focus on form at the point when it is most needed for communication. This is the moment when meaning meets form. While not explaining the learner's error, the teacher provides indirect assistance so the learner can solve his or her own communication problem and can proceed to negotiate meaning still further. Besides, Long (1991; 2005) and Long & Robinson (1998) has consistently argued for a particular type of focus on form in which learners' attention is drawn to linguistic features if and when demanded by the communicative activities and the negotiation of meaning learners are engaged in.

## **PROPOSAL OF NOTIONS OF TASK AND TBLT FRAMEWORK**

From the aforementioned review of task notion and TBLT framework, it is evident that no consensus exists about notion of tasks and the best way to sequence tasks or to sequence

elements within tasks. This is one of the key areas of research needed in the field. In the below section, the author manages to propose an understanding of task and TBLT framework to serve the research project's objectives, and then present another perspective on task and TBLT for future discussion in language teaching and in education. In order to do that, a judgment on what review above narrated with a clear-cut criteria base is done at first attempt, and then the proposals come after.

### **Notion of tasks**

Notions of tasks are various; it is too difficult to mention all in one paper, but clarify the common features of those viewpoints in groups for better understanding. In literature, notions of task and TBLT can be categorized into two following groups: (1) meaning-focused viewpoint (Prabu, 1987; Willis, 1996, 1998, 2007; Crookes & Gass, 1993; Ellis, 2003, 2006, 2009; Lee, 2000; Robinson, 2005), which bear some characteristics as (a) basing on the synthetic approach to language teaching, (b) being not based on grammar, (c) being based on involvement in the completion of a task, (d) using authentic or real-life tasks, (e) making the learner central to the learning and teaching process, and so on; (2) form-focused viewpoint (Long, 1997; Nunan, 1989, ) which bear some characteristics as (a) basing on the analytic approaches to language, (b) being focused on grammar, (c) there being room for explicit learning of forms, (d) building grammatical scaffoldings before doing task, (e) selecting tasks according to learners' needs, and so on; (3) balance-focused viewpoint on form and meaning with which Skehan stresses the need for a third approach in which "the central feature is a balance between form and meaning, and an alternation of attention between them" (1998: 121).

Despite that different task-based approaches exist today (Johnson, 2008, p. 184), TBLT, in its broadest sense, is based on 'the use of tasks as the core unit of planning and instruction in language teaching' (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p.223). Another useful definition of TBLT is provided by Samuda & Bygate, who put that task-based language teaching refers to 'contexts where tasks are the central unit of instruction: they "drive" classroom activity, they define curriculum and syllabuses and they determine modes of assessment' (2008: 58). This conceptualisation of TBLT takes the agreement of well-known writers as Long and Crookes (1992), Skehan (1998) and Willis (1996a).

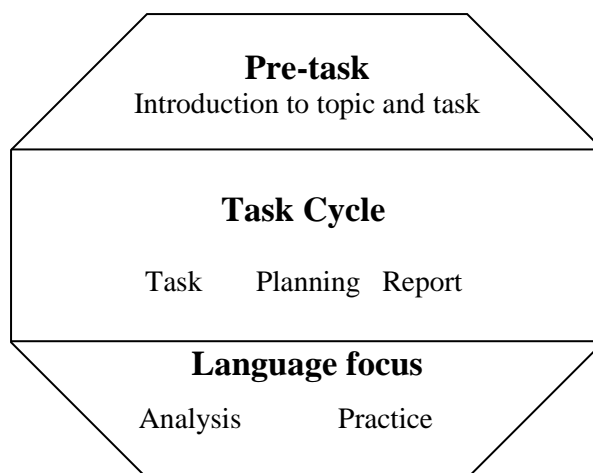
My own view of a task and TBLT is strongly influenced by Willis (1996a) and Skehan (1996), and Lee (2000), in which pedagogical tasks involve communicative language use in which the user's attention is focused on meaning rather than grammatical form. However, this does not mean that form is not important. My proposal of TBLT can be expressed:

Task-Based Language Teaching is the implementation of pedagogical tasks, which are inspired from the real world tasks, fitted well to students' need and interest, and socially contextualized. A task is goal-oriented, meaning-focused first and form-focused then, contextualized, and implemented as the basis for teaching and learning. It can enable teacher's teaching in the direction of strong form realization of CLT, and help students achieve the reachable and communicative outcome when they are exposed to authentic and comprehensible input, then do the task through interactions (in pairs or in small groups) in which their own experiences of target language are exploited, and lastly access the completeness through the outcome.

My definition refers to the deployment of learners' knowledge, experience and skills to express meaning, highlighting the fact that meaning and form are highly interrelated, and that grammar exists to enable the language user to express different communicative meanings.

### Framework for TBLT

As Ellis (2009: 224) notes, 'there is no single way of doing TBLT'. However, For the benefit of research project, take the model of Willis' (1996a, 1996b, 1998) is adopted. It is, in fact, very much advocated by other researchers, methodologists and university teachers. The framework of Willis is modeled as below:



**Figure 1: Willis' framework of TBLT**

The reason for this choice is not only because of that this model is in a precise design, which enhances teachers' approach and understanding to it; no any other ways of task sequencing is modeled eligibly for better thought like this. Fundamentally, the choice depends very much on the research setting of both research goals and textbook design's model. Many second language learner textbooks now follow this practice.

### REASONS FOR THE CHOICE OF NOTION AND FRAMEWORK OF TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING

In this research project, I define notion of TBLT and choose the framework as what have been mentioned above as the setting of the research which is in turn presented in this part for the clarification.

According to Van (2011), the series of textbooks of English subject is based on the framework of TBLT proposed by Willis (1996a) which was also strongly supported by Skehan (1996, 1998a, 2003), Ellis (2000, 2003) and Willis (1998, 2001, 2009). This series of textbooks was carefully designed, and this was a big effort to change the teachers' attitude, teachers' awareness of English teaching in Vietnam from teacher-centered orientation to learner-centered orientation. Works from Hung (2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2012d, 2012e) show that the teaching model adopted in textbooks from grade 10<sup>th</sup> to grade 12<sup>th</sup> shapes the framework of each unit with five parts (reading, speaking, listening, writing, language focus), and in each skill part consists of three phases (pre-task, while-task and post-task) each phase of which has smaller or subtasks or activities. To get this framework compared with

ancestors' ones, it fits well with the one proposed by Willis (1996a, 1998, 2001, 2007). A little deviation is that the task cycle in the new series of textbooks does not accomplish in a class teaching period but in 10 periods (2 periods for each part: reading, speaking, listening, writing, language focus), so a task in these textbooks is bigger and more ranging to be afforded than the TBLT framework stated in literature.

The research project, the purpose of which is to investigate teachers' cognition including two domains, teachers' perceptions of TBLT and teachers' beliefs of textbooks (Borg, 2003, 2006, 2009), is carried out mainly in mountainous hinderlands in Vietnam by a mixed approach method in which a survey questionnaire, a semi-structured interview and classroom observation is combined (Hung, 2012b). The research relates to a rather big population, and it is done in the special context: economic condition and living condition is low; students' motivation and proficiency is indefinite; facilities are below the demand; especially teacher's knowledge of ELT methodology and TBLT literature cannot cover all issues that be present and variant day by day. Therefore, an unanimous choice of a task notion and TBLT framework corresponding to Willis' theory that is adopted by the series of textbook is an suitable act.

## CONCLUSION

The implementation of the new series of textbooks from 2006 placed all Vietnamese teachers of English in the rush of teaching method renovation; the major orientation is the advocacy of TBLT according to Willis' model (Hung, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2012d, 2012e; Van, 2011). With that fact, the understandings of the textbooks and TBLT must be an indispensable part of teachers' knowledge; however, in many parts of our country, especially in undeveloped remote and mountainous areas, this orientation of using TBLT is largely verbal rather than being implemented in the direction of curriculum renewal. This may be because of the awareness shortage or the variation in understanding about TBLT among the teachers, the negative beliefs or unfavorable attitudes towards to new textbook, or the student factors, etc. In order to investigate teachers' cognitions of that new series of textbooks including teachers' beliefs of new textbooks and teachers' perceptions of the teaching method (TBLT) implied in those textbooks, the proposal for understanding task notion and TBLT framework have been made as reference axis for that measurement to uncover the undesirable and mysterious teaching quality having been present so far.

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