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SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING

MIKE LONG



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Second Language Acquisition and
Task-Based Language Teaching

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Preface and Acknowledgments

Language teaching (LT) is notorious for methodological pendulum swings, amply documented in published histories of the field. Currently, “task-based” learning and teaching are increasingly fashionable, and many of the very same textbook writers and commercial publishers who made large sums of money out of the structural, notional, functional, topical, and lexical movements of the past 30 years are now repeating the performance with tasks. Most of what they are selling is task-based in name only, however. Miscellaneous “communication tasks” of various kinds, many not very communicative at all, and use of which pre-dates current ideas about task-based learning and teaching, have replaced exercises or activities, but, like their predecessors, are still used to deliver a pre-planned, overt or covert *linguistic* syllabus of one sort or another. Tasks are carriers of target structures and vocabulary items, in other words, not themselves the content of a genuine *task* syllabus. Their role lies in *task-supported*, not *task-based*, LT. Alternatively, such tasks figure as one strand in a so-called hybrid syllabus in textbooks whose authors and publishers claim to combine some or all of grammatical, lexical, notional, functional, topical, situational, and task syllabi under one visually attractive cover, seemingly untroubled by, or in some cases unaware of, their incompatible psycholinguistic underpinnings.

Such materials may or may not have merit, aside from their earning power – certainly, many students around the world have learned languages through (or despite?) their use, some to high levels, for a long time – but they are not what I mean by task-based LT, and I will not be spending much time on them in this book. Instead, I will focus on one of the few genuinely task-based approaches. It is not the only one, not necessarily the best one – an empirical question, after all, to which none of us has the final answer – and may ultimately turn out to have all sorts of weaknesses, but it is the one I have been developing over the past 30 years, with growing, and increasingly valuable, participation by a number of other researchers and classroom practitioners in many parts of the world, and so the one with which I am most familiar. Unlike synthetic linguistic syllabi, it is broadly consistent with what second language acquisition (SLA) research has shown about how learners acquire second and foreign languages and has been implemented in a variety of settings. From the beginning, back in 1980, I have referred to it as (uppercase) Task-Based Language Teaching (‘TBLT’, not to be confused with ‘BLT’, the sandwich).

The purpose of this book, however, is not to “convert” readers to TBLT; many will feel they have achieved positive results without it. Some may find it attractive, some may

find parts of it worth including in different kinds of programs but reject other parts, and some may consider the whole thing an abomination. Nor is the purpose to provide a survey of the field of LT and applied linguistics, with equal time for all the many proposals out there. LT is a dynamic field, featuring a wide range of views on how best to carry it out, many of which conflict, and not all of which could possibly be correct. This book is intended as a contribution to the debate. My aim is to offer what I believe to be a rational argument for a particular approach, with supporting evidence from theory, research, and classroom experience, followed by a step-by-step description of how to implement TBLT for those interested in doing so. I am especially keen to show the linkage between theory and research findings in SLA, the process LT is designed to facilitate, and TBLT. I will make the case as explicitly as possible and as strongly as I feel warranted. The strength of an argument draws attention to an idea and simultaneously makes it easier for critics to focus on what it is about it that they find objectionable. Explicitness helps remove ambiguities, facilitates testing of ideas, and speeds up identification of flaws. That way lies progress, and faster progress.

I first outlined a primitive rationale for TBLT in courses at the University of Pennsylvania from 1980 to 1982 and sketched the ideas publicly in a plenary address to the Inter-Agency Language Roundtable at Georgetown in 1983, a presentation that appeared in print two years later (Long 1985a). Expanded and modified considerably ever since in response to theoretical developments, the results of empirical studies, and classroom experience, TBLT remains a work in progress. Motivated by research findings in educational psychology, curriculum and instruction, SLA, an embryonic theory of instructed second language acquisition (ISLA; see Chapter 3), and principles from the philosophy of education (see Chapter 4), it has gradually evolved into a comprehensive approach to course design, implementation, and evaluation. First and foremost, it remains an attempt to respond to the growing demand for accountable communicative LT programs designed for learners with real-world needs for functional L2 abilities.

In the first four chapters, which make up Part One of this book, 'Theory and Research,' I review TBLT's rationale, including its psycholinguistic and philosophical underpinnings. In Part Two, 'Design and Implementation,' I devote seven more practically oriented chapters to describing and illustrating procedures, and in some cases problems, in each of the six basic stages in designing, implementing, and evaluating a TBLT program: needs and means analysis, syllabus design, materials development, choice of methodological principles and pedagogic procedures, student assessment, and program evaluation. Finally, in a single chapter that constitutes Part Three, 'The Road Ahead,' I discuss TBLT's prospects and potential shelf-life and identify some issues in need of further research. An appendix lists abbreviations used.

Many people have influenced the ideas in this book, including numerous researchers in SLA and applied linguistics, and many students in my courses and seminars on TBLT at the Universities of Pennsylvania, Hawaii, and Maryland, and summer courses overseas. They are acknowledged and their work referenced in the main text. While I was writing it, several individuals graciously agreed to read and comment on sections, or in some cases, a whole chapter. Others provided additional information on their work when I asked, chased down recalcitrant missing references, gave me permission to include data and examples from their materials development projects, or joined with me in needs analyses and TBLT teacher education sessions and in implementing some of the ideas in the classroom. I am very grateful to the following for their assistance with

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Second Language Acquisition and Task-Based Language Teaching is dedicated to my wonderful son, Jordi Nicholas Long.

Mike Long
University of Maryland
June 2014

Part One
Theory and Research

Chapter 1

Why TBLT?

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1.1. The Importance of Second Language Learning and Teaching in the Twenty-First Century

Second language learning and teaching are more important in the twenty-first century than ever before and are more important than even many language teachers appreciate. Most of us are familiar with traditional student populations: captive school children required to “pass” a foreign language (often for no obvious reason), college students satisfying a language requirement or working toward a BA in literature, young adults headed overseas for university courses, as missionaries or to serve as volunteers in the Peace Corps and similar organizations, and adults needing a L2 for vocational training or occupational purposes in the business world, aid organizations, the military, federal and state government, or the diplomatic and intelligence services. Typically, these students are literate, well educated, relatively affluent, learning a major world language, and, the school children aside, doing so voluntarily.

Less visible to many of us, but often with even more urgent linguistic needs, are the steadily increasing numbers of *involuntary* language learners of all ages. Each year,

millions of people are forced to cross linguistic borders to escape wars, despotic regimes, disease, drought, famine, religious persecution, ethnic cleansing, abject poverty, and climate change. Many of these learners are poor, illiterate, uneducated, and faced with acquiring less powerful, often unwritten, rarely taught languages. In some instances, for example, migrant workers in Western Europe, the United States, and parts of the Arab world, the target language is an economically and politically powerful one, such as French, Spanish, German, English, or Arabic. Instruction is available for those with money and time to pursue it, but many such learners lack either. Worse, marginalized and living in a linguistic ghetto, they frequently have little or no access to target language speakers, interaction with whom could serve as the basis for naturalistic second language acquisition (SLA). In some cases, involuntary learners are not created by people moving into new linguistic zones but by powerful languages coming to them. When imperialist nation states use military force to annex territory, they typically oblige the inhabitants to learn the language of the occupier if they hope to have access to education, economic opportunity, or political power, often while relegating local languages to second-class status or even making their use illegal.¹

The overall picture is unlikely to change anytime soon. Advanced proficiency in a foreign or second language will remain a critical factor in determining the educational and economic life chances of all these groups, from college students and middle-class professionals, through humanitarian aid workers and government and military personnel, to migrant workers, their school-age children, and the victims of occupations and colonization. Moreover, if the obvious utilitarian reasons were not important enough, for millions of learners, especially the non-volunteers, acquiring a new language is inextricably bound up with creating a new identity and acculturating into the receiving community. Occasionally, SLA is a path to resistance for them (“Know thine enemy’s language”), but in all too many cases, it is simply necessary for survival. For all these reasons, and given the obvious political implications of a few major world languages being taught to speakers of so many less powerful ones, a responsible course of action, it seems to me, as with education in general, is to make sure that language teaching (LT) and learning are as socially progressive as possible. LT alone will never compensate for the ills that create so many language learners, but at the very least, it should strive not to make matters worse.

It is clear from the above examples – just a few of many possible – that the scope of second and foreign language learning and teaching in the twenty-first century is expanding and likely to continue to do so, and as varied as it is vast. Given the importance of

¹ This has happened for thousands of years. Comparatively recent cases include the annexation of much of the African continent by European powers followed by the imposition of English, French, Dutch, Portuguese, and Spanish at the expense of indigenous languages; the British occupation of what are now known as Australia, New Zealand, and North America, followed by imposition of English and the suppression and near eradication of numerous indigenous languages, and often, of the people who spoke them; Spain’s and Portugal’s colonization of South America, followed by centuries during which the Spanish and Portuguese overwhelmed local languages; the annexation of Hawaii by the United States, followed by decades during which English was imposed and Hawaiian prohibited; the imposition of Russian as the official language of government, administration, education, and the law throughout much of the Soviet Union; and the fascist coup in Spain in 1936, for 30 years after which Franco made it illegal to speak Basque or Catalan, and an imprisonable offense to teach either. These are no more than a few of many such examples in recent world history (see, e.g., Phillipson 2009; Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas 2009; Skutnabb-Kangas 2000; Warner 1999).

language learning for so many people and so many different kinds of people, therefore, it would be reassuring to know that LT is being carried out efficiently by trained professionals and that language teachers and learners alike are satisfied with the end product. In fact, there is little evidence for either supposition. While individual programs are professionally staffed and producing good results, they are the exception. Around the world, people continue to learn languages in many ways, sometimes, it appears, with the help of instruction, sometimes without it, sometimes despite it, but there are many more beginners than finishers, and as described in Chapter 2, the field remains divided on fundamental issues to a degree that would cause public consternation and generate costly lawsuits in true professions.²

Against this backdrop, it seems reasonable to suggest that new proposals for LT should strive to meet some minimum criteria, with the justification for any serious approach needing to be multi-faceted. Since language learning is the process LT is designed to facilitate, an essential part of the rationale must surely be psycholinguistic plausibility, or consistency with theory and research findings about how people learn and use second and foreign languages. But that is by no means the only motivation required. Given that the subject is language education, a solid basis in the philosophy of education should be expected too. Also of major importance are accountability, relevance, avoidance of known problems with existing approaches, learner-centeredness, and functionality. This book is about Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), an approach to course design, implementation, and evaluation intended to meet the communicative needs of diverse groups of learners and which attempts to satisfy all seven criteria. But first, what exactly is meant by “task-based”?

1.2. TBLT and the Meaning of ‘Task’

Throughout this book, I distinguish between “Task-Based Language Teaching” (upper case), as in the book’s title, and “task-based language teaching” (lower case). The

² Although often referred to as such, LT unfortunately lacks the characteristics of a true profession, such as law, medicine, engineering, nursing, or architecture. In some parts of the world, language teachers need to have completed recognized degree programs before they are allowed to teach, especially in state schools, but even in those countries, a largely unregulated private sector usually operates, as well. While most teachers strive to be “professional” in the way they go about their work and to perform well for their students, the sad fact is that, in many places, anyone who can find an institution willing to employ him or her can teach a language, even with little or no training, little or no classroom experience, and poor command of the language concerned. Others simply advertise for students and start giving private lessons. The fact that, in many cases, demand for LT far exceeds supply makes that possible. Among institutions offering courses or whole degree programs supposedly preparing students for a career in LT, there is no agreed-upon common body of knowledge of which all practitioners should demonstrate mastery and no common examinations required of would-be practitioners. There is no licensing body, no licenses, and few sanctions on cowboy teachers or language schools. In some countries, even in wealthy first-tier universities with the resources to employ well-qualified staff if they chose to do so, foreign LT is often carried out by tenure-line faculty members, and (more often) temporary lecturers and teaching assistants (TAs), who are literature specialists, with little or no training, expertise or interest in LT, which they often look down upon as a second-class occupation. This would be roughly equivalent to employing biologists to care for the sick, or geologists to design houses – something that does not happen because the expertise required is different and medicine and architecture are professions. Would it were that language learners were as well protected as hospital patients and those with a roof over their heads.

reason is simple. I developed my initial ideas for (upper case) TBLT in courses at the University of Pennsylvania from 1980 to 1982, and first presented them publicly in a plenary talk at the Georgetown Round Table in Washington, D.C., in 1983. The paper subsequently appeared in print as Long (1985a). As so often happens in applied linguistics, however, it was not long before the original proposals were diluted, changed beyond recognition in some cases, and repackaged in a form more acceptable to the powerful political and commercial interests that exert enormous influence over the way LT is conducted worldwide.³

As described in detail in subsequent chapters, TBLT starts with a task-based needs analysis to identify the *target tasks* for a particular group of learners – what they need to be able to *do* in the new language. In other words, ‘task’ in TBLT has its normal, non-technical meaning. Tasks are the real-world activities people think of when planning, conducting, or recalling their day. That can mean things like brushing their teeth, preparing breakfast, reading a newspaper, taking a child to school, responding to e-mail messages, making a sales call, attending a lecture or a business meeting, having lunch with a colleague from work, helping a child with homework, coaching a soccer team, and watching a TV program. Some tasks are mundane, some complex. Some require language use, some do not; for others, it is optional. (For more details on definitions and types of tasks, see Chapter 5, Section 5.5.1.)

After undergoing some modifications, the tasks are used as the content of a *task syllabus*, which consists of a series of progressively more complex *pedagogic tasks*. Pedagogic tasks are the activities and the materials that teachers and/or students work on in the classroom or other instructional environment. ‘Task’ is the unit of analysis throughout the design, implementation, and evaluation of a TBLT program, including the way student achievement is assessed – by *task-based, criterion-referenced performance tests*. TBLT is an *analytic* approach, with a *focus on form* (see Chapter 2).

In sharp contrast, by the late 1990s, “TBLT” (lower case) as manifested in commercially published pedagogic textbooks and some handbooks for teachers involved “classroom tasks” – often little more than activities and exercises relabeled as tasks (another example of the meaning of a construct being diluted in applied linguistics) – usually unrelated to students’ real-world activities beyond the classroom. These counterfeit “tasks” are used to practice structures (see, e.g., Fotos & Ellis 1991), functions or sub-skills in a traditional grammatical, notional-functional, or skills-based syllabus delivered using linguistically simplified materials, with classroom methodology to match, that is, what I call *focus on forms*. Role-playing a job interview, for example, might be chosen not because job interviews in the L2 were target tasks for a group of learners but because they provided opportunities for practicing question forms. Skehan (an advocate of genuine TBLT) refers to such activities as “structure-trapping” tasks. Ellis (1997) refers to them as “consciousness-raising” tasks or “focused” tasks (Ellis 2003, p. 141).

The syllabus in (lower case) tblt is not task-based at all in the sense understood in (upper case) TBLT; in other words; it is an overt or covert linguistic (usually a gram-

³ The tendency to dilute the meaning of new terms and the constructs behind them is a long-standing affliction in applied linguistics. For example, 30+ years after it originated in England in the work of Brumfit, Johnson, Morrow, and others (e.g., Brumfit & Johnson 1979), what is meant today by ‘communicative LT’? The term originally had a fairly precise meaning. Nowadays, it can simply refer to a lesson taught mostly in the L2, even if what is said has nothing to do with genuine communication. “TBLT,” “task,” “learner-centered,” “recast,” and “focus on form,” as we shall see, are among many other casualties.

matical) syllabus, and the syllabus, methodology, materials, and tests are what Wilkins (1974) called *synthetic*, not analytic. In what Ellis (2003, p. 65) and others refer to as *task-supported*, as distinct from task-based, LT, “focused tasks” are used for the final “produce” stage of a traditional present–practice–produce (sic.) (PPP) approach, with an overt or covert grammatical syllabus. Task-supported LT has its champions and is worthy of consideration – perhaps, as suggested, for example, by Shehadeh (2005), as a bridge between traditional synthetic syllabi and genuine task-based approaches – but is still a synthetic approach. Synthetic approaches may turn out to be useful, at least in part (although, as explained in Chapter 2, the evidence is currently against them), but what is gained by blurring the original meaning of (in this case) ‘task-based’ until it denotes something quite different, and indeed, opposed to the original meaning of the term?

In fact, it is not hard to see what is gained and by whom. Synthetic approaches, especially grammatical syllabuses, are palatable to commercial publishers and various politically powerful LT institutions because they are what underlie at least 90% of existing, commercially highly successful textbooks sold around the world. Synthetic approaches, including ones that employ structure-trapping tasks, do not entail any fundamental change to the status quo. A true TBLT course, conversely, requires an investment of resources in a needs analysis and production of materials appropriate for a particular population of learners. Textbook series based on a structural syllabus, on the other hand, featured in what publishers refer to euphemistically as their “international list,” can continue to be sold around the world to learners of all sorts, however unjustified that may be, on the grounds that they teach “the structures of a language,” which are “the same for everyone.” This results in enormous profits for authors and publishers alike. With a few exceptions, true task-based materials will rarely have such commercial potential precisely because they are not designed for all learners and do not assume that what all learners need is the same.

Lower case ‘task-based,’ that is, task-supported, approaches (see, e.g., Ellis 1997, 2003; Nunan 1996, 2004; Willis & Willis 2007) have merits, including their location within the existing comfort zone of most teachers, state education authorities, and publishers, which can make them more acceptable, and so more likely to be adopted, in the short term (and possibly in the long run, as well, as discussed in Chapter 12). They may eventually turn out to be optimal, in fact, but as should be obvious, they are not genuinely task-based, so will not constitute a major focus of this book, which, for better or for worse, is about (upper case) TBLT. How does TBLT measure up against the proposed minimum criteria for a new approach to LT?

1.3. A Rationale for TBLT

1.3.1. Consistency with SLA theory and research findings

An approach to LT should be psycholinguistically plausible. This means that it should rely on learning mechanisms and processes shown to be available to learners of a given age while at the same time recognizing any known constraints on their learning capacity. The tacitly assumed theoretical underpinnings of all synthetic approaches to LT (grammatical, notional-functional and lexical syllabuses, audio-lingual, grammar-translation,

and total physical response “methods,” etc.) are what are known as skill-building theories of various kinds (see, e.g., DeKeyser 2007a,b; Gatbonton & Segalowitz 1988; Johnson 1996; Segalowitz 2003). Skill-building theories hold that only younger learners, and in some cases, only children younger than seven, can learn a language incidentally, that is, without intending to do so and without awareness of doing so. When it comes to LT for older children and adults (usually envisaged as in the mid-teens and thereafter), therefore, they accord dominant status to explicit learning and explicit instruction. The claim is that language learning is like learning any other complex cognitive skill. Declarative knowledge (knowledge *that* a language works this or that way) is changed through controlled practice into procedural knowledge (knowledge *how*), after which the procedural knowledge is gradually automatized through massive practice, the speed-up process reflecting the power law of learning. Automatization is necessary, as skill builders acknowledge that real-time communicative language use depends on a listener’s or speaker’s ability to access linguistic knowledge far too rapidly to permit conscious retrieval of declarative knowledge from long-term memory. Rightly or wrongly, such approaches are sometimes referred to as being based upon the *strong-interface* position, which holds that what starts as explicit knowledge “becomes” implicit through practice, or else becomes automatized to such a degree that it becomes accessible sufficiently rapidly to appear to have become implicit, even though that is not the case.

In contrast, TBLT invokes a symbiotic *combination of implicit and explicit learning* that theory and research findings in several fields, including SLA, show are available to students of all ages. The availability of both of these processes, albeit a somewhat reduced capacity for *instance learning* (e.g., the capacity for learning new lexical items and collocations, and for purely incidental learning of form–meaning relationships – see Chapter 3), generally fits well with what is known about adult learning, including adult language learning. The basic tenets of TBLT are motivated by, and broadly consistent with, the past 40 years of SLA research findings, sketched briefly in Chapter 2, and with the embryonic cognitive-interactionist theory of instructed second language acquisition (ISLA) outlined in Chapter 3. Conversely, as explained in Chapters 2 and 3, the strong-interface position is *inconsistent* with the evidence of 40 years of SLA research; that is, it is psycholinguistically implausible.

As with any theory, the embryonic cognitive-interactionist theory goes beyond the data in hand, so may eventually turn out to be wrong, wholly or in part, thereby undermining the validity of parts of TBLT. That is the nature of theories, which by definition go beyond the facts in an attempt to fill in the gaps in our knowledge and, more importantly, seek to explain the facts we think have been established. Meanwhile, however, unlike LT approaches and “methods” with no theoretical or research basis, including so-called eclectic methods (an oxymoron), TBLT is a coherent approach and, because it is grounded in a theory and in research findings in SLA, has at least a chance of being correct.

As will become apparent in subsequent chapters, many additional research findings in SLA, educational psychology, language testing, and applied linguistics are drawn upon to justify specific aspects of the design, delivery, and evaluation of TBLT programs. For example, as detailed in Chapter 10, well-documented processability constraints on the effectiveness of instruction (e.g., Pienemann 1984, 1989; Pienemann & Kessler 2011, 2012), including negative feedback (e.g., Mackey 1999), are taken into account in the area of TBLT’s (currently, ten) *methodological principles* (MPs), in the form of respect

for the internal learner syllabus and developmental processes (MP 8) and respect for individual differences via the individualization of instruction (MP 10). Similarly, as acknowledged in Chapter 11, much of the accumulated wisdom in the literatures on criterion-referenced performance testing and program evaluation is drawn upon in TBLT's approach to the assessment of student learning and the evaluation of TBLT programs.

1.3.2. Basis in philosophy of education

TBLT's philosophical roots lie in *l'education integrale* and the rich educational tradition found in the writings of William Godwin, Sebastien Faure, Paul Robin, Leon Tolstoy, Peter Kropotkin, Elias Puig, Francisco Ferrer y Guardia, and others, and in the practice of the so-called modern schools (*escuelas modernas*) established in many countries in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries (see, e.g., Suissa 2006). Consciously or not, fundamental principles developed by these theorists and practitioners have been adopted by progressive philosophers of education ever since, often without adequate recognition. They live on in the work of John Dewey, Ivan Illich, John Holt, Colin Ward, and many others, as well as in the growing number of participatory democratic educational projects around the world. The principles are ones to which most language teachers and students subscribe in their everyday lives – principles that need not be forgotten in the classroom. They include educating the whole person, learning by doing, rationalism, free association, learner-centeredness, egalitarian teacher–student relationships, and participatory democracy. Interestingly, the implications of these philosophical principles and those of TBLT's psycholinguistic underpinnings converge in most cases. The details, and their realization in TBLT, will be spelt out in Chapter 4.

1.3.3. Accountability

With the world's population growing as fast as the planet's wealth and natural resources are shrinking, the era of the free ride is over. Accountability is fast becoming a watchword in publically funded federal, state, and local services, from policing and firefighting to transportation and health care – in most fields, in fact, outside politics and banking. Public education is a favorite target among politicians needing to balance budgets, and foreign and second language programs are among the two or three most vulnerable curricular areas. Demands for accountability in education often come with sanctions attached. Examples include state and federal government funding for schools tied to various dimensions of school performance, moves to evaluate in-service teachers on the basis of student test scores and then to dismiss staff deemed ineffective (often without taking into consideration the fact that they work in schools with high proportions of “at risk” and disadvantaged children), and at the university level, post-tenure review.

If a current educational system cannot deliver, or even if it can simply be *asserted* that a current system cannot deliver, with rebuttals either not provided or provided but not heard due to lack of media access, then one or both of two things happen. First, the “service,” for example, second language classes for migrant workers, bilingual education for their children, or foreign LT in schools and universities, is reduced or even

eliminated from budgets entirely. Second, consumers financially able to do so vote with their feet, moving their children to the private sector or to so-called charter schools and academies of various kinds. Paradoxically, many of those supposedly superior institutions⁴ are publically funded and often tout their foreign language curricula as a selling point. Alternatively, as adults, students may enter the world of for-profit language schools, private teachers, and expensive self-study courses, some of which lure naive customers with claims of dubious validity: “A foreign language, your gateway to the world,” “Arabic in ten days!” Customers’ hopes and bank balances are hit hard, but wild claims of that kind from segments of the private language sector are increasingly under scrutiny, too. Better late than never, large clients, for example, federal governments, which have long handed over massive sums of taxpayers’ money annually to businesses and private vendors of language services and courses of questionable quality, have begun to commission evaluations of what they have been purchasing, leading in some cases to the long overdue cancellation of multimillion dollar contracts.

1.3.4. Relevance

Against this background, and since languages are widely regarded as less critical than mathematics, science or (L1) language arts, it is vital for second and foreign language programs to be well motivated, well designed, and successful. Needs analysis is an essential prerequisite for all three. It is important, however, not only that, objectively, programs be designed rationally but also that their relevance and value be obvious to stakeholders, starting with the students. Learning a new language requires time, effort, and resources (far more than the vendors of most commercial programs claim) on the part not only of the individuals and institutions involved in providing the instruction but also of the learners themselves and their sponsors. The older those learners are, the more likely they are to have a clear goal in mind when they register for a course. A one-size-fits-all approach, using pedagogic materials written with no particular learners or learning purposes in mind, is as unacceptable in LT as it is in other domains.

Before investing in developing new products, manufacturers conduct research to identify gaps in the market – exactly what it is that consumers need or want and will purchase – so they can be sure the investment will be profitable. Since the same household furniture or automobile will rarely appeal to all consumers, whose tastes, preferences, and requirements vary, products are designed for specific groups. Physicians do not prescribe the same medicine to all patients. They would be sued if they did. They first conduct an individual diagnosis (the medical equivalent of a needs analysis), often involving a battery of increasingly specialized tests, and then prescribe a course of treatment designed specifically for that patient, or for all patients with the complaint or condition in question. The same is true of purveyors of most services, be they architects, carpenters, plumbers, painters, travel agents, hairdressers, or restaurateurs. Vast amounts of research underlie most of the products and services offered, as does quality control.

Education is one of the few areas where the one-size-fits-all approach survives, in the form of state education, especially when beholden to centralized, mandated curricula and so-called “standards.” But even there, things are changing. The private sector offers

⁴ The superiority is a myth. See, for example, Ravitch (2010).

a variety of educational alternatives, such as academies and charter schools, for those able and willing to pay for them, and magnet programs and other specialized curricular offerings are increasingly common within regular state systems, each appealing to particular groups. When it comes to language education, adults increasingly do not expect to have to waste time and money learning things they do not need or not learning things they do need. They have a right to expect language courses, like medical treatments, to be relevant and, ideally, to be designed just for them or, at the very least, for learners like them. That is why, to be rational, relevant, and successful, language course development should begin with an identification of learners' goals and an analysis of their present or future communicative needs to achieve those goals.

The growing demand for accountability and the need for relevance are closely related. Mass-marketing of off-the-peg courses suitable for everyone, but for no one in particular, benefit authors' and publishers' bank balances, but they do little for the end user. Language learning requires a huge investment of time, effort, and money on the part of students and, in many cases, their parents or employers. With the need for new languages so crucial for so many, more and more learners, especially college students and young adults, are reluctant to accept courses that were clearly not designed to meet their needs. "General-purpose" (nebulous or no purpose) courses may teach too much, e.g., all four skills, when learners may only need, say, listening, listening and speaking, or reading abilities, and/or too little, e.g., nothing comparable to the content and complexity of the tasks and materials with which learners will have to deal or the discourse domain in which they will have to operate. The same "generic" course is no more likely to be appropriate for everyone, much less efficient and effective, than the same medical treatment, the same dwelling, or the same food will be appropriate. People's language needs, like their other needs, differ, often greatly, and, as repeatedly revealed by the results of needs analyses (see Chapters 5–7), almost always far more extensively from one group to another, and from typical textbook fare, than an outsider would ever anticipate if relying on intuition.

A course that bypasses needs analysis and simply teaches "English," "Spanish," "Chinese," or "Arabic" risks wasting everybody's time by covering varieties of the target language, skills, genres, registers, discourse types, and vocabulary that students do not need, at least not immediately, and by not covering the often specialized target tasks (not necessarily the specialized language itself) that they do need. In attempting to cater to the majority, the course will often be slow-paced and over-inclusive in both the skills and the linguistic domains treated, covering linguistic features "because they are there," as an end in themselves rather than as a communicative tool.

Many learners in FL settings have to be able to read specialized literature in their field, for example, but rarely hear or speak the L2, and never write it. Others require listening and speaking skills, e.g., for tourism, but minimal reading or writing ability. Similarly, *within* a skill area, some learners may wish to be able to comprehend informal colloquial Spanish for a vacation in Madrid, while others may need to be able to understand spoken Spanish in order to follow a lecture series on anthropology at a Mexican university. The variety of Spanish and the genres, registers, and lexis involved in each case will differ considerably, as will the predictability of what is said, the average grammatical complexity of the input, the degree of planning, speed of delivery, the use of idiomatic expressions, visual support, environmental noise, and, last but not least, the background knowledge that the non-native speaker (NNS) brings to the task. (The

lecture series may well be easier for the anthropology student than the street Spanish for the tourist.) In a language like Arabic, the spoken variety students require will vary significantly according to the region in which they will be working – Levantine, Egyptian colloquial, North African, or Gulf Arabic, for example. It is literacy that makes Arabic (Chinese, Japanese, and many other languages) so hard and time-consuming for learners whose L1 employs a different writing system. Unless students will need to be able to read and/or write the language, mastering Modern Standard Arabic (MSA, the very different formal variety used for most writing, but for little but the most formal speaking), may be unnecessary, yet most Arabic courses begin with MSA whether learners need it or not, and some begin and end with it.⁵ A task-based needs analysis can help avoid such shocking wastes of time and money.

1.3.5. Avoidance of known problems with existing approaches

A new approach to LT needs to avoid its predecessors' known problems. To illustrate, as explained in Chapter 2, the fundamental problem with existing approaches is that the vast majority employ a linguistic unit of analysis and "interventionist" *synthetic* syllabuses and "methods," that is, *focus on forms*, and most of the remainder employ extreme "non-interventionist," *analytic* syllabuses and "methods," such as the Natural Approach (Krashen & Terrell 1983), that rely on a pure *focus on meaning*. One of several problems with purely synthetic approaches is their incompatibility with "natural" language-learning processes. One of several problems with purely analytic approaches is their inefficient, and often ineffective, treatment of learners' persistent grammatical errors and their inadequacy for older learners, whose reduced capacity for purely incidental learning makes supplementary opportunities for intentional learning necessary. It is necessary to address such errors, and to do so in a timely fashion – an issue largely ignored by purely analytic approaches, which eschew "error correction" and any focus on language as object and rely, instead, on provision of additional positive evidence, e.g., more comprehensible input, for the purpose. That is a strategy now proven to be both inefficient and inadequate, as detailed in Chapter 2. TBLT's solution is to employ an analytic (task) syllabus, but with a *focus on form* to deal with problematic linguistic features, and provision of opportunities for intentional learning to speed up the learning process and to supplement the adult's weaker capacity for incidental learning, especially instance learning. MP 6: Focus on form, and MP 7: Provide negative feedback, for example, are two of TBLT's 10 MPs (see Chapter 10), each with numerous realizations in the form of classroom *pedagogic procedures*, which combine to fulfill the purpose while avoiding a return to the equally flawed *focus on forms*.

Avoidance of known problems does not mean that a new approach to LT will entail rejecting everything that has gone before. Thus, of its 10 MPs, only 3 – MP 1: Use task, not text, as the unit of analysis; MP 3: Elaborate input; and MP 6: Focus on form – are original to TBLT. In different combinations, some of the other seven have characterized a number of approaches over the years. It would be counterproductive not to build on

⁵ For an innovative beginner's course that starts with colloquial spoken (Levantine) Arabic, see Younes (2006).

what has come before, which can mean, with due recognition of sources, judiciously adopting or adapting positive features of alternative approaches.

1.3.6. Learner-centeredness

Learner-centeredness has long been extolled as a virtue in the LT literature. While serious work on individual differences, including affective factors, has been published over the years (see, e.g., Dornyei 2005; Robinson 2002a), their treatment at the level of pedagogy has usually been at a rather superficial level. Teachers are typically encouraged to employ pedagogic procedures likely to create a positive classroom climate. They should praise learners' achievements, for example, respond to errors with sympathy rather than face-threatening negative feedback, and employ games and other activities that make students feel good about themselves and their teacher and vice versa. In other words, the focus has been firmly on the affective domain: "Love your students and they will learn." Few would oppose making the learning experience as pleasant as possible for all concerned, but even such an apparently innocuous statement may deserve qualification. There is some evidence, after all, that a certain degree of tension, or classroom anxiety, can have a positive effect on learning (Scovel 1978), probably because it activates a process known to be critical for language learning: attention.

In TBLT, real learner-centeredness, as distinct from rhetorical hand-waving and everyone just getting along, is addressed first and foremost in the cognitive domain. To begin with, course content is not determined by a multimillionaire textbook writer sipping martinis a thousand miles away on a beach in the Cayman Islands but by a locally conducted analysis of learner needs. Second, attention to language form is reactive, in harmony with the learner's internal syllabus. Third, *teachability* is recognized as being constrained by *learnability*. Fourth, to the extent logistical constraints allow (time, money, student and teacher numbers, access to technology, etc.), individual differences are catered to through the individualization of instruction. The relevance of course content to students' communicative needs and respect for individual differences and underlying psycholinguistic processes is more important for language learning than everyone feeling good about themselves. Students can still be treated with as much delicacy and charm as typically overworked, underpaid teachers can muster, but superficial affective considerations pale in importance for students compared with the self-respect that comes from being treated as rational human beings, associating voluntarily and playing an active role in their own progress in a learner-centered, egalitarian classroom.

1.3.7. Functionality

College students and adults are often attempting to learn a language for the second, third, or fourth time, the results of their earlier efforts having been unsuccessful. They are more likely to recognize the "same, again" when it is served up lightly reheated, and to be more quickly disenchanted this time around. Many college students and most adults, whether voluntary or involuntary learners, require *functional* language abilities, be they for academic, occupational, vocational, or social survival purposes, that they

lacked when they were younger, and in general terms, at least, they are more likely to be aware of those needs. They are quicker to spot the irrelevance of generic, structurally based courses in which culturally distant cardboard characters exchange mindless pleasantries about each other's clothing or things they see during a walk in the park. Conversely, in my own experience and that of teachers in other TBLT programs (see Chapter 11), the same students respond immediately and positively to materials and teaching that treat them like adults and have clearly been designed to cater specifically to their communicative needs. TBLT, like any approach that hopes to be successful, must be perceived by students to be enjoyable, intellectually stimulating (even at low proficiency levels), and as LT that works for them.

As will become clear, TBLT meets all the above criteria. This does not mean that it is the best approach to LT, or even a good one. That is a judgment call, based on the plausibility of its theoretical underpinnings and on the research to back it up, including evaluations of its effectiveness. Moreover, other approaches may meet the criteria, too, in which case the judgment will be one of TBLT's and other approaches' *relative effectiveness*. Finally, the criteria themselves may be unsatisfactory or incomplete.

1.4. Summary

Second and foreign language learning affect the educational life chances of millions of learners the world over, and many different types of learners. This book is about an approach to LT that attempts to meet their diverse psycholinguistic and communicative needs. It is about (upper case) TBLT, as distinct from (lower case) "task-based" approaches that, in *task-supported* LT, merely use pedagogic tasks to carry an overt or covert linguistic syllabus of some kind or, in a few cases, to deliver a topical, situational, or content syllabus. Given the importance of language learning to so many, it is essential that an approach to LT meet certain minimum standards. It should be consistent with theory and research findings on how people learn languages, and it should embody progressive social values. Five other criteria considered critical are accountability, relevance, avoidance of known problems with existing approaches, learner-centeredness, and functionality. Subsequent chapters will attempt to show how TBLT measures up against all seven criteria.

1.5. Suggested Readings

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Chapter 2

SLA and the Fundamental LT Divide

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2.1. Interventionist and Non-Interventionist Positions

Historical surveys by Fotos (2005), Howatt (1984), Kelly (1969), Musumeci (1997, 2009), Titone (1968) and others have shown that while varying and overlapping at the level of individuals and geographic regions at any one time, the practice of language teaching (LT) over the centuries has swung back and forth between interventionist and non-interventionist positions, between an emphasis on form and on meaning, and between the linguistic code and the learning process. Changes in the twentieth and twenty-first century have often reflected paradigm shifts in philosophy, linguistics, or psychology, but rarely new empirical findings about LT itself. Since the 1960s, the two major orientations have existed side by side. In the past few decades, views held simultaneously by different camps on the effects and effectiveness of instruction have diverged markedly, with proposals running the gamut from *laissez faire* to ball and chain. Teachers and learners have achieved a great deal through the use of all sorts of approaches and “methods.” However, while not the only source of relevant data, I believe second language acquisition (SLA) research findings provide important evidence against both

traditional options and in favor of a third, an analytic approach with a focus on form, the one that underlies TBLT.

2.1.1. Interventionist positions

Over the past 60 years, at one end of the spectrum, influenced by structural linguistics and neo-behaviorist psychology, a variety of strongly “interventionist” positions have been advocated by Asher (1981), Brooks (1964), Curran (1976), R. Ellis (1993), Fries (1945), Gattegno (1972), Harmer (1998), Lado (1957, 1964), Lado and Fries (1958), Paulston (1970, 1971), Paulston and Bruder (1976), Politzer (1960, 1961, 1968), Prator (1979), Rivers (1964), Stockwell, Bowen, and Martin (1965), and Swan (2005, 2006), among many others. Despite mostly trivial surface differences in appearance, all these LT approaches and “methods” interfere with what, left alone, might resemble *somewhat* the way young children acquire their native language (successfully). Intervention starts with the language to be taught, and involves such practices as dividing it into bite-size linguistic units of one kind or another (sounds, words, collocations, structures, notions, functions, etc.), presenting them to learners one at a time, and practicing them intensively using pattern drills and exercises, with errors “corrected,” before moving on to the next item.¹

Such views are reflected in almost all mass-produced, commercially published LT materials. This has less to do with their validity than with the fact that “grammar-based” materials are easier to write and simpler to use. Given that in some parts of the world, many language teachers are non-native speakers whose own command of the target language is weak, structurally controlled and sequenced “tramline” materials are understandably popular. It is easier to fall back on the L1 and to stay one rehearsed structure or vocabulary item ahead of the students when working through a mechanical textbook exercise, i.e., to engage in what I refer to as “language-like” behavior, than to conduct a lesson in the target language, using it communicatively and spontaneously, reacting to linguistic problems as they arise, and thereby, to the learner’s “internal syllabus.” In fact, little but the covers, artwork, and supporting technology for commercial textbooks has changed much in 60 years, and little is likely to change as long as authors and large publishers continue to make vast sums of money from selling millions of copies annually that are based on grammatical syllabi and thinly disguised variants of drill and kill.

Because the grammar of a language does not change much, some pedagogues (often textbook writers, themselves) have periodically tried to justify pervasive use of the same off-the-shelf series to “teach the language” by asserting that “the grammar is the same for everyone.” This is to ignore the fact, however, that while grammatical structures may

¹ “Correction” appears in scare quotes because, as any experienced teacher knows, what deviant student output often triggers in such classrooms is not correction, but *negative feedback* of more or less overt kinds, provision of which is an illocutionary act. The information the feedback contains may or may not be incorporated by the learner, assuming it is noticed at all, and when it does happen, immediate production of the target version may simply be echoic, and contrary to the way it is often interpreted by novice teachers, not indicate a lasting change to the learner’s underlying grammar. Correction, conversely, is a perlocutionary act, implying that just such a modification of the grammar is achieved by the teacher’s move.

not change very much, their uses do, a lot (see Chapter 7). The “one-size-fits-all” assertion ignores serious differences in language use corresponding to differences in learner needs and abilities. One wonders if those making such assertions believe the same ready-made clothes are suitable for everyone, or the same drug or medical treatment is good for everyone, no matter their size or what ails them.

Interventionist approaches assume the validity of what in SLA has come to be called the *strong interface* position. On this view, explicit learning and explicit instruction are paramount, and explicit knowledge (knowledge of a language that learners are aware they possess) can, in some versions of the position, supposedly be converted into implicit knowledge. In others (e.g., DeKeyser 2007a), through practice, declarative knowledge (knowledge that) is turned into procedural knowledge (knowledge how), and through further massive practice, automatized, sometimes to such a level that it is sufficient to pass as implicit knowledge (knowledge learners have, but do not know they have), which they deploy automatically. We will return to the questionable validity of the strong interface position, and the more likely roles of explicit and implicit learning, in Chapter 3.

2.1.2. Non-interventionist positions

At the other extreme have been “non-interventionist” positions of the kinds espoused during the last 60 years by Corder (1967), R. Ellis (1985), Felix (1985), Krashen (1985), Krashen and Terrell (1983), Newmark (1966, 1971), Newmark and Reibel (1968), Prabhu (1987), Reibel (1969, 1971), and Wode (1981), among others. While differing somewhat among themselves, members of the second group were often influenced by the growing hegemony of special nativist (Chomskyan) linguistics. Frequently noted were reports from SLA researchers in the 1960s and 1970s of L2 learners’ common errors and error types, developmental sequences largely impervious to instruction, and a so-called “natural order” of morpheme accuracy (cf. acquisition), all of which were interpreted as evidence of the continued workings of the language acquisition device (LAD), supposedly used for L1A, and of a relatively minor role for L1 transfer. Also apparently consistent with such views were the findings of large-scale comparative methods studies (see Chapter 11) – notably, in the USA, the Pennsylvania Project (P. Smith 1970) and the Colorado Project (Scherer & Wertheimer 1964), and in Sweden, the Gume project (Levin 1972; Oskarsson 1972, 1973; Von Elek & Oskarsson 1972) – which appeared to show only short-term effects or no effect for instructional method or approach, and by implication, the irrelevance of type of instruction (another interpretation that turned out to be wrong).

Adult SLA was claimed by those in the *laissez faire* group to be much like L1A, with older learners by implication assumed to retain the child’s capacity for incidental learning – learning a language, without awareness of doing so or intention to learn, while doing something else, e.g., playing, or studying a content subject through the medium of the L2. Explicit learning and teaching were marginalized or proscribed altogether. On this account, the role of instruction is not to tamper with the language itself, but to focus on the learners, providing students with plentiful access to comprehensible samples of the L2 and opportunities to use it for communication. As Krashen put it, the role of the teacher was to recreate in the classroom the conditions that had made L1A so successful, and to let the innate human capacity for (implicit) language learning,

or in his terms, the *acquisition* process, run its natural course. The instructional counterpart of this position became known as the Natural Approach (Krashen & Terrell 1983).

Non-interventionist approaches rest on the *non-interface* position. On this view, pure incidental learning underlies implicit knowledge, explicit and implicit learning are separate processes, and explicit and implicit knowledge are separate systems, stored in different areas of the brain. Explicit L2 knowledge, or in Krashen's terms, *learning*, i.e., (the narrower) conscious knowledge of simple L2 grammar rules, cannot "become" implicit (see, e.g., Krashen & Scarcella 1979). At most, when the learner has sufficient time, knows the rule, and is focused on language as object, it can be used to monitor and edit spoken and written production. These conditions are met in very few cases, e.g., on a discrete-point grammar test, so conscious knowledge of a L2 is not very useful. Most communicative language use depends fundamentally on implicit knowledge, or in Krashen's terms, *acquisition*.

Disagreements resulting from these two conflicting positions remain strong in LT circles to this day. They underlie arguments over such matters as the relative merits of deductive and inductive teaching, the need, or not, for a grammatical syllabus or for linguistically "simplified" teaching materials, the usability of explicit grammar rules, the value of intensive, linguistically focused drills, the relative effectiveness of overt and covert negative feedback, the utility (or, according to some, the uselessness) of "error correction," and so on. They reflect a long-standing division over whether the appropriate starting point in LT is the language or the learner, or, in terms of the important distinction made by Wilkins (1974 and elsewhere), between *synthetic* and *analytic* approaches.

2.2. Synthetic and Analytic Approaches to LT

2.2.1. Synthetic approaches

'Synthetic' and 'analytic' refer to the learner's presumed role in the learning process. A *synthetic approach* begins by focusing on the *language* to be taught, dividing it into linguistic units of one or more kinds – words, collocations, grammar rules, sentence patterns, notions and functions, and so on – sequencing them according to one or more criteria – valency, criticality, frequency, saliency, and (intuitively defined) difficulty – and presenting items to the learner one by one. Timing is determined by where a teacher is "up to" in the pre-set syllabus, not where the learners are "up to" in terms of developmental readiness, i.e., L2 processing capacity. The learner's job is to *synthesize* the items for communicative purposes.

The synthetic approach typically employs a lexical, grammatical, or notional-functional syllabus, or some "hybrid" combination thereof, and in theory, at least, such teaching "methods" as Grammar Translation, the Audio-Lingual Method, the Silent Way, or Total Physical Response.² Assuming a central role for explicit instruction

² 'Method' is a convenient fiction, useful for discussions in "methods" courses. Research in general education by Shavelson and Stern (1981), and in foreign language classrooms by Swaffar, Arens, and Morgan (1982), shows that teachers plan, implement, and recall lessons at the classroom level in terms of activities or tasks, not methods.

and explicit learning, followed by proceduralization of declarative knowledge, and automatization of procedural knowledge, LT is conceptualized as a process of filling the learner's linguistic quiver one shiny new arrow at a time. The syllabus is delivered using linguistically controlled materials and pedagogic procedures suitable for intensive practice of target forms and constructions. The standard Presentation–Production–Practice (sic) (PPP) formula consists of student exposure to “simplified” dialogues and reading passages written using a limited vocabulary and “seeded” with the structure(s) of the day, intensive practice of the structure(s) via drills and written exercises, followed by gradually “freer practice” – in reality, usually pseudo-communicative language use. Lessons are primarily teacher-fronted. Courses typically cover all four skills, whether or not students need all four. Tasks are employed in some cases, but chiefly as an alternative vehicle for practicing the linguistic items on the day's menu, not because they relate to identified student needs to be able to perform such tasks outside the classroom. In synthetic approaches, the L2 is the *object* of instruction.

2.2.2. Analytic approaches

An *analytic approach* does the reverse. It starts with the *learner* and learning processes. Students are exposed to gestalt samples of the L2, as natural and authentic representations of target language communication as possible, and gradually engaged in genuinely communicative (or at least, meaningful) target language production. The learner's job is to *analyze* the input, and thereby to induce rules of grammar and use. There is no overt or covert linguistic syllabus. More attention is paid to message and pedagogy than to language, e.g., to ways of making L2 samples comprehensible, engaging learners with the input, and involving them in communication. The idea is that, much in the way children learn their L1, adults can best learn a L2 incidentally, through using it. Examples of analytic approaches include some immersion education programs, the procedural syllabus, some kinds of content-based LT, including some content and language integrated learning (CLIL), currently popular in parts of Europe and elsewhere, sheltered subject-matter teaching, and Krashen and Terrell's Natural Approach. In analytic approaches, the L2 is the *medium* of instruction.

Wilkins' terms, 'synthetic' and 'analytic,' were originally conceived as ways of classifying types of LT syllabi, but syllabi do not come in isolation. They are implemented using materials and pedagogic procedures suitable for the task at hand. Thus, synthetic syllabi typically rely on linguistically controlled reading passages and dialogues seeded with unnaturally high frequencies of whatever linguistic features and constructions are in focus in a given lesson, and a battery of drills, exercises, and linguistically focused tasks for intensive practice during the proceduralization and automatization phases. Classroom (or computer-mediated) language use is primarily mechanical and meaningful, rarely communicative (for the three-way distinction, see Paulston 1971), and then only during the final “practice” stage of a PPP lesson (see, e.g., Harmer 1998; Thornbury 1999). Pedagogic grammar rules and, especially in foreign language settings, recourse to the native language, including translation, are common options. Early student production is demanded, usually after minimal input (most notoriously in the Silent Way), with non-native-like performance the subject of “error correction.” The end-product is assessed via discrete-point tests of various kinds. LT that involves a combination of a synthetic syl-

labus, synthetic teaching materials, synthetic methodology and pedagogy, and synthetic language testing, where the content and focus of lessons and evaluation of student achievement are the forms themselves, I refer to as *focus on forms*.

Analytic syllabi, conversely, are generally implemented using spoken and written activities and texts, either genuine, i.e., originally designed for native speaker–native speaker (NS–NS) communication, not LT, or modified for L2 learners, chosen for their content, interest value, and comprehensibility. Classroom language use is predominantly meaningful or communicative, and rarely mechanical. Grammar rules, drills, and error correction are seldom, if ever, employed. However, especially when mandated by state school requirements, assessment is often similar to that used in synthetic programs. LT that involves a combination of an analytic syllabus, analytic teaching materials, and analytic pedagogy, where the content and focus of lessons is the message, subject matter, and communication, I refer to as *focus on meaning*.

The fact that such fundamentally contradictory approaches to LT can be defended and implemented simultaneously illustrates the extent to which the field is unaccountable to SLA theory and research findings or to evaluations of practice. Not just the approaches, but the underlying assumptions about how second and foreign languages are learned (let alone best learned), are mutually exclusive. They cannot possibly both be correct, and it is likely that neither is. I have argued for many years (see, e.g., Long 1991, 2000a; Long & Robinson 1998) that a pure focus on forms and a pure focus on meaning are to varying degrees *both* unsupported by research findings – each inadequate, albeit in different ways.

2.3. Problems with Synthetic Approaches and Focus on Forms

The basic problem with the synthetic approach and with *focus on forms* is the assumption that learners can and will learn what they are taught when they are taught it, and the further assumption that if learners are exposed to ready-made target versions of L2 structures, one at a time, then, after enough intensive practice, they will add the new target versions, one at a time, to their growing native-like repertoire (shiny new arrows). In other words, adult SLA is understood chiefly as a process of skill building. On this view, declarative knowledge (conscious knowledge *that*) is implanted first. Subsequently, via intensive use, it is gradually converted into qualitatively different, because analyzed and restructured, procedural knowledge (unconscious knowledge *how*), stored in long-term memory. During the conversion process, the former knowledge system is proceduralized, and then, through massive practice, automatized. Reflecting the power law of practice, performance moves from controlled to automatic processing, with increasingly faster access to, and more fluent control over, new structures achieved through intensive linguistically focused rehearsal (see, e.g., DeKeyser 2007a,b; Gatbonton & Segalowitz 1988; Johnson 1996; Paradis 2009; Segalowitz 2003, 2010). In the most successful (rather rare) cases, automatized procedural knowledge can be accessed so rapidly as to “pass” for implicit knowledge, although it no such thing.

Skill-building models sit uneasily with some rather obvious facts about language, and with 40 years of research findings on interlanguage (IL) development. To start, there are

very few grammatical features or constructions that can be taught in isolation, for the simple reason that most are inextricably inter-related. Producing English sentences with target-like negation, for example, requires control of word order, tense, and auxiliaries, in addition to knowing where the negator is placed. Learners cannot produce even simple utterances like “John didn’t buy the car” accurately without all of those. It is not surprising, therefore, that IL development of individual structures has very rarely been found to be sudden, categorical, or linear, with learners achieving native-like ability with structures one at a time, while making no progress with others. IL development just does not work like that. Accuracy in a given grammatical domain typically progresses in a zigzag fashion, with backsliding, occasional U-shaped behavior, over-suppliance and under-suppliance of target forms, flooding and bleeding of a grammatical domain (Huebner 1983), and considerable synchronic variation, volatility (Long 2003a), and diachronic variation. Advances in one area sometimes cause temporary declines in accuracy in another, e.g., because the increased processing demands created by control of a new feature result in diminished attentional resources being available elsewhere during production (Meisel, Clahsen, & Pienemann 1981). For example, a learner may produce third person -s accurately in simplex sentences (Melissa works in a bank.), but later fail to supply the -s when it is required in dependent clauses (*Peter said he play every Saturday.), i.e., in a syntactically more complex environment that makes more demands on processing capacity. The assumption implicit in synthetic syllabi and focus on forms is that learners can move from zero knowledge to native-like mastery of negation, the present tense, subject-verb agreement, conditionals, the subjunctive, relative clauses, or whatever, one at a time, produce utterances containing them accurately, and move on to the next item on a list. It is a fantasy.

This is not to deny that explicit instruction in a particular structure, even a complex one, can produce measurable learning. However, studies that have shown this, e.g., Day and Shapson (1994), Harley (1989), Lyster (1994), and Muranoi (2000), have usually devoted far more extensive periods of time to intensive practice of the targeted feature than is available in a typical course. Also, the few studies that have followed students who receive such instruction over time (e.g., Lightbown 1983) have found that once the pedagogic focus shifts to new linguistic targets, learners revert to an earlier stage on the normal path to acquisition of the structure they had supposedly mastered in isolation and “ahead of schedule.”

Far from being pliant organisms ready to be inculcated with new sets of language habits, L2 learners, both children and adults, are active, creative participants in the acquisition process. There is plenty of evidence of this. For example, ILs exhibit common patterns and common developmental stages, with only minor, predictable differences due to learner age, L1, acquisition context, or instructional approach. If structures could really be learned on demand, accuracy and acquisition sequences would reflect instructional sequences, but they do not. On the contrary, as demonstrated, for example, by Pica (1983) for English morphology by Spanish-speaking adults, by Lightbown (1983) for the present continuous *-ing* form by French-speaking children in Quebec being taught English as a second language (ESL) using the Lado English series, by Pavesi (1986) for relative clauses by children learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in Italy and Italian adults learning English naturalistically in Scotland, and by R. Ellis (1989) for English college students learning word order in

German as a foreign language, they are remarkably robust, regardless of different textbook presentation sequences, different classroom pedagogic foci, or whether learners receive instruction at all. As observed in communicative speech samples, rather than “language-like” performance on discrete-point tests, accuracy orders and developmental sequences found in instructed settings match those obtained for the same features in studies of naturalistic acquisition, although instruction can help speed up passage through those sequences.

While ILs are characterized by systematic and free variation, and no two ILs are exactly alike, the striking commonalities observed suggest powerful universal learning processes are at work, as in L1A. In SLA, they are reflected in many ways, including widely attested findings of common errors and error types (Pica 1983) and common interlingual forms and developmental stages (Ortega 2009; Zobl 1980, 1982), some of which appear to be universal. For instance, an initial pre-verbal (*Neg V*) negation stage appears in the ILs not just of speakers of L1s, like Spanish, with pre-verbal negation, in which case one could simply be looking at a case of L1 transfer, but in the ILs of L1 speakers of languages, such as Japanese or Turkish, that have post-verbal negation, even when the target language, e.g., Swedish, also has post-verbal negation (Hyltenstam 1977). The same non-target-like structures appear, regardless of the fact that they are never taught, and despite occasional temporary disturbances caused by teachers and textbooks providing intensive exposure to, and practice with, full native versions from the get-go (Lightbown 1983). The interlingual structures occur in fixed developmental sequences (Johnston 1985, 1997), the same sequences observed in naturalistic SLA, which studies have shown are impervious to instruction (R. Ellis 1989; Pienemann 1984, 1989, 2011). Outside the artificial confines of language-like behavior, such as a pattern drill, instruction cannot make learners skip a stage or stages and move straight to the full native version of a construction, even if it is exclusively the full native version that is modeled and practiced. Yet that is what should happen all the time if adult SLA were a process of explicit learning of declarative knowledge of full native models, their comprehension and production first proceduralized and then made fluent, i.e., automatized, through intensive practice. One might predict utterances with occasional missing grammatical features during such a process, but not the same sequences of what are often completely new, never-modeled interlingual constructions, and from all learners.

The learner’s powerful cognitive contribution is visible, too, in so-called “autonomous syntax.” As exemplified by the cases of pre-verbal negation described above, most transitional structures are not attested in the L1 or the L2 input, and certainly not practiced by teachers, but, again, created by the learners themselves. For instance, as first shown by Hyltenstam (1984), resumptive pronouns are often observed in the relative clauses of such learner utterances as *That is the man who he stole the car*, or *She is the woman who he loves her*. They are even produced, e.g., by Italian learners of English, when resumptive pronouns are found in neither the L1 nor the L2 (Pavesi 1986). The common error types, developmental sequences, and autonomous syntax documented by Hyltenstam, Pica, Pavesi, and many others are hard to account for, either in SLA theory or in classroom practice, if, as is the case in most classrooms the world over, students are drilled in exclusively standard target language forms, and learning is a process of proceduralizing native-like declarative knowledge. While practice has a role in automatizing

what has been learned, i.e., in improving *control* of an acquired form or structure, the data show that L2 *acquisition* is not simply a process of forming new habits to override the effects of L1 transfer; powerful creative processes are at work. In fact, despite the presentation and practice of full native norms in *focus-on-forms* instruction, ILs often stabilize far short of the target variety, with learners persistently communicating with non-target-like forms and structures they were never taught, and target-like forms and structures with non-target-like functions (Sato 1990). The stabilization is sometimes for such long periods that the non-target-like state is claimed to be permanent, i.e., indicating not just stabilization, but permanent linguistic rigor mortis, or fossilization (see Lardiere 2006; Han & Odlin 2005; Sorace 2003; White 2003a; and for an alternative view, Long 2003a).

From robust findings of these and other kinds over four decades, it is clear that *learners, not teachers, have most control over their language development*, and they do not move from ignorance to native-like command of new items in one step, however intensive and protracted the pedagogic focus on code features. Even a simple grammatical rule, like that for English plural, is not acquired suddenly and categorically, but appears to be the end result of a process that Pica (1983) showed starts as item-based learning, plural allomorphs initially occurring only with high frequency, invariant and partially frozen plurals (*scissors, shoes, stairs, etc.*), then moving on to measure words (*dollars, days, years, etc.*), before gradually spreading across noun phrases (NPs) in general. A study by Pishwa (1994) of the acquisition of German subject-verb agreement by 15 Swedish children, aged 7–12, covering 10 observations over 18 months, showed no abrupt restructuring of their IL system, but instead, the same gradual extension of the agreement rule from one structure to another, the sequence governed by the structures' complexity, as judged by their markedness.

IL development is regulated by common cognitive processes and what Corder (1967) referred to as the internal "learner syllabus," not the external linguistic syllabus embodied in synthetic teaching materials. At least with regard to constructions shown to be part of a developmental sequence (see Long & Sato 1984; Ortega 2009), students do not – in fact, cannot – learn (as opposed to learn about) target forms and structures on demand, when and how a teacher or a textbook decree that they should, but only when they are developmentally ready to do so. In Pienemann's terms, and as his classroom studies (Pienemann 1984, 1989; Pienemann & Kessler 2011) and those of others have demonstrated, *learnability*, i.e., what learners can process at any one time, determines *teachability*, i.e., what can be taught at any one time. The effectiveness of negative feedback on learner error has been shown to be constrained in the same way (Mackey 1999). Instruction can facilitate development, but needs to be provided with respect for the learner's powerful cognitive contribution to the acquisition process, and appropriately timed, in harmony with the internal learner syllabus.

Synthetic syllabi will almost always be embodied in pedagogic materials that were written without reference to students' present or future communicative needs, as identified via a thorough needs analysis, and so are inefficient. They risk teaching more skills, vocabulary, genres, and so on, than students can use, but also less, through not teaching language abilities they do or will need. They will also almost always have been prepared in ignorance of any particular group of students' current developmental stages, especially so if in the form of commercially published textbook materials, which are mass-produced for everyone, but for no one in particular. Moreover, as experienced teachers

know, and as shown, e.g., by the Pienemann (1984) study, learners within a class will often be at different developmental stages, even when labeled as having attained X or Y level of proficiency or having scored within a specified range on a placement test. Learners can achieve roughly similar overall proficiency and test scores despite strengths and weaknesses in different areas of their IL repertoires.

2.4. Problems with Analytic Approaches and Focus on Meaning

The analytic approach and *focus on meaning* have several advantages over their multiply flawed synthetic counterparts, but suffer from different problems. On the plus side, learners and teachers are no longer faced with trying to meet a psycholinguistically unrealistic timetable in the form of an externally imposed linguistic syllabus, and thereby with virtually guaranteed repeated failure. Liberated from the tight linguistic controls in most synthetic teaching materials and the unnatural classroom language use that accompanies their delivery, students are exposed to richer input and more realistic language models. In other words, the learning task for adults is not made more difficult than it already is by having to be accomplished using the impoverished input that classroom studies have shown characterize lessons with a focus on forms (see, e.g., Dinsmore 1985; Long & Sato 1983; Nunan 1987). Analytic lessons can be more interesting, motivation maintained, and attention held, as teachers and students are free to use the L2 to communicate about topics of interest – potentially, topics of relevance to meeting communicative needs beyond the classroom – instead of yet another memorable dialogue in which Dick and Jane ask and answer questions about the clothes they are wearing or the location of objects on a table visible to both. As evidenced most clearly by the results of French immersion programs in Canada, given enough time, very high levels of achievement are possible via some programs with a focus on meaning.

There are at least four problems, however. First, and most crucially, a pure analytic approach and focus on meaning assume that the capacity for implicit learning remains strong in adults. Yet even though implicit language learning is an option throughout the life span, for reasons detailed in Chapter 3, it is no longer as powerful a language-learning capacity as it was during early childhood. Were it fully intact, there would be plentiful cases of adults achieving abilities comparable to those of native speakers simply as a result of prolonged immersion in a L2 environment. Many have looked, but not a single such case has ever been documented. As demonstrated by Abrahamsson and Hyltenstam (2009), even the ILs of highly proficient speakers, judged to be natives on the basis of short speech samples, turn out to exhibit non-native-like features when scrutinized.

Second, implicit learning takes time, and LT needs to be efficient, not just minimally necessary and sufficient. Most classroom courses meet for just a few hours a week, and nothing approaching the virtually full-time L2 experience of the successful French immersion programs in Canada. In particular, L2 features that are of low saliency for one or more reasons, e.g., because infrequent, non-syllabic, string-internal, or communicatively redundant, may not even be either *noticed* or *detected* (see Chapter 3) in the input for a long time, if ever, unless learners' attention is drawn to them by a

teacher, by artfully crafted pedagogic materials, or by a helpful native speaker. A clear illustration of the role of attention direction in this process was Schmidt's failure to notice the imperfect suffix *-ia* [used to go] in his daily naturalistic exposure to Portuguese in Brazil until his teacher focused on it in a classroom lesson one day, whereupon he immediately began to notice *-ia* in the input outside the classroom, which he realized must have been there all along (Schmidt & Frota 1986, p. 279). Some theorists hold that *noticing* in Schmidt's sense (Schmidt 1990, and elsewhere), i.e., consciously attending to and detecting a form or form-meaning connection in the input, is the necessary first stage in the process of acquiring some features and form-meaning connections, especially if new and of low salience, and likely to speed up the acquisition of others.

Third, as a result of possessing a L1, learning from positive evidence alone will no longer suffice. As White (1987, 1991) has argued convincingly, this is important when retreat from an over-generalization is required in cases where the L1 and L2 are in a superset-subset relationship. English and French adverbs of frequency, for example, can appear in some of the same places in a sentence (I drink coffee *every day*/Je bois du café *tous les jours*), but not all. French also allows interruption of verb and direct object (Je bois *toujours* du café), whereas English does not (*I drink *every day* coffee.). English and French children can learn what their L1 allows in each case by exposure to the language in use, positive evidence. English-speaking adults can do the same when learning French as L2, encountering examples of the new option in the input. French- (Spanish-, Japanese-, etc.) speaking adult learners of English as L2, conversely, need to "unlearn" the SVAdvO option, grammatical in the L1, but illegal in the L2. That may never happen if the difference goes unnoticed. At the very least, it will take a long time, eventually occurring either as a case of attrition because of absence of support for the L1 pattern in the L2 input, or as a result of negative evidence, e.g., a teacher drawing students' attention to the problem. This is particularly important, White notes, in cases where retention of the ungrammatical L1 option causes no breakdown in communication, for that is precisely when negative feedback is less likely (A: *In France, when I was ten years old, I drank *every day* wine mix with water with my dinner. B: Really? So young!). Communication clearly having been achieved and the conversation moved on, A is unlikely to have noticed anything was wrong.

Fourth, a purely analytic approach ignores the substantial evidence that L2 instruction that also includes one or more types of attention to language works. It does not change the route of acquisition, e.g., developmental sequences, or acquisition processes, e.g., simplification, generalization, and regularization, but it does speed up acquisition and can improve the level of ultimate L2 attainment in some areas (Long 1983a, 1988). The jury is still out on optimal uses and timing of various kinds and combinations of instruction (explicit, implicit, focus on form, focus on forms, etc.), as well as how best to match type of instruction to students' language aptitude profiles (Vatz *et al.* 2013) and the classes of L2 features on which to expend most effort (Spada & Tomita 2010). However, there is overwhelming evidence that all these varieties of intervention can facilitate learning better than simple exposure to meaningful samples of the L2. For comparative reviews, see, e.g., De Graaff and Housen (2009), R. Ellis (2012), N. Ellis and Laporte (1997), Goo *et al.* (2009), Housen and Perriard (2005), Norris and Ortega (2000), and Spada (1997).

2.5. A Third Option: Analytic Approaches with a Focus on Form

Given the flaws and limitations of both focus on forms and focus on meaning, I have argued since the mid-1980s for a third option, which I call an analytic approach with a *focus on form* (see, e.g., Doughty & Long 2003; Doughty & Williams 1998a; Long 1988, 1991, 2009; Long & Robinson 1998). One of the original methodological principles (MPs) of TBLT (Long 1991, 2000a, 2009), *focus on form* involves *reactive* use of a wide variety of pedagogic procedures (PPs) to draw learners' attention to linguistic problems in context, as they arise during communication (in TBLT, typically as students work on problem-solving tasks), thereby increasing the likelihood that attention to code features will be synchronized with the learner's internal syllabus, developmental stage, and processing ability.³ Focus on form capitalizes on a symbiotic relationship between explicit and implicit learning, instruction, and knowledge.

As noted above, reliance on implicit learning from simple exposure, i.e., a pure focus on meaning, is inadequate, especially if advanced proficiency is the goal, and inefficient, due to the time required. Learner attention to problem areas of grammar, lexis, collocation, and so on, is needed in the interests of rate of acquisition and level of ultimate attainment. A purely implicit approach might not work with adults, especially with non-salient items, and would anyway take too long. However, to avoid a return to psycholinguistically indefensible lessons full of externally timed grammar rules, overt "error correction," and pattern drills, with all their nasty side effects, the idea is that as many of the problem areas as possible should be handled within otherwise communicative lessons by briefly drawing learners' attention to code features as and when problems arise. In this *reactive* mode (part of the *definition* of focus on form, not an optional feature), the learner's underlying psychological state is more likely to be optimal, and so the treatment, whatever PPs are employed, is more effective.

For example, while comparing car production in Japan and the USA as part of a *pedagogic task* designed to help students develop the ability to Deliver a sales report (the *target task*), a learner might say something like "Production of SUV in the United States fell by 30% from 2000 to 2004." If the very next utterance from a teacher or another student is a partial recast, in the form of a confirmation check, e.g., "Production of SUVs fell by 30%?" as proposed in Long (1996b), the likelihood of the learner noticing the plural *-s* is increased by the fact that he or she is *vested* in the exchange, so is *motivated* to learn what is needed and *attending* to the response, already knows the meaning he or she was trying to express, so has freed up *attentional resources* to devote to the form of the response, and hears the correct form in close juxtaposition to his or her own, facilitating *cognitive comparison*. These are all reasons why implicit corrective recasts are believed to work as well as they do, without disturbing the fundamental communicative focus of a lesson, and why negative feedback is believed to work better than provision of the same numbers of models of a target form and/or tokens in ambient input (positive evidence). In contrast, with *focus on forms*, the teacher or the textbook, not the student, has selected a form for treatment. The learner is less likely to feel a need to

³ See Chapter 10 for a full discussion of the distinction between methodological principles (MPs) and pedagogic procedures (PPs).

acquire the new item, and so will likely be less motivated, and less attentive. If the form is new, moreover, so, typically, will be its meaning and use, requiring the learner to process all three simultaneously. (We will return to these issues in more detail in Chapters 3 and 10.)

If a problematic form is considered tricky, perhaps because of L1 influence or low saliency, a more explicit brief switch of pedagogic focus by the teacher to the language itself, sometimes for just a matter of seconds, may be beneficial, e.g., “Car or cars?” In either case, and however overt the pedagogic procedure may be that the teacher employs to induce student focus on form, this reactive approach to treating (in the case of plural -s) a simple grammar point is operating in tandem with the learner’s internal syllabus, in that the focus on form was triggered by a problem that occurred in the student’s performance, not by a pre-set syllabus having prescribed it for that day’s lesson. A student’s attempt to produce a form is not always, but often, an indication of his or her developmental readiness to acquire it.

Learners’ attention often needs to be directed to linguistic issues – not only in response to error or communicative trouble, but by extending a learner’s repertoire as opportunities arise, e.g., by a teacher reformulating and extending already acceptable learner speech or writing. For example, in a discussion of great soccer players, an elementary-level student might say or write, “I think Xavi is a better player than Pirlo.” The teacher might respond with “You think Xavi is better than Pirlo, but do you think he’s the best midfielder ever?” The learner (and his or her classmates) is likely to be focused on the teacher’s response, given that it concerns something he or she has just said, and – because already partly familiar with the content of the message – has attentional resources available with which to focus on the switch from comparative to superlative forms.

In sum, rather than the limited binary choice offered by analytic and synthetic approaches, and by focus on forms and focus on meaning, it is clear that there are *three* major options in LT, depicted in Table 2.1.

2.6. A Role for Instructed Second Language Acquisition (ISLA) Research

Against this backdrop of fundamental disagreement in LT, one might expect theory and research in SLA to provide some help. After all, although most work in SLA has little

Table 2.1. Three major options in language teaching.

Options in Language Teaching		
Option 2 Analytic Focus on Meaning	Option 3 Analytic Focus on Form	Option 1 Synthetic Focus on Forms
Natural Approach Immersion, CLIL	TBLT Content-Based LT (?)	GT, ALM, Silent Way, TPR, etc.
Procedural Syllabus, etc.	Process Syllabus (?), etc.	Structural, Notional-Functional, Lexical Syllabi, etc.

or nothing to do with LT, one of its most applied sub-domains, ISLA, is of obvious potential relevance. Since SLA is the process LT is designed to facilitate, the relationship between the two, and understanding the effects and effectiveness of instruction, and constraints on instruction, is of considerable interest. The problem is, the relationship between SLA and LT has not always been a positive one, such that SLA-based proposals will not necessarily be welcomed with open arms, even when, as will become clear in later chapters, the rationale is much broader than research findings in SLA, as is the case with TBLT. The potential contribution of work on ISLA is addressed in the next chapter, as well as in later parts of the book.

2.7. Summary

LT over the centuries has oscillated between two fundamentally different and mutually exclusive positions: on the one hand, synthetic, focus-on-forms approaches, syllabi, methods, materials, and (although not discussed yet) tests, and on the other, analytic, focus-on-meaning approaches, syllabi, methods, materials, and (less often) tests. The difference during the past 60 years, up to and including the present day, is that, while synthetic, focus-on-forms approaches remain dominant, mostly due to the influence of commercial publishers; there has been simultaneous verbal support for each approach from different wings of the LT field. SLA research findings show that both have serious problems, however, and fortunately, are not the only choices available. As explained briefly, and as will be discussed in more detail in later chapters, a third option, *an analytic syllabus with a focus on form*, captures the advantages of analytic, focus-on-meaning approaches, while avoiding their shortcomings.

2.8. Suggested Readings

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