TASK-BASED INSTRUCTION

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Abstract

Task-based instruction (TBI) is a methodology used in ESP/ LSP programs. Since its key characteristic is to provide an opportunity for learners to use language in realworld situations, the focus of work is on task outcome, not linguistic form. The assumption is that this transaction will engage learners' natural acquisition mechanisms, and causes the underlying interlanguage system to be stretched and drives learners' language development. The definitions of TBI are given in a variety of terms from the field of applied linguistics to other fields such as psychology where cognition is involved.

บทคัดย่อ

การสอนแบบเน้นงาน (TBI) เป็นวิธีสอนอย่างหนึ่งที่ใช้ในการสอนภาษา (อังกฤษ) เพื่อจุดประสงค์เฉพาะ (LSP/ESP) ทั้งนี้เพราะลักษณะเด่นของวิธีการสอนแบบนี้ที่ให้โอกาสผู้เรียนได้ใช้ภาษาในสถานการณ์จริง จุดประสงค์ของการสอนอยู่ที่การแสดงออกด้านภาษา ซึ่งเป็นผลของงานไม่ใช่ด้านไวยากรณ์โครงสร้างของภาษา วิธีสอนแบบเน้นงานมีสมมติฐานว่าการที่ผู้เรียนมีปฏิสัมพันธ์จากการใช้ภาษาในสถานการณ์จริงจะทำให้ผู้เรียนเรียนรู้ภาษาใหม่ โดยใช้กลไกที่มีอยู่ตามธรรมชาติผลักดันระบบการเรียนรู้ภาษาให้ขยายขอบเขตออกไปมากพอที่ผู้เรียนจะสามารถพัฒนาโครงสร้างของภาษาใหม่ได้ มีผู้ให้จำกัดความการสอนแบบเน้นงานแตกต่างกันไปทั้งนี้ขึ้นอยู่กับสาขาวิชา ตั้งแต่ในสาขาของภาษาศาสตร์ประยุกต์ไปถึงสาขาอื่นๆ เช่น สาขาจิตวิทยาซึ่งกล่าวถึงการเรียนรู้ที่ใช้กลไกด้านความคิดเข้ามาเกี่ยวข้อง

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Definitions of task-based instruction

Like many basic concepts in applied linguistics and second language pedagogy, TBI was defined in different ways. A fundamental notion of TBI is in reference to the definitions of what a task is and how applied linguists are defining the terms with reference to language teaching. Various terms are used for TBI such as task-based learning, task-based approach, task-based language teaching (TBLT), task-based instruction (TBI), and communicative task-based instruction (CTBI). Theoretically, all terms used for TBI refer to an approach based on the use of tasks as the core unit of planning an instruction in language teaching. Richards and Rodgers (2001: 223-243) add that some of TBI proponents are a logical development of communicative language teaching (CLT) since it draws on several principles that have formed part of the CLT movements since the 1980s, for example activities that involve real communication in which language is used for carrying out meaningful tasks, and language which is meaningful to the learners.

With similar concept, Willis (1996: 18-25) explains that TBI is teaching methodology that involves learners in an entirely different mental process as they compose what they want to say to express what they think or feel. The task-based learning framework aims to maximize opportunities for learners to put their limited language to genuine use and to create a more effective learning environment. Tasks are always activities where the target language is used by the learners for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome. Teachers who follow a task-based cycle naturally foster combinations of skills depending upon the task.

Murphy (1993: 140-45) provides the following definition of TBI:

> We use specific tasks that are designed to help people learn an L2. We may invent apparently mechanical tasks such as drills, which seem to focus on language for itself, or we may devise apparently communicative tasks such as information-gap exercises, which mimic purposeful activities that involve use of language. In both cases the expectation is that the language will be acquired through carrying out the learning task, where the task acts as a vehicle or catalyst for the learning.

> ....in TBL the tasks themselves become the organizing principle and focus of the learning program – goals, content, procedures and evaluation – are taken to be presented in tasks. Focus on content is based on being able to predict learning outcome; focus on process allows that learners will make their own interpretation of tasks. Tasks should be work plans prepared in advance, detailing procedures each learner will work through, rather than the specific outcome the tasks will produce.

Based on the review of task-based research, Skehan (1998: 95) presents several features of task–based instruction as follows:

- meaning is primary
- there are some communication problems to solve
- there is some sort of relationship to real-world activities
- task completion has some priority
- the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome.

Another definition of TBI from Hong Kong SAR Government (Candlin, 1987: 233)   is as follows:

> The task-based approach aims at providing opportunities for learners to experiment with and explore both spoken and written language through learning activities which are designed to engage learners in the authentic, practical and functional use of language for meaningful purposes. Learners are engaged to activate and use whatever language they already have in the process of completing a task. The use of a task will also give a clear and purposeful context for the teaching and learning of grammar and other language features as well as skills. Such language focus components in turn enable learners to construct their knowledge of language structures and functions. All in all, the role of task-based learning is to stimulate a natural desire in learners to improve their learning competence by challenging them to complete meaningful tasks. Language use is stimulated and a range of learning opportunities for learners of all levels and abilities are provided.

In conclusion, TBI is an approach using tasks as the core unit in planning learning activities with communicative goals set for learners to accomplish.

Theoretical concepts underlying task-based instruction

Mainly, course content is presented in the form of a syllabus of which the paradigm intends to cover two aspects of language learning: what processes and procedures the learners undertake while learning a second language. Gass and Selinker (2001: 240) present a diagram illustrating second language studies as shown in Diagram 1.
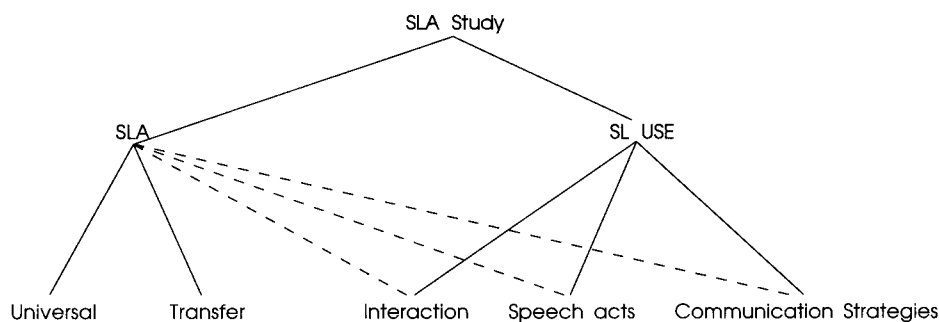
Diagram 1 : A Characteristic of Research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA)
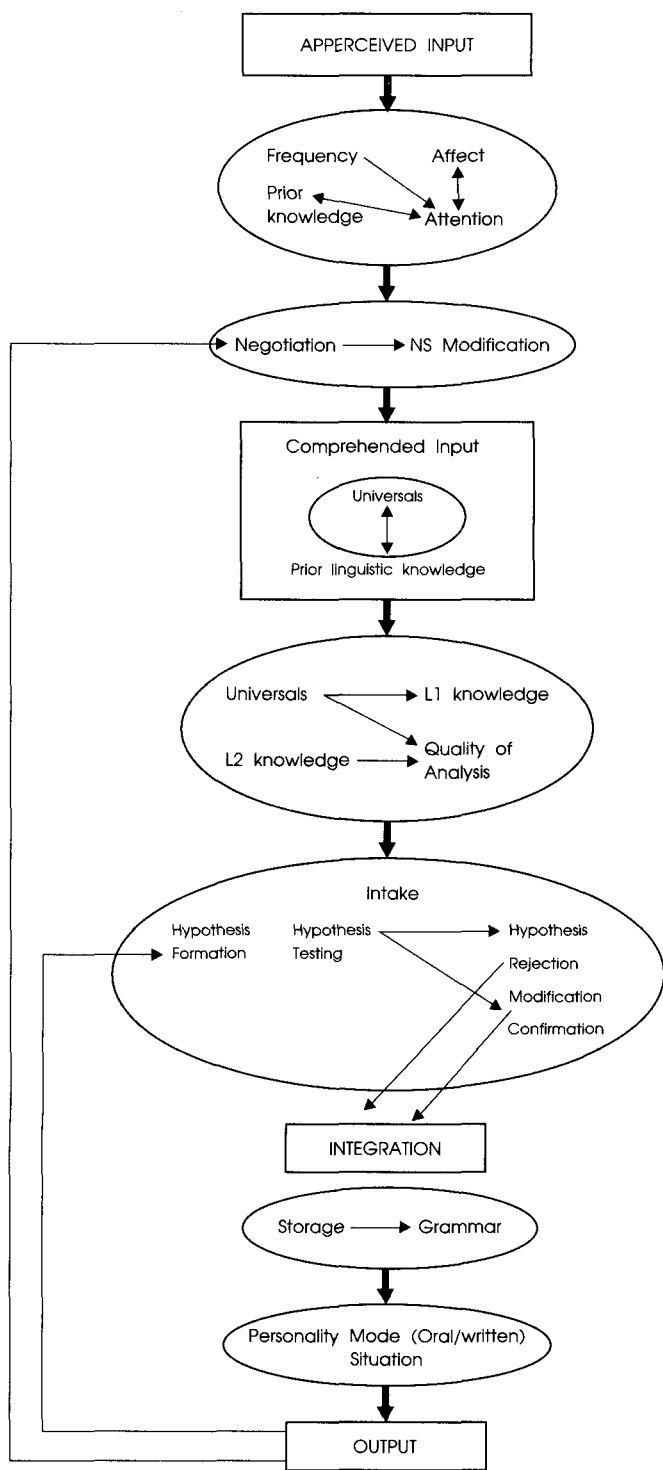
According to Gass and Selinker, second language study is illustrated in two different views: second language acquisition and second language use. The left part is in the area of language acquisition which contributes to knowledge concerning what the learner acquires. The solid lines connect SLA and contributing areas of research (universals and transfer) to areas of acquisition studies, whose contribution to knowledge is subject to little dispute. The dotted lines represent areas in which argumentation and empirical evidence must be brought to bear. The second area of study concerns the explanation of how language is learnt and the process of the acquisition of inter-language systems. These two concerns lead to two research approaches underlying TBI. They are the input and interaction approach, and the language socialization approach, which can be viewed as follows.

1. Input and interaction approach

During 1960s, the research started with the belief that the same processes occurred with the learners when learning a second language as in those learning a first language. This belief leads to the conclusion that conditions for first language acquisition can lead to successful second language learning. This idea is supported by Krashen (1985) who

proposed his Input Hypothesis postulating the similarity of learning that takes place in both L1 and L2. According to Krashen's Input Hypothesis, learners need to access to comprehensible input in a low affective filter environment in order to learn a new language. The notion of comprehensible input is that there is a need for meaningful input to engage learners with language at a level which is slightly above their competence. "Meaningful' has been variously interpreted as 'relevant and topical to learners and their interests' or 'realistic' in terms of stimulating speaking situations. This leads to the concept of out-of-class resources and the role of teacher to select the context appropriate to learner's proficiency level (Hedge, 2000:12). Furthermore, Pica's research (1992 quoted in Ellis, 2003: 79-80) states that opportunities to negotiate meaningful language assist language learning in three principal ways. First, negotiation helps learners to obtain comprehensible input. Second, it provides learners with feedback on their own use of the L2. Finally, it prompts learners to adjust, manipulate, and modify their own input. The Input and Interaction Approach suggests a number of ways which interaction can contribute to language acquisition. This leads to an investigation when the negotiation actually takes place and what the outcomes are.

Gass and Selinker (2001: 401) call the first stage of input utilization 'apperceived input'. They clarify that apperception is an internal cognitive act identifying a linguistic form as a priming device that tells us which parameters to attend to in analyzing second language data. During the developing stage, there are some mediating factors that influence apperception such as frequency, social distance, status, motivation, attitude, prior knowledge, and attention. These factors can be interrelated among themselves. Gass and Selinker's framework (2001: 401) can be seen in the following figure.

Figure 1. A Model of Second Language Acquisition

Gass and Selinker point out that there is a process that learners produce before the output. The output represents more than the product of language knowledge; it is an active part of the entire learning process. Negotiation is identified as a significant stage leading to language output. As a consequence, the tasks provided for learners are believed to foster processes of negotiation, modification, rephrasing, and experimentation that are at the heart of second language learning. TBI proposes that the task is the pivot point for stimulation of input-output practice, negotiation of meaning, and transactional focused conversation (Richards and Rodgers, 2001: 228-29).

2. Socialization approach

Recent evidence from research studies in the field of SLA and pedagogy rejects the view processing in first and second language acquisition. Vygotsky (1987 quoted in Ellis, 2003: 24) offers a term called 'zone of proximal development (ZPD*) to explain the difference between an individual's actual and potential levels of development. The skills that the individual can perform when assisted by another person constitutes their potential level. Thus, learnt skills provide a basis for the performance of new skills. When these skills become autonomous and stable, a new zone can be created to make possible the acquisition of further skills. The implication for TBI is that tasks must be structured in such a way that they pose an appropriate challenge by requiring learners to perform functions and use language that enables them to dynamically construct ZPD. The social dimension of the development of a new skill is through the notion of 'scaffolding'** and 'collaborative dialogue', the supportive interactions that arise when learners communicate with others. The concept of scaffolding states that language of the expert or more knowledgeable peers serves as directives and moves the learner through her or his ZPD to the point where the learner is able to perform a task alone. Additionally, Brown (2001: 287) mentions the principles of awareness, autonomy, and authenticity which lead the learners to Vygotsky's ZPD. The term self-directed or autonomous learner as defined by Hedge (2000: 76) refers to a learner who is self-motivated, one who takes the initiative, one who has a clear idea of what he wants to learn, and one who has his own plan for pursuing and achieving his goal.

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* ZPD is the acronym of Vygotsky's term 'zone of proximal development' where learners construct the new language through socially mediated interaction (Ellis, 2003: 24).

** Scaffolding is the dialogic process by which one speaker assists another in performing a function that he or she cannot perform alone (Ellis, 2003: 181).

Types of task-based instruction

The skeptical concept of how tasks are used in language pedagogy has led researchers, language teachers, material writers and course designers to recognize the value of tasks. Because of the different views from different methodologists, tasks are defined differently and also different types of TBI frameworks have been proposed. White (1988) distinguished synthetic and analytic syllabuses: type A and type B. These concern two aspects of language learning: 'what' and 'how'. According to White, TBI is classified within type B, or analytic syllabus. Basically, TBI is classified into two approaches concerning how tasks are used. The first approach is structure-oriented task-based instruction; the second approach is communication-driven task-based instruction.

In his study, Ellis (2003) views tasks as an important feature of communicative teaching (CLT). He proposes two types of communicative task-based instruction (CTBI) in CLT: 1) task-supported language teaching (weak version of CLT), and 2) task-based language teaching (strong version of CLT). Another TBI framework is proposed by Skehan (1998: 128). Based on research studies, Skehan proposes an information-processing approach to TBI with five principles as its basis.

Briefly, there are two different viewpoints for TBI frameworks: CTBI in communicative language teaching and TBI in Skehan's information-processing approach.

1. Communicative task-based instruction (CTBI)

This TBI is claimed to be the strong version of CTBI (Ellis, 2003). In this version, learners are provided with opportunities to experience how language is used in communication. Ellis's proposal is consistent with Richards and Rodgers (2001:223) who state that TBI refers to an approach based on the use of tasks as the core of planning instruction in language teaching. Additionally, Richards and Rodgers state that TBI can be regarded as a recent version of a communicative methodology that seeks to reconcile methodology with current theories of second language acquisition. This type of TBI is similar to the framework proposed by Long and Crookes (1992) who claim findings of second language classroom research are its basis. TBI utilizes the concepts that task requires a need identification to be conducted in terms of real-world target tasks which learners are being prepared to undertake. The principles of course design are those for teaching languages for specific purposes (LSP). (Widdowson, 1978)

2. Task-based Instruction proposed by Willis

This TBI framework consists of pre-task, task cycle, and language focus. These three stages of presenting language learning are also stated in Skehan (1998). He states that there are opportunities for attention to form in all three phases. The TBI framework proposed by Willis (2000: 36-38) can be seen in Figure 2.
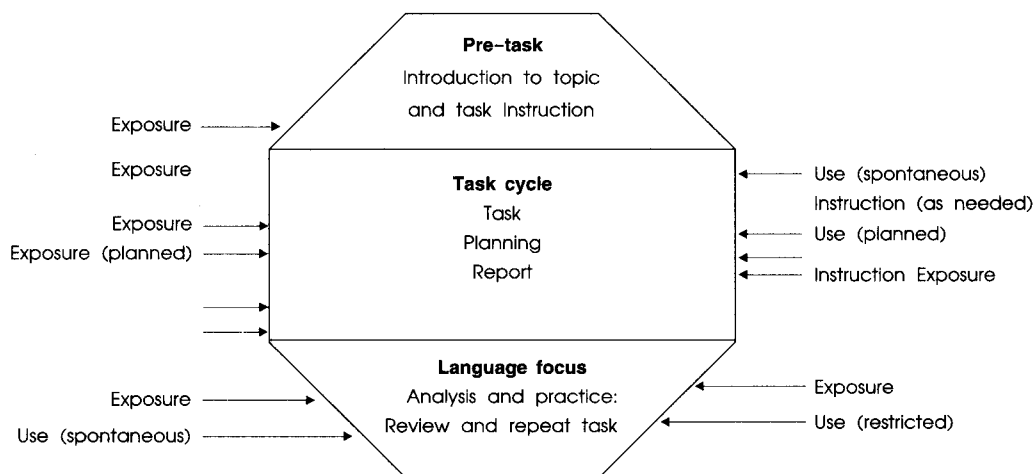

Figure 2. Framework for a Task-based Instruction

According to Willis, the framework for TBI includes the following concepts:

- All three components (task, planning and report) are genuinely free of language control and learners rely on their own linguistic resources.

- The task supplies a genuine need to use language to communicate.

- In all three components, language is used for a genuine purpose—there are outcomes to achieve for the task and the purpose of the drafting, rehearsal and practice at the planning stage is to help learners adjust their language for the report stage.

- The report allows a free exchange of ideas, summarizing learners' achievement.

- The planning stage encourages learners to consider appropriateness and ac curacy of language form in general, rather than the production of a single form.

- There is a genuine need to strive for accuracy and fluency as learners prepare to 'go public' for the report stage; it is not a question of either accuracy or fluency at any one point in the cycle.

3. Task-supported language teaching (PPP)

Task-supported language teaching is the weak version of CTBI. It views tasks as a way of providing communicative practice for language items. It aims to teach learners how to realize specific general notions such as 'duration' and 'possibility', and language functions such as 'inviting' and 'apologizing'. This weak version of CLT is based on linguistic content. It is the proposal for notional/ functional syllabuses developed by Wilkins (1976) and Van Ek (1976). It employs a methodological procedure consisting of present-practice-product (PPP). Willis (2000: 133) states that the aim of a PPP lesson is to teach a specific language form – a grammatical structure, or the realization of a particular function or notion. PPP views language as a series of 'products' that are acquired sequentially as 'accumulated entities'. The PPP framework (Willis, 2000: 134-35) presents the three stages: presentation, practice and production as shown in Figure 3.
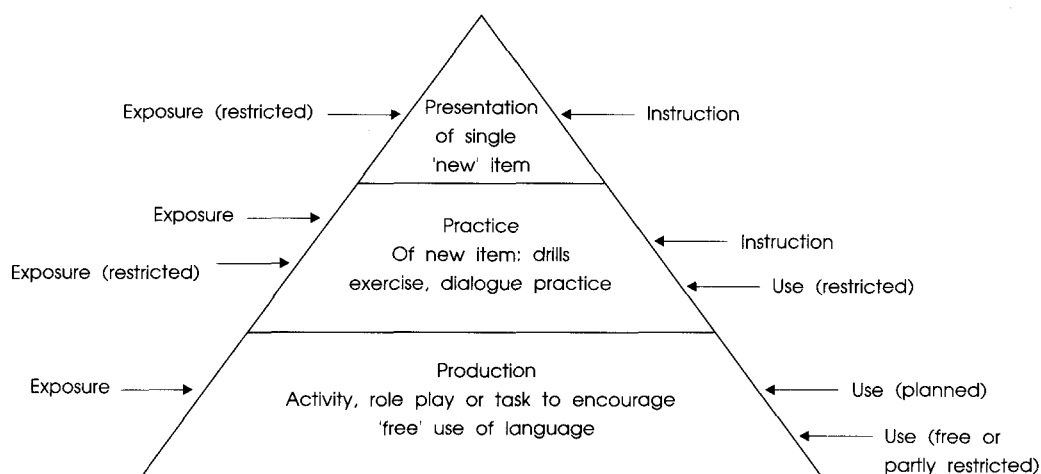
Figure 3. Framework for PPP

The three stages proceed like this:

- Presentation stage

  The teacher begins by presenting an item of language in a context or situation which helps to clarify its meaning. Presentation consists of pattern sentences given by teacher, or short dialogues illustrating target language acted out by the teacher, read from a textbook, or heard on tape.

- Practice stage

    Students repeat target items and practice sentences or dialogues, often in chorus and/ or in pairs, until they say them correctly. Activities include pattern practice drills, matching parts of sentences, completing sentences or dialogues and asking and answering questions using pre-specified forms.

- Production stage

    Students are expected to produce in a 'free' situation language items they have just learnt, together with other previously learnt language. This 'free' situation is a role play, a simulation activity or even a communication task

Later, SLA research has disagreed with this concept. The criticism is that the three stages presented by PPP are not widely accepted since the second language learning processes do not follow the stages stated in PPP. In contrast, they constructed a series of systems, known as interlanguage, which are gradually reconstructed while learners incorporated new features (Ellis, 2003: 27-35).

Many aspects of the implementation of PPP have been criticized; the problems given by Willis (2000: 135) are:

> *The PPP cycles derive from the behaviourist view of learning, which rests on the principle that repetition helps to 'automate' responses and that practice makes perfect. This research has now been largely discredited as far as it applications to language learning go. Language learning rarely happens in an additive fashion, with bits of language being learnt separately, one after another. We cannot predict and determine what students are going to learn at any given stage. Instruction does help, in the long term, but it cannot guarantee when something will be learnt. Rich and varied exposure helps language develop gradually and organically, out of the learner's own experience. Unfortunately, the PPP cycle restricts the learner's experience of language by focusing on a single item. By relying on exercises that encourage habit formation, it may actually discourage learners from thinking about language and working things out for themselves.*

PPP was criticized by Willis (2000), Ellis (2003) and Skehan (1998). Ellis (2003: 27-35) states that the weak version of CLT is only content-driven and reveals an unclear concept of TBI. His idea is also supported by Widdowson (1990). Furthermore, Ellis states that the production stage in PPP calls for 'grammar tasks'. A target task viewed in task-supported language teaching is not a means by which learners acquire new knowledge or restructure their interlanguage but simply as a means by which learners can activate their existing knowledge of the L2 by developing fluency. This view acknowledges that tasks do not replace exercises, but they are only supplementary. The differences between PPP and TBI as pointed out by Willis (2000: 136-37) are:

- In a PPP cycle, the presentation of the target language comes first. In the TBI framework, the context is already established by the task itself. By the time learners reach the language focus phase, the language is already familiar.

- The process of consciousness-raising used in the TBI language focus activities encourage students to think and analyze, not simply to repeat, manipulate and apply.

- Listening and reading – both part of the TBI framework – provide a more varied exposure to natural language than examples made up to illustrate a single language item as in a PPP cycle.

- The exposure in the TBI framework includes a whole range of words, collocations, lexical phrases and patterns in addition to language forms pre-selected for focus. Students realize that there is more to language than verb tenses and new words.

- In a PPP cycle, it is the teacher who pre-selects the language to be taught.

- A PPP cycle leads from accuracy to fluency; a TBI cycle leads from fluency to accuracy (combined with fluency).

- In TBI, all four skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing – are naturally integrated. PPP only provides a paradigm for grammar and form-focused lessons.

4. Task-based instruction in Skehan's information-processing approach

Skehan (1998: 128) criticizes Willis's framework saying that although it seems to provide useful guidance for the implementation of TBI, it does not show a clear connection with second language acquisition theories, the role of noticing, acquisition sequences, information-processing, and so on. To enhance language learning, Skehan (1998: 129-30) proposes the information-processing approach to TBI based on five principles. He claims that the five principles and the model are grounded in theory and research, and offers some prospects for the systematic development of underlying inter-language and effective communicative performance. The five principles are:

- Choose a range of target structures.
- Choose tasks which meet the utility criterion.
- Select and sequence tasks to achieve balanced goal development.
- Maximize the chances of focus on form through attention manipulation.
- Use cycles of accountability.

Skehan clarifies the concept of choosing a range of target structures saying that learners do not simply learn what teachers teach because of the power of internal processing factors since teachers can only create appropriate conditions and hope that learners will benefit from them. Therefore, merely giving learners tasks to do is not enough. Teachers should be concerned that tasks chosen for learners should be of an appropriate level of difficulty, with the focus on fluency, accuracy, and complexity and have some basis in task-based research. Skehan recommends that teachers select context with the targeted structures and with the support of task choice and task implementation conditions. He suggests engaging learners in cycles of evaluation in terms of stock-taking. Stock-taking as explained by Skehan, is to track what the learners have learnt in order to make a future plan. His proposal is different from Willis on certain points as he attempts to add more careful planning to each stage. The differences can be seen in the following chart.

Chart 1. Principles of TBI from Skehan (1998) and Willis (2000)

Skehan (1998)	Willis (2000)
1. Choose a range of target structures, i.e. ensure systematic in language development without adhering rigidly to a structural syllabus.	1. Choose tasks which expose students to worthwhile authentic language.
2. Choose tasks which meet the utility criterion, i.e. make it 'useful' for students to perform the target structures.	2. Choose tasks which enhance the use of language.
3. Sequence tasks to achieve balanced goal development, i.e. prioritize fluency, accuracy, and complexity at different times.	3. Choose tasks which motivate learners to engage in language use.
4. Maximize the chances of a focus on form through intentional manipulation.	4. Choose tasks which focus on language at some points in a task cycle.
5. Use cycles of accountability, i.e. mobilize students, meta-cognitive resources to keep track of what has been learned.	5. Choose tasks which focus on language with more or less prominent at different times.

In conclusion, the implementation of TBI is proposed in various frameworks relating to different definitions given to 'task'. The CLT framework proposed by Ellis (2003: 276-79), TBI is premised on the belief that, if the development of communicative language ability is the goal of classroom learning, then communicative practice must be part of the process (Hedge, 2000: 57). Moreover, CLT draws different models of language into teaching such as Halliday's functional model, Hymes' theory of communicative competence, and Widdowson's terms 'use' and 'usage'. Therefore, the CLT framework can incorporate most aspects in language learning. Additionally, using tasks in the framework of CLT is clearly stated as seen in some frameworks provided for the implementation of TBI such as Willis's, Ellis', and Skehan's. Although, there are some weak versions of CTBI such as PPP or TBI in Willis' framework, in my opinion it is more practical to use tasks in CLT framework.

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