

# Task-Based Methodology and Sociocultural Theory

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Current teaching and research have increasingly focused on cognitive psychological processes through communicative language teaching and task-based language learning and teaching (TBLT). At the same time, sociocultural theory (SCT), with its discourse oriented nature, has been creeping into the literature. Looking at the recent work of the lead players in SLA (e.g., Ellis 1999, Swain 2000) one can't help but notice the increasingly emerging sociocultural slant. These views are largely underpinned by qualitative and discursive oriented Vygotskian theory. Over the past decade or so, a number of TBLT methodologies have been developed. Section I defines tasks, gives three methodological overviews, and discusses research and problems in TBLT. The central focus of SCT is learners using language in tasks. Section II attempts to link TBLT and SCT through their commonalities with regard to context, language and tasks for analysis, and focus on meaning. Section III discusses the rationale for SCT and introduces five components: mediation, activity theory, private speech, regulation, and the zone of proximal development. It is argued that these components are useful for language and discourse in general and are highly compatible with TBLT to analyze teachers and learners under tasks in classroom activity. Finally Section IV discusses some research from the SCT perspective on teacher-student/classroom discourse, learner-learner discourse, and findings with respect to tasks. The overriding purpose is to provide a number of positions from which language teachers, curriculum designers, and researchers can use the information here to launch from and to introduce a new and additional means from which to analyze and explain what participants under tasks do.

## Section I

### What is a task?

Of the varying definitions of task that exist, Kumaravadivelu (1993) finds Candlin's the most definitive:

One of a set of differentiated, sequencable, problem-posing activities involving learners' cognitive and communicative procedures applied to existing and new knowledge in the collective exploration and pursuance of foreseen or emergent goals within a social milieu. (p. 71)

### Three Task Methodologies

A variety of task methodologies exists. Here, I review three, Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1993), Crookes and Long's Focus on Form (FonF) (1993), and Breen & Candlin's Process Syllabus (1980), in an order in which they align along Nunan's (1989) continuum for understanding TBLT methodologies and their underlying theories to SLA. This moves from classroom structured tasks which predict and predetermine what the learner will do in the class-room to real-world (rehearsal) oriented tasks which have a tendency towards unpredictable emergent structures that evolve in the classroom.

*Structure Oriented Tasks.* Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1993, cited in Williams & Doughty, 1998; Skeehan, 1998) propose that three characteristic levels of task design can be used to constrain learners production of specific linguistic structures to varying degrees:

1. Task Naturalness: A grammatical construction may arise, but the task can be performed without it (e.g., describing the steps in an experiment, past tense is likely to evolve).
2. Task Utility: The structure is not necessary, but the task is easier with structure (e.g., in judging any kind of contest for awards, adjectives are almost necessary, thus bordering on essentialness).
3. Task Essentialness: The task cannot be performed without the structure. Other increasingly explicit devices may be needed to attract learner attention.

Loschky and Bley-Vroman optimistically argue that tasks should be designed to meet the third criterion without compromising meaning. This has a highly pedagogic rationale. They note that essential tasks are difficult to conceive of, but may be more easily incorporated into comprehension tasks. Production tasks may rarely go beyond fostering task naturalness or task utility. In the most extreme case, the task designer predetermines the meaning that learners will negotiate. Although, many of the techniques for enhancing the input (e.g. visual highlighting, underlining, and auditory-intonational focus) still remain relatively implicit.

*Focus on Form.* Long's (1985, Crookes & Long, 1993) version of TBLT is the strongest in terms of referencing tasks to the real world. With such a high emphasis on meaning learners may lose sight of grammatical forms. Long introduced FonF (focus on form) in order to resolve this issue. There are two versions of FonF, proactive and reactive (Williams & Doughty, 1998). Proactive FonF emphasizes tasks that are designed in advance to ensure that opportunities for learners to use forms that they have trouble will arise while communicating a message. Whereas reactive FonF posits that the teacher has tasks already prepared to bring the learners' attention to problematic forms when pervasive errors arise. Long's version emphasizes reactive FonF. He proposes the following five-stage procedure in developing a task-based language program:

1. A requisite needs analysis to identify real-world target tasks for task selection.
2. Selection and classification of target tasks into types.
3. Pedagogical tasks are derived from the bank of generalized task-types and sequenced forming the syllabus.
4. Task complexity/difficulty is determined for grading and sequencing through the number of steps, solutions, participants, and distinguishing features of tasks (see Robinson, 2001).
5. Task-based criterion referenced tests are used to evaluate achievement.

Meaning in relation to the real world plays a much more significant role in this methodology. Though, it places negotiation at the level of generalized classroom tasks, class work is interrupted only briefly when needs for FonF arise. Kumaravadivelu (1993) views this as a pedagogic rationale because tasks are still not directly related to communicative performance in the outside world. Skeehan (1998) claims that, in practice, derivation and classification of tasks is difficult to do. If content taken to an extreme is the central theme in its rationale, then another criticism is that it could serve as training in limited language use and competence, rather than education.

*Process Syllabus.* The resources and materials needed for course design in Breen and Candlin's (1980, cited in Crookes & Long, 1993) version of TBLT consists of:

1. Making general decisions about classroom language learning (who needs to learn what, how they prefer to learn it, when, with whom and so on).
2. Alternative procedures for making those decisions (the basis for an eventual 'working contract' between teachers and learners).
3. Alternative activities, such as teacher-led instruction, group work, and laboratory use.
4. Alternative tasks, i.e. a bank of pedagogic tasks students may select from to realize the 'activities'.

Here, individual learning preferences and processes become the focus of instruction. Kumaravadivelu (1993) calls this a psycho-social rationale having tasks that take into consideration cognitive, expressive and social parameters negotiated among the participants of the mini-society of the classroom. This most closely follows a Vygotskian framework by determining what was learned and the syllabus *retrospectively*, rather than *a priori*. This type of syllabus design incorporates negotiation not only of that which takes place inside task activity, but also what, with whom, how, in what participant structure, and what task is to be learned. Negotiation of meaning is placed above the level of classroom tasks and activities. The main criticism is that it may require learners who already have a high degree of proficiency in the language in order to co-manage their own learning.

These frameworks provide starting points from which to choose and develop activities for classroom instruction. Structure oriented tasks might be developed for a linguistically based syllabus or for brief FonF activities necessary in a primarily meaning-focused/authentic curriculum. Long's FonF leans more in the direction of ESP courses where tasks can be derived more directly from the real-world tasks that learners will eventually have to do. The process syllabus would probably work with either an ESP or an English for general purposes course. However, it may require some higher level degree of linguistic control, self-control, and participation on the part of the learners for more explicit co-management of classroom activities and their own learning trajectories.

### **Task-Based Research**

A brief review of research in TBLT illustrates some of the categorical distinctions that have been made and their implications for language instruction, the language produced, and opportunities for negotiation of meaning.

1. One-way vs. two-way tasks. Long (1981, cited in Nunan, 1991) found that two-way tasks (in which all students in a group discussion had unique information to contribute) *stimulated significantly more modified interactions* than one-way tasks (that is, in which one member of the group possessed all the relevant information). Gass and Varonis (1985, cited in Gass, 1997) *found no significant differences* in the output produced by the two task types.
2. Convergent vs. divergent. Duff (1986 cited in Gass, 1997) found that *convergent problem-solving tasks prompted significant interactional and discursal differences with more and shorter turns than divergent debating tasks* (cited in Nunan, 1989). They produce different types of language.
3. Shared vs. single source of information. Pica, Holliday, Lewis, Berducci, and Newman (1991, cited in Gass, 1997) found that *negotiation is greater when a single individual holds all the information* needed for a resolution of a task as opposed to being shared.
4. Teacher presence. Pica, Young, and Doughty (1987, cited in Gass, 1997) found many *more examples of interactional exchange when the teacher was not present* than elicited when present.
5. Effects of negotiation. Aston (1986 cited in Gass, 1997) shows that tasks that *promote negotiation often result in language that is frustrating to produce and as a result error-laden*.

These hypotheses and research have made a useful beginning in creating a framework for the design and study of tasks. This list of characteristics and contrasting sets, by no means exhaustive, describes some of the types of potential negotiation in tasks. They are also useful for task design thinking processes. However, the mixed and conflicting results of the research make it difficult to draw conclusions in linking negotiation of meaning to language acquisition. It's still difficult to determine whether these distinctions will lead to greater opportunities for negotiation of meaning. Another criticism also is that overall TBLT research has tended to focus on the end result of language as a product, rather than a process. In this sense TBLT is still highly focused on the behavioral aspects of tasks as control devices for learners in the classroom.

## **Problems with TBLT yet to be solved**

Remaining problems for TBLT concern where tasks begin and end, the number of task-types, the number of levels, and what is transferred from one generalized task to the next. Once tasks are generalized how much can we expect to transfer from one type to another? How are task difficulty and task complexity to be measured? Also synchronizing the teacher's and learners' agendas is still problematic.

In essence, this is what TBLT has been trying to do, synchronize learner internal syllabus' and teaching to acquire higher levels of language faster. The methods presented here, with the exception of the Process Syllabus, remain pedagogic in their rationale and behaviorist in terms of tasks designed for a hypothetical learner. Developing a task-based approach will be dependent upon predictable factors such as institutional demands and objectives, class sizes, and probable real world activities that learners will someday do. Developing this approach will also be dependent upon unpredictable factors which include maturational levels, learner factors, learner goals, and a host of other factors. As Nunan (1989) claims, it might well be that it is the learners who impose their own automatic order on the way things play out in the classroom. With this in mind, I shall turn to SCT which provides a means of analysis to tie together those factors that are predictable and designable with those that are more elusive, hidden, and unpredictable in an attempt to create a more coherent whole.

## **Section II**

### **Linking TBLT and Sociocultural Theory**

TBLT and SCT might be historically connected through the early work in discourse analysis with Goffman's approach to interaction or conversation analysis associated with Schegloff, Sacks, and Hatch. These kinds of analyses reveal the task-focused nature of jointly oriented, co-constructed participants in talk (Crookes, 1993, p. 1; Heritage, 1997, p. 166-167; Frawley, 1997, p. 181). In reading Vygotsky and literature on SCT it becomes clear that it has many points of connection and compatibility with TBLT. Three points TBLT and SCT share include: an attempt to re-contextualize the classroom, the focus of activity or tasks as a place for studying and developing language, and a focus on meaning.

Schooling tends to decontextualize meaning and make language learning and use abstract in the classroom. For Vygotsky, meaning is determined by the relationship between the structure and interpretation of language and the context in which they appear (Wertsch, 1985). In the same vein, tasks are used to re-contextualize the classroom for more meaning making as it happens in the real world. While SCT contextualizes the analysis.

The combination of tasks and language activity made sense for Vygotsky. By means of research he saw that language and action converged to function in the goal oriented activity of a task. TBLT attempts to shift the language teaching focus from a product to a process approach. In SLA, products consist of "what" is to be learned, the learning and acquisition of discrete grammar in isolation. Processes consist of "how" or "the way" things are learned, learning through participation and the use of language in tasks. This is consistent with Vygotsky's push for a "need to concentrate not on the product of development but on the very process by which higher forms are established" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 64). That is, the activity under which language is built up.

Vygotsky disagreed with focusing on language form stripped from its meaning (Wertsch, 1985, p. 88). In other words, his ideas have a strong congruence with tasks which emphasize combining language form with its meaning. This is consistent with TBLT's emphasis on meaning through the use of language. It may be that TBLT and SCT can be mutually supportive and beneficial for research, analysis, and instruction of learners in SLA.

### Section III

In the following section, the rationale for SCT and its five components, mediation, activity theory, private speech, regulation, and the zone of proximal development, are briefly covered.

#### **The Sociocultural Rationale**

The dominant psychological theories underlying SLA have been behaviorist which focus on the formation of language habits, and cognitive which focus on a single hypothetical learner's internal processing and transmission of input and output. Cognitive perspectives on learning tend to promote a focus on the non-personal knowledge, skills, and activities of a person. Sociocultural theories are shifting from these behaviorist and cognitivist psychological approaches. SCT attempts to capture the context, action, and motives of language events between individuals who are simultaneously social and cognitive. Analysis from social perspectives seems as though it would eclipse the person, but on the contrary it makes a very explicit focus on the individual within a community and the world (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Traditional dichotomies are useful in highlighting specific aspects of process, however, their focus on surface features, rather than fundamental processes, limits their ability to provide clean classificatory categories in terms of meaning, knowing, or learning (Wenger, 1998).

#### **Mediation**

The central concept for Vygotsky and SCT is the mediation of human behavior (i.e. activity, labor, what we do, our work in the classroom) with tools and sign systems -- most importantly language. Vygotsky saw tools and language as the evolving products of the forward march of human history and its cultural development. We use these historically developed cultural artifacts, tools and language, to mediate relationships with ourselves, others, objects, and the world. The Vygotskian perspective makes human communication through the use of the mediation of language the central object of analysis rather than language as a system, like a grammar, abstracted from use. Vygotsky saw that external social speech was internalized through mediation (Vygotsky, 1978). In this way Vygotsky and SCT link society to mind through mediation. Language as a tool of the mind bridges the individual understanding of our selves and particular contexts and situations within the world.

#### **Activity Theory**

Activity theory provides a framework to analyze what learners do in interaction with an aim to understand their goals through action and motives through activity. It analyzes system in activity from the broad perspective of the larger social system through the eyes of the member or participants co-constructing the activity. The activity practitioner must then simultaneously focus on the activity system (learner or learners) they study through tasks and what transpires around that activity system.

Activity theory raises the question "what is the individual or group doing in a particular situation?" (Wertsch, 1985, p. 211). Rather than focusing on skills, concepts, information-processing, units, or reflexes, activity theory can provide a response through analysis at the level of: 1) *activity*, 2) *action*, and 3) *operations*. At the global level is *activity* which is the frame or context in which something occurs. The second level is goal-directed *action*. It tells us "what" must be done to get from A to B and through this implies a motive. The context or *activity* cannot inform us of the reasons and outcomes that develop, the *action* that happens in some outcome. Thus, *activity* and *action* are distinguished. The third level is operations, which describe "how" something is done. This is associated with "the concrete conditions under which the action is carried out" (Wertsch, 1985, p. 202-204). Thus *activity* relates to context (e.g. in a classroom, something about a language), *action* relates to goals (e.g., to get a good grade, to improve grammar, to satisfy the teacher etc.), and operations relate to conditions (e.g., teacher-fronted, in pairs, the performed responses to the task).

## **Inner Speech or Private Speech and Private Writing: The Act of Self-Mediation**

Vygotsky referred to the internalization of external forms of dialogic communication as inner-speech. What Piaget termed egocentric speech, speech that children use but eventually disappears, Vygotsky found to go "underground" or become internalized processes of thought (Vygotsky, 1986). He also found that when speech was not permitted, children were unable to accomplish a given task (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Vygotsky, our internal mental ability to use and manipulate language is result of mediation through language. He found that when confronted with tasks beyond the ZPD, children invoked private speech, the convergence of thought and language, in seeking and planning the solution to a task (Vygotsky, 1986). Inner-speech (now also termed private-speech, and private-writing), is somewhat analogous to think-aloud tasks or protocol. This is seen as an insight to strategies and processes learners use to complete a task. Donato (1994) defines inner-speech as, "speech to oneself, which overtly expresses the requisite actions to successfully complete a task, is a means of self-guidance in carrying out an activity beyond one's current competence" (p. 48). It now serves as an element which evidences various regulatory functions between speakers in tasks and exposes internal processes with insight to language use.

### **Regulation**

Wertsch's (1985) four levels of regulation are important for understanding and analyzing a wide variety of interaction, mediation, and relationships between the self, expert-novice, teacher-learner, peer interaction, and group interaction under task and problem-solving activities. These have been adapted in several studies such as Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994), McCafferty (1994), and Nassaji and Swain (2000).

(1) Object-regulation indicates a person directly controlled by the environment. It represents strategic use of the nature of the task itself, evidenced through private speech or private writing. Describing and naming certain aspects of the action and environment characterizes attempts to plan and direct action. To paraphrase Wertsch (1985), the teacher may attempt to direct the language learner through strategic steps, but the learner's understanding of the objects and goal-directed action is so limited that the learner may not interpret the teachers' talk.

(2) In other-regulation a person is primarily controlled by another person. Speech of this sort consists of metacomments which function not as conversation, but something like teacher-talk (e.g., "Open your books" "Turn to page 25") The second variety are self-directed questions. These are called "other-regulation" because learners resort to a dialogue like forms for seeking self-guidance reminiscent of the ways children engage with their mothers. At this stage the learner begins participate successfully in the task setting, but the learners' understanding of the task situation is still far from being in complete agreement with the teacher's (Wertsch, 1985).

(3) In self-other-regulation a person begins to take on more of the control of his own actions. The teacher no longer has to specify all the steps that must be followed for the learner to interpret a directions because the learner can now do much more on his own (Wertsch, 1985).

(4) Self-regulation is when a subject has suddenly understood, mastered, or gained complete control and ability to function independently. It is an ability to focus attention on the abstract goal while ignoring task-irrelevant features. The learner takes over complete responsibility for carrying out the goal-directed task.

### **The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)**

The site where the language is shared and internalized through mediation is the 'zone of proximal development' defined by Vygotsky as follows:

It is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86)

Vygotsky's law makes claims about instruction and learning. The ZPD places instruction on the part of the teacher as assisting and guiding learner development and intellectual possibilities in collaborative activities. Thus for Vygotsky "the only 'good learning' is that which is in advance of development" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 89). Ohta (2000) claims that "the construct of the ZPD specifies that development cannot occur if too much assistance is provided or if a task is too easy" (p. 52). Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994) claim that mediation needs to be contingent. This means teachers need to balance the giving and withholding of guidance and assistance, on-line, in accordance with students' progression through a task. This gives rise to the term prolepsis. According to Anton (1999) prolepsis leads participants in the interaction to reach an understanding of each other's view of problem solving and solution.

According to Throne (2000) Krashen's notion of comprehensible input ( $i + 1$ ) which concerns an autonomous passive learner listening for the next level of linguistic input, should not be equated with the ZPD which concerns people working together in the joint accomplishment of specific tasks developing personal ability. The ZPD is useful in both a linguistic and a task-based system because it indicates what the learner can or can't do with or without assistance.

## **Section IV**

### **Research in SCT**

#### **Teacher-Student and Classroom Discourse**

Hall (1995) investigated the discursive practices of a Spanish high-school teacher on his students. While this teacher was judged to be knowledgeable, highly proficient, and providing a linguistically rich environment full of comprehensible input similar to other foreign language class-rooms, Hall's analysis shows that the nature of the instructor's discourse was not proleptic. Thus, instruction limited student opportunities to facilitate interactional development (Hall, 1995). She finds that the dominating IRE (initiation, response, follow-up/evaluation) format of class discussion and the teacher's agenda in tasks constrained opportunities for students to engage in longer, more complex discursive patterns. She found that the IRE and teacher agenda also constrained classroom discussion to the linking of words and repetition of parts or all of previous utterances, rather than developing student knowledge and expansion of topic relevance, and expansion and coherence across utterances (Hall, 1995).

Anton (1999) examines the discourse of two high-school teachers, one of French and one of Italian, in formal grammar lessons. She focuses on the degree to which classrooms are made either teacher-centered or learner-centered through the discourse. Anton (1999) found that proleptic instruction and the dialogic nature of a high-school French instructor increased learner involvement in negotiation of meaning, linguistic form, and participation in classroom activity. Analysis of the discourse revealed how the dialogic style of the instructor recruited student investment in the lessons, creating joint-ownership of the classroom activity. Thus, a learning-centered environment was created. In the case of a high-school Italian instructor, Anton (1999) found that learner engagement and negotiation of meaning are dramatically reduced when instruction is not proleptic. That is when instruction lacks scaffolding in the ZPD. This includes communicative moves by the instructor in the use of directives, assisting questions, open ended questions, pauses, gestures, opportunities to bid for the floor.

#### **Learner-Learner Discourse -- Peer Mediated Research**

In a vocabulary acquisition study of university students of English, mainly from East and Southeast Asian nations, in an intensive English program, R. Ellis and He (1999) found that the dialogic construction in peer interaction provided far more opportunities for learners to learn new words than did monologically constructed formats. They believe their results agree with Lantolf and Pavlenko (1995) who claim that "learning hinges not so much on richness of input, but crucially on the choices made by individuals as responsible agents with dispositions to think and

act in certain ways rooted in their discursive histories" (p. 116). The peer dialogic groups far outscored the monological groups. This didn't link negotiation of meaning to acquisition, but points to the greater opportunities for use, and negotiation of meaning, that more dialogically based interaction creates and provides.

Through the work of Holunga (1994), Swain (2000) examines students who were taught to verbalize metacognitive strategies (i.e. language used for oneself to focus attention, predict, plan, externalize and test hypotheses about language, supply solutions, and evaluate) as they worked through a task (a kind of inner-speech). This group of students far outperformed other groups given the same instruction except for respect to metacognitive strategies. The second group was taught metacognitive strategies, but not to verbalize them during the task. The third group was not taught metacognitive strategies.

## **Task Related Research**

### **Tasks and Methodology**

Roebuck notes that sociocultural pedagogy and sociocultural methodology differ. One technique Vygotsky used to study development, was to introduce tasks which exceeded the subjects knowledge abilities to study the rudimentary beginnings of new skills (1978). Pedagogical tasks are chosen because they lie within the learners' ZPD while tasks on the fringe of the learners' zone and beyond can be chosen to discover how people respond to problems and difficulties and integrate other signs and tools into their tasks (Roebuck, 2000).

The friction between tasks and individuals is often what is considered bad data and often discarded. In the case of De Geurrero and Villamil (1994), several recordings were eliminated because participants did not comply with task procedures. In some cases bad data may be more revealing.

### **Re-Defining Tasks**

Donato (1994, p. 36) states that "tasks cannot be externally defined or classified on the basis of specific external task features." Rather, tasks are in fact internally constructed through the moment-to-moment verbal interactions of the learners during actual performance. Roebuck (2000) claims it is important to distinguish between tasks and activities as Coughlan and Duff (1994) define them:

*A task* is, we propose, a kind of behavioral blueprint provided to subjects in order to elicit linguistic data.

*An activity*, by comparison, comprises the behavior that is actually produced when an individual (or group) performs a task. (p. 175)

Coughlan and Duff (1994) argue that experimentally elicited behavior is neither constant nor controllable because it is an instantiation of activity between the participants. That is, during a task, roles of expert-novice can shift and the nature of the task can vary between being a task for natural or not unnatural communication. Tasks are imposed on learners to teach pre-determined agendas while activity is how the learners -- as agents -- construct the task to the final outcome.

### **Task Design**

In a teacher-fronted translation task that would not be considered state-of-the-art, Ohta (2000) finds that learners push forward with a difficult grammatical construction through their own persistence and investment working as peers to go beyond the bounds of the task creating their own language learning activity. The productivity of learner interaction cannot necessarily be determined by looking at task design, but tasks themselves may be transformed as each learner applies him or herself in instantiation of a unique activity (Coughlan & Duff, 1994).

## **Orientation in Tasks**

Appel and Lantolf (1994) defined orientation as the way individuals view an object or a task, the kind of goals they establish relative to the task, and the plans and means they devise to carry the task to its completion. Orientation can then influence personal strategies so different individuals can potentially have different personal strategies even when under the same instructions. Donato (2000) argues teachers need to focus more on students' orientation that are 'emergent interactions' based on participants' multiple goals during the conduct of classroom tasks rather than independent measures of the accumulation of knowledge.

## **Re-Orientation**

Wang (1996) showed that classroom group work is best conceived as internal goal-directed actions of the students rather than passive adherence to external task demands. This study showed how different groups continually altered their orientations to each other and to the task, as they progressed through it, based on their goals, desires, and motivations.

Through analysis of non-native speakers in a text recall task Roebuck (2000) contends that learners' orientations, what they think a task is about, cannot be determined a priori. In her study learners often reinterpret the meaning and intent of a task according to what they think the task is about and in relation to what counts as successful completion for themselves while engaged in the task on-line.

Learners in Roebuck's (2000) text recall task exhibited various orientations to the task which included attempts to memorize the text, summarize it, comprehend it, distance themselves from the content of their writing, and reframe the task when the self was in danger of losing face. One learner reformatted the task putting himself on the same level as the researcher. Roebuck defines activity as how learners-as agents-construct and make the task their own. She concludes that researchers need to discover the subjects' activity rather attempt to predict their unpredictable complex activity (Roebuck, 2000).

## **Problems for Task-Based Learning**

R. Ellis (1999, cited in Lantolf, 2000b) believes that the sociocultural perspective problematizes task-based learning because it strips the ability to grade tasks independently from an individual learners' ZPD. Lantolf (2000b) claims the perspective of tasks as behavior eliciting devices privileges language acquisition over learner agency. He points out that, if learners do not exhibit the behaviors predicted by the tasks, one could mistakenly jump to the conclusion that there is a problem with the learner and not the task.

## **Discussion**

This paper has given a general overview of TBLT methodologies and a sociocultural approach to tasks and SLA. In section I, three methodologies to TBLT, their justification, and their approach to implementation were discussed. A brief outline of TBLT research was provided illustrating some of the task categories that have been derived from this research, and some of the broad problems which still confront TBLT such as task classification, task difficulty, and task complexity.

Section II proposed common areas TBLT and SCT share and points of intersection. Both are seen to attempt to inject more context into language learning, and both use tasks as a medium as teaching/researching devices. The two constructs also cross paths where in TBLT the degree that meaning is related to the real world is primary while in SCT it is through the interaction that meaning is made.

Section III discussed the rationale for SCT which emphasizes the study of the system of language as a whole in instances of activity, rather than the study of parts of the system of language. This justifies SCT in that when language is studied in parts it is difficult to reconstruct them into a working whole. Five key components mediation, activity theory, private speech, regulation, and the ZPD for the analysis of activity and talk in tasks were introduced.

Finally in section IV, research grounded in a sociocultural theory of development in expert/novice mediated discourse, peer mediated discourse, and research specifically related to tasks was reviewed. It seems certainly clear from the expert-novice/classroom discourse research that dialogic oriented instruction leads to more opportunities for use, and negotiation of meaning which may lead to deeper processing or internalization. This research shows how learners who are proleptically instructed and lead within the ZPD "far outperform" comparison groups. It pushes instructors to think about the opportunities that they make available and about the opportunities that they extend to their learners for dialogic interaction in order to work developmentally within the ZPD. Task related research from an SCT perspective reveals contrasting behavior and activity of learners within tasks. It brings a more microscopic view to what happens inside tasks highlighting learners' orientation and re-orientation in tasks. It reveals how important it is to observe not simply the outcome in tasks, but what learners do as they progress through them.

### Conclusions

To conclude, the implementation of a completely task-based curriculum with its wide-ranging scope is a difficult task in and of itself. As intimidating and overwhelming as the selection and grading of tasks combined with the individual agency that learners bring to the tasks may be, this paradox brings to fore the freedom and flexibility it allows the instructor or researcher to mediate between the two perspectives. TBLT and SCT are highly compatible. In light of the research emerging from SCT it is proposed that use of sociocultural frameworks may provide richer understandings of learners engaged in various forms of TBLT. This should also make it possible to gain further insight to the nature of TBLT methodologies. In this way then it may be possible to push forward using SCT and TBLT to triangulate what and how learners do what they do under task conditions to create and maximize learning-centered second language acquisition under the rubrics of TBLT.

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