Part One

Theory and Research

Chapter 1

Why TBLT?

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 *in*voluntary 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

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[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

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[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 subskills 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-

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[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 *in*consistent 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 institutions[4] 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

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[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

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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 quali-fication. 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 differ-ences and underlying psycholinguistic processes is more important for language learn-ing 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 volun-tarily 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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