

# **Task-Based Language Teaching and Research in EFL Classrooms: An Interview with Dr. Parvaneh Tavakoli<sup>1</sup>**

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Photo provided by Dr. Parvaneh Tavakoli

## **Abstract**

In the 80s, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) emerged in response to a need for learner-centred teaching approaches which aim at developing communicative skills and, particularly, fluency. Since then, TBLT has become a popular approach for teaching and learning languages around the world. The reason for its popularity is because learners can use the language communicatively through the performance and attainment of tasks. However, there is a growing amount of research evidence which suggests that the effectiveness of this approach in the language classroom can be limited by complex, yet interrelated, factors which are cognitive, perceptual, practical and pedagogical in nature. In order to better understand the principles of the TBLT approach and how language teachers in Mexico can adopt it more effectively in their classrooms, we conducted an interview with Dr. Parvaneh Tavakoli, who is known to be a leading researcher in the fields of Second Language Acquisition, Multilingualism, Teacher Development and, especially, Task-Based Research and Teaching. We hope that the information discussed in this interview is useful for language teachers in Mexico who are interested in using TBLT in their classrooms, and/or have seen limitations in its implementation and achievement.

## **Resumen**

En los 80s, la enseñanza de lenguas basada en tareas surge en respuesta a la necesidad de enfoques de enseñanza centrados en el estudiante los cuales desarrollen sus habilidades comunicativas y especialmente su fluidez. Desde entonces este enfoque ha sido popular para enseñar y aprender lenguas a nivel mundial. La razón de su popularidad se debe a que los estudiantes pueden usar la lengua de forma comunicativa a través del desarrollo y logro de tareas. Sin embargo, evidencia de investigaciones sugiere que la efectividad de este enfoque en el salón de clase puede ser limitada por factores complejos e interrelacionados los cuales son de naturaleza cognitiva, perceptual y práctica. Con la intención de entender mejor los principios de la enseñanza de lenguas basada en tareas y cómo los maestros de lengua en México pueden adoptar este enfoque de mejor manera en el salón de clase, realizamos una entrevista con la Dra. Parvaneh Tavakoli quien es considerada una investigadora líder en el área de Adquisición de Segundas Lenguas, Multilingüismo, Desarrollo de Profesores y particularmente en la Investigación y Enseñanza Enfocada en Tareas. Esperamos que la información de esta entrevista sea de utilidad para maestros de lengua en México quienes están interesados en usar un enfoque basado en tareas y/o han visto limitaciones en su implementación y efectividad en el salón de clase.

## **Introduction**

Recently, it has been generally accepted that teaching and learning a language requires learners to adopt and maintain an agentive role in developing language learning (Garcia

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Ponce, 2016). This recent role has encouraged them to possess an awareness of the importance of their participation, use of interactional strategies, and L2 learning opportunities. These views underpin communicative approaches, for example, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT).

For more than three decades, TBLT has been a popular approach to teach and learn second and foreign languages. This is because TBLT is believed to provide learners with meaningful opportunities to use the language creatively and communicatively (Ellis, 2003, 2006, 2012; Nunan, 2004; Prabhu, 1987). Central to this approach lies the concept of 'task', which can be defined as a classroom activity which "involves learners in comprehending, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilising their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form" (Nunan, 2004, p.4). In this definition, we can see that while performing tasks, the target language is used in order to achieve a communicative purpose. Tasks are therefore assumed to influence learners' oral performance quantitatively and qualitatively, having an impact on their grammatical knowledge. Motivated by these ideas, TBLT has become an important element in language syllabus design. This has resulted in the reformulation of educational policies in both English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings which adopt a needs-based approach, a focus on interaction to learn, the use of authentic texts, greater opportunities for learners to focus on the learning process itself, the interplay between learners' own personal experiences, and the relationship between classroom language learning and language use outside the classroom (Nunan, 2004). All in all, tasks are considered to be important instructional materials that language teachers and learners can use inside and outside the classroom to promote interlanguage development.

In Mexican educational contexts, where English is mostly learned as a foreign language, there have been some attempts to adopt communicative approaches, including TBLT. However, teaching and learning practices tend to be dominated by focused-on-forms practices, during which grammar and vocabulary instruction predominates. As suggested by Garcia Ponce (2016), the dominance of grammar instruction and the limited effectiveness of communicative approaches (i.e., TBLT and Communicative Language Teaching) can be motivated by an interplay of several factors which are complex, yet interrelated, in nature.

In order to understand better how teachers in Mexico can implement TBLT to teach English, we conducted an interview with Dr. Parvaneh Tavakoli, who is considered to be a leading scholar in the field of Second Language Acquisition and, particularly, Task-Based Language Teaching and Research. The aim of the article is fourfold. First, it intends to inform Mexican teachers of (some) principles that they can follow in order to adopt a TBLT perspective. Second, it aims to present the challenges that teachers may encounter while implementing tasks in their practices and how teachers can best address them in order to ensure the effectiveness of tasks. Third, the article attempts to discuss some ideas and findings concerning task-based research. Fourth, it is hoped that the information discussed in this interview orients the readers' attention towards tasks as classroom activities which can be useful to ensure language achievement.

## **Background**

Dr. Parvaneh Tavakoli currently works as an Associate Professor at the Department of English Language and Applied Linguistics of the University of Reading, United Kingdom. Her education background was focused on the English language by having studied a BA

in English Translation (Azad University, Iran), an MA in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (IUST, Tehran, Iran) and a PhD in Applied Linguistics at King's College London. Dr. Parvaneh Tavakoli's research interests include, but are not limited to, Second Language Acquisition, Second Language Literacy and Oracy, Task-Based Language Teaching, Oral Fluency, English Language Teacher Education, Quantitative Approaches to Language Research, Globalisation and Higher Education. She has published extensively on TBLT and the effects of tasks on learners' complexity, accuracy, lexis and fluency (CALF) (please refer to Appendix I to see a complete list of her prominent publications). Based on the fact that she is an expert on TBLT, and our intention is to better understand how Mexican EFL teachers can implement the principles of TBLT in their classrooms, we interviewed Dr. Tavakoli as follows.

### **The Interview**

*Cassandra:* Dr. Tavakoli, tell us about your line of research,

*Parvaneh:* In general, I am interested in Second Language Acquisition. More specifically, I am interested in the effects of tasks on language teaching and learning. On the one hand, I am very curious to investigate what happens when a second language learner develops knowledge and/or skills in some areas of the second language. On the other hand, I am keen to find out what teachers can do to promote this process.

*Edgar Emmanuell:* What motivated you to investigate these research areas?

*Parvaneh:* I think it was during my master's study that I got really interested in learning and teaching English from a research perspective. I remember that in a Phonology module, I got really interested in identifying ways that I can help my learners become better speakers of the language and pronounce the language more intelligibly. As teachers, we were all frustrated with the way language teaching was working in our classes. I had worked in institutions where the Audiolingual Method was promoted. I remember that at times my bosses would walk in the corridors of the language schools to spy on us and to see whether we were using the first language, or even to find out whether we were sitting in our desks. So, coming from that kind of background, I thought that there must be a better way of teaching English, and I was then introduced to Task-Based Language Teaching.

*Cassandra:* What are the challenges that you have faced while conducting task-based research and teaching?

*Parvaneh:* I see a few challenges in task-based language research and teaching. One of the first challenges is that it is a relatively new area of inquiry. Task-based language teaching was very much quantitatively oriented, but we are very pleased to see that task-based language teaching is not only lab-based research, but it is classroom-based. Also, a wider range of researchers with interests in qualitative enquiry, in ethnography, in quantitative research are now involved in TBLT. Another challenge that I can see is that it is difficult to convince teachers to work with researchers, or researchers to work with teachers collaboratively to investigate tasks. I really believe that if teachers and researchers came together in all areas of Applied Linguistics, particularly in task-based language teaching, we could make a long way much shorter. Our needs and wishes are shared, why not work together at this? And this is my wish, really.

*Cassandra:* What suggestions would you give to teachers who are interested in conducting task-based research?

*Parvaneh:* As you can see, over the past two decades, the field of TBLT has suddenly grown. This means there is a huge scope for development. Number one, I really advise younger researchers to come along and take the existing research and develop it further. The other advice is that we need researchers who are keen to look at TBLT from other perspectives and paradigms. I refer to a paper by Foster and Ohta (2005), who looked at tasks from two very different perspectives: sociocultural and cognitive. This is only one example, but we need more people who can work together from interactional, cognitive, social and psycholinguistic perspectives. This would strengthen TBLT research. Without such collaborations, our knowledge of the field would remain very limited.

*Edgar Emmanuell:* We know that defining a 'task' is a challenge, but, from your perspective, how would you define a 'speaking task'?

*Parvaneh:* To me, a task is a classroom activity in which the main purpose in completing the task is communicating a message, communicating a meaning through the use of language, but not limited to the use of language. Another important characteristic of a task, from my perspective, is to what extent this mirrors what students do in real life, beyond the borders of classroom. Finally, a task should be evaluated in terms of task completion. This would help learners to see what objectives there are, what they are expected to achieve, and what they need to do and learn to ensure task completion. That's how I define a task.

*Cassandra:* Why do you think tasks have been important instructional materials to teach and learn the language?

*Parvaneh:* I think the interest in tasks comes from teachers' frustration with traditional teaching and learning methods. Tasks provide real opportunities for student interaction and communication. Tasks allow learners to notice the gap between what they know and what they need to know. Through using tasks, learners identify the grammatical structure and words that they do not know. I think all these points help teachers and learners see the benefits of tasks, and for using them in their language classrooms.

*Edgar Emmanuell:* According to your experience, what would be some potential constraints for using them in the language classroom?

*Parvaneh:* That's a very good question! I think many teachers are interested in tasks, but a large majority of teachers see many constraints the moment they start using them in classrooms. I think the very first constraint is lack of teacher training. A large majority of teachers that I have worked with either do not know tasks and TBLT very well or cannot use tasks communicatively. We hardly ever provide enough teacher training to our teachers on their BA and MA programmes about what a task is and how a task can be used in classrooms. In addition to this, another constraint that I can see is that we have done a lot of research in task-based language teaching and learning, but this has hardly ever been clearly translated into practice. Moreover, there are limitations in terms of practicality. If you are teaching a class of 55 students, using interactive tasks could be very difficult, if not impossible. Students may also have perceptions against tasks. I myself have taught English classes where students say that "this looks like a game, I have not come to this class to play a game. I am here to learn grammar, teach me some grammar." For this reason, students' and teachers' perceptions could also be a constraint.

*Cassandra:* Do you recommend that teachers use tasks at a specific proficiency level, for example, at advanced levels, instead of basic levels?

*Parvaneh:* I think in principle this is against the rationale behind task-based language teaching. A task is an activity that can basically be given to learners at different levels of proficiency. I am sure there are tasks that are more suitable for lower-level learners. I don't really think that there are certain task types that are more useful for certain levels of proficiency.

*Edgar Emmanuell:* In order to teach the language more effectively, what suggestions would you give to Mexican English teachers who are readers of this journal and who are trying to use tasks in the classroom?

*Parvaneh:* The advice that I am going to give to them is based on my own experience. As teachers, our main responsibility in class is to help our learners identify techniques, strategies and resources that they can use to develop more efficient language skills. I think those efficient language skills come to learners when they identify what they need to do with the language. Once that has been identified, teachers can then work with them to identify tasks that can help them get there. I suggest collaborating with students in identifying needs and tasks that can help them achieve their objectives would be one way of dealing with the challenge of teaching and learning effectively.

*Cassandra:* The last question, what are your future plans regarding research?

*Parvaneh:* That's a difficult question! My interest has been task-based language teaching and learning for the past 20 years, starting from my MA up to now. But recently, I have focused more on the fluency aspect of the CALF framework. So, my aim is to be in a situation where I can say teachers of second languages have a clear idea about what fluency is and how they can help their learners become fluent speakers of the languages they teach. Currently, as I am working with teachers, I can see they have great knowledge of the field, and that they are reflective. But because there has not been enough training on fluency, teacher's knowledge of fluency and teacher's confidence in what they can do to help their learners become fluent is very limited. I really hope that I can help teachers around the world to develop a better understanding of fluency, and to acquire skills and confidence in helping their learners become fluent speakers of the language they are teaching them.

## Conclusions

As discussed in the interview, tasks can be effectively used to advance the development of learners' interlanguage because these instructional materials provide opportunities to use the language communicatively in oral and written forms while attempting to attain the objective of tasks. Depending on their characteristics, tasks can be useful for promoting the development of several aspects of the target language. However, as discussed by Dr. Parvaneh Tavakoli, a TBLT approach can be hindered by teachers' lack of knowledge regarding how to use tasks, limited research discourse on the use of tasks inside the classroom, and teachers' and learners' perceptions.

We believe that the report titled *An Overview of Approaches to Second Language Acquisition and Instructional Practices* by Tavakoli and Jones (2018) can provide teachers with general ideas and principles concerning TBLT and other communicative methods. The book *Task-Based Language Teaching* by Nunan (2004) is literature that teachers can read to learn and implement principles of TBLT in language classes, involving planning, implementation, assessment and reflection. Another piece of work that we suggest reading for those are interested in adopting a TBLT approach is *Language Teaching Research & Language Pedagogy* by Ellis (2012). Moreover, we believe that more research is conducted in order to understand how tasks can effectively be used in the language classrooms.

Concerning language teacher training programmes, they should provide pre- and in-service teachers with the opportunity to design and implement tasks so that they understand their characteristics, and how they can be used to promote language learning.

Based on the benefits of tasks and their research findings, we encourage Mexican teachers to use tasks to teach English. This does not have to involve a change of teaching perspective and methods. Rather, teachers can incorporate tasks to promote the acquisition of speaking and writing, and reading and listening skills.

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