BACKWARD ENGINEERING THE CONCEPT OF 'TASK' IN TBLT FOR EAP

A/Prof Jonathan Newton

Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

Hong Kong Metropolitan University

Research Institute for Bilingual Learning and Teaching (RiBiLT)

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OUTLINE

1. Setting the scene: A case study

2. Dimensions of teacher cognition for TBLT

   - The theoretical dimension

   - The conceptual dimension – Back-engineering strong and weak versions of TBLT in EAP
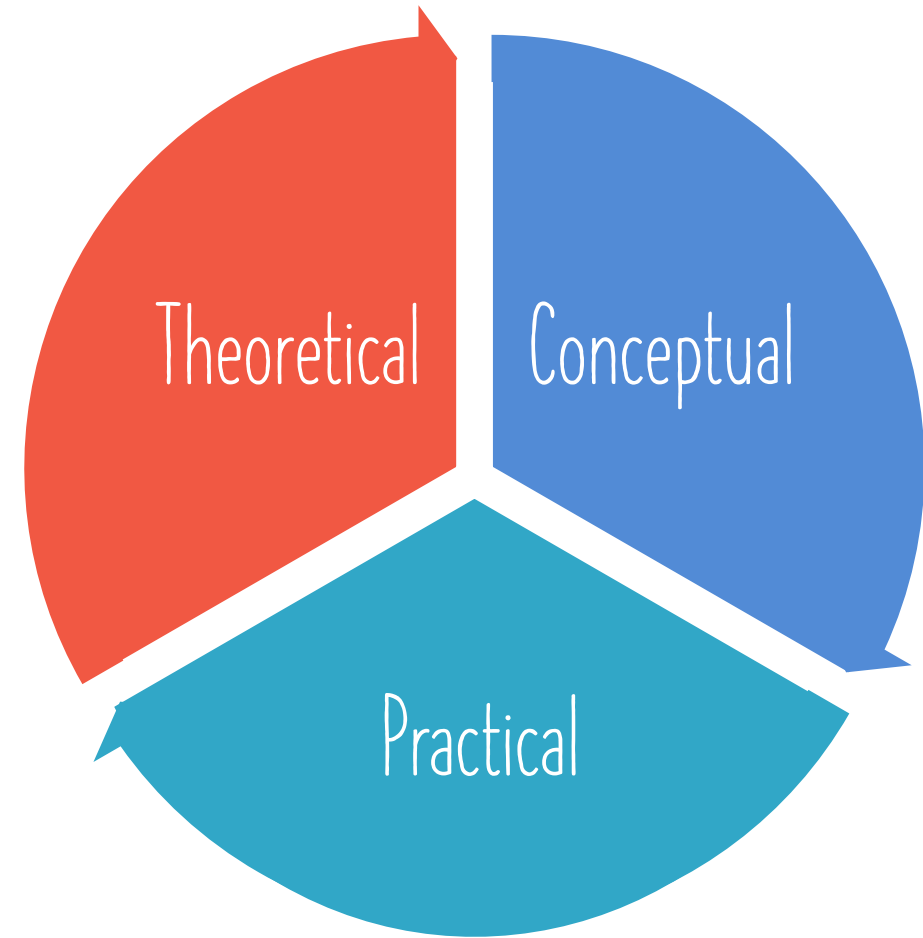
3. Conclusions
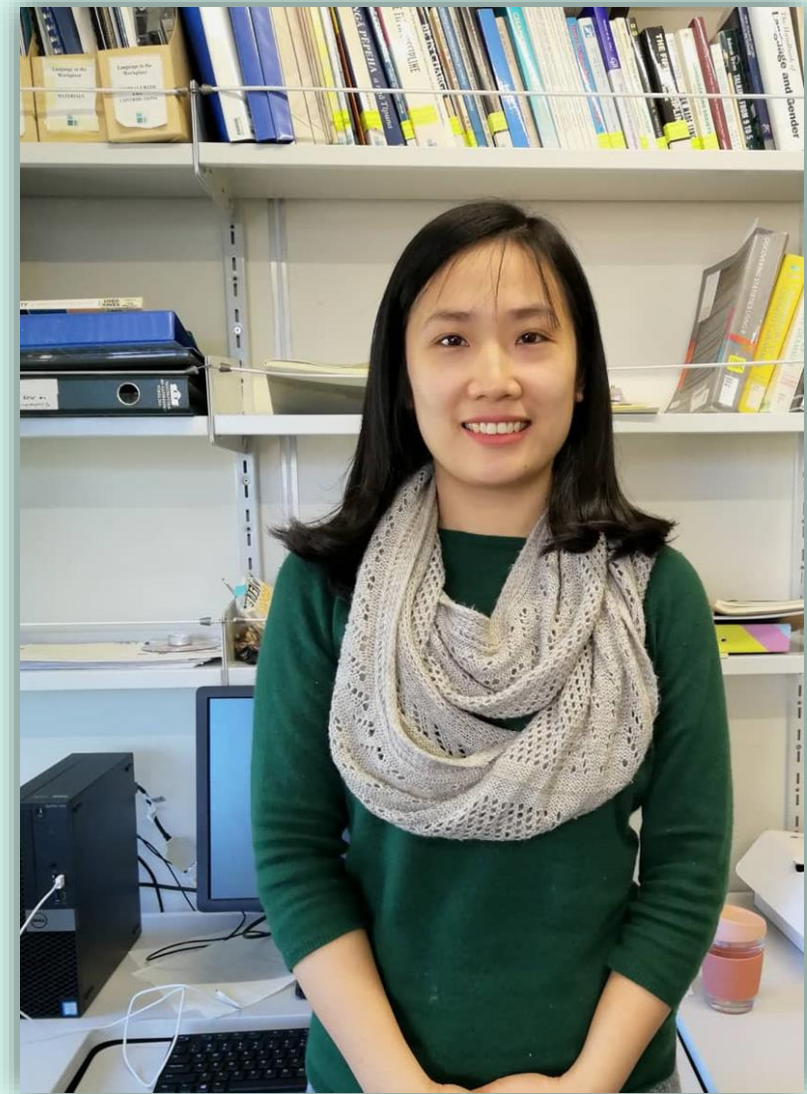
Theoretical

Conceptual

Practical

Figure 1: Three dimensions of teacher cognition for TBLT

Dr Hao Thi Thanh Dao

Dao, H., & Newton, J. (2021). TBLT perspectives on teaching from an EFL textbook at a Vietnam university. *Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 24(2), 99–126. https://doi.org/10.37213/cjal.2021.31371

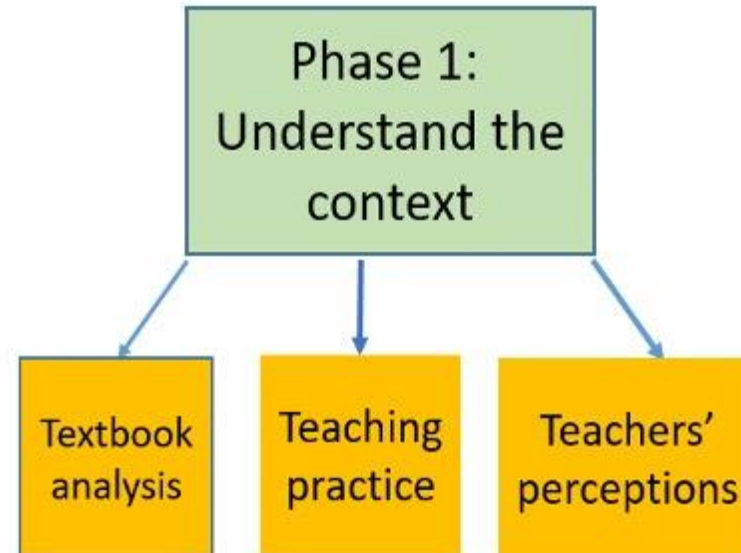# A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH (PAR) STUDY

Context: EFL classes for Non-English majors at a Vietnamese university

Participants: Three teachers and their classes: *New Cutting Edge (Intermediate)* (2007)

"Dull classes"

"Demotivated students"

A CASE OF ONE TEACHER'S TEACHING OF ONE TXB UNIT

	Activities in 1 unit	Retained	Adapted	Added	Removed	Total
Non communicative	**9** (23%)	9		12		**21** (49%)
Pre communicative	**18** (46%)	13	2		3	**15** (35%)
Communication	**10** (26%)		5		5	**5** (12%)
Structured communication	**2** (5%)	1	1			**2** (4%)
Total	**39 (100%)**					**43 (100%)**

FOR EXAMPLE ...

Removed interactive activities

... or turned them into tcher-led Q&A practice

Translated text into Vietnamese (with Ss)

2 Work in pairs. Make a list of eight foods that are healthy and eight that are unhealthy.

healthy   unhealthy
green vegetables   chocolate

3 a **MD** Read these ideas about healthy eating. Do you think they are

Coff...

Ther...

Fruit juice is good for you.

Carrots help you see in the dark.

It's okay not to eat breakfast.

Food: Facts and myths

1 _Fruit juice is good for you._

True and false. Natural fruit juice is good for you, but it can be bad for your teeth. So yes, have some orange juice with your breakfast or lunch, but don't drink any juice between meals. Try water instead. Up to eight glasses of water a day is good for you, and ...

... a good idea. (If you want a healthy snack, try some nuts or melon.)

3 _____

True and false. People drink coffee when they are tired, but it isn't very healthy so don't have more than two cups a day and don't drink any coffee before you go to bed. Tea is generally good for you, but drink it with lemon and don't put any milk or sugar in it! Green tea is especially healthy.

4 _____

Teacher as knowledge provider

PART 2
WHAT EAP TEACHERS NEED TO KNOW THEORETICALLY ABOUT TASKS AND TBLT
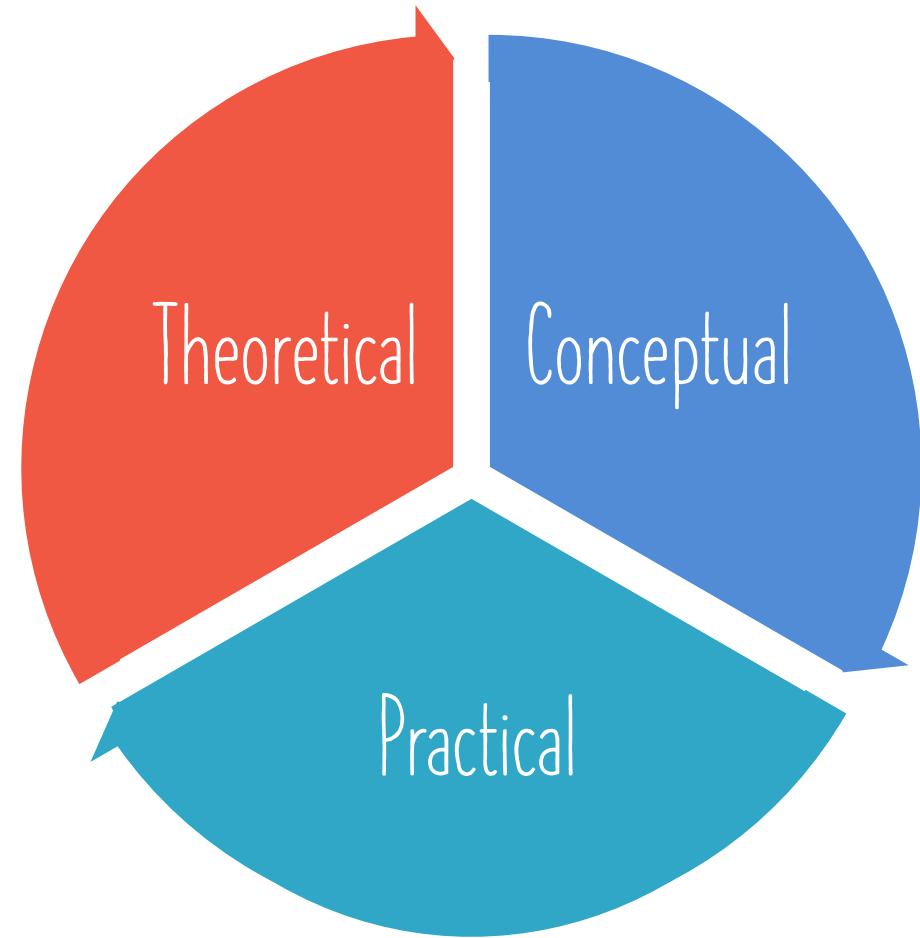
Theoretical

Conceptual

Practical

Figure 1: Three dimensions of teacher cognition for TBLT

1. THEORETICAL – WHAT IS THE RATIONALE FOR TBLT?

- SLA is a process of building a functioning L2 system

- A learner's emerging L2 system is a "dynamic, non-linear, complex system" (Larsen-Freeman, 2012)

- Acquisition is largely an incidental process (where the learner's primary focus is meaningful use)

- This process builds implicit knowledge (i.e. not requiring conscious attention), which is the foundation of a productive L2 system.

- Deliberate learning (FoF) and explicit knowledge are also important, especially for vocab learning.

- FoF is most effective when integrated into TBLT??

- Draws on education theories that emphasize experiential, multi-modal learning and active learner participation.

'... it is not necessary to choose between form-based and meaning-based instruction. Rather, the challenge is to find the best balance between these two orientations'
(Waters, 2012: 442)

FOF: BRIDGING IMPLICIT & EXPLICIT LEARNING PROCESSES

The complex and abstract mental representation of language is mainly built up through implicit learning processes as learners attempt to comprehend [and produce] messages [...] in the language.

Explicit learning plays a more minor role in the language acquisition process, contributing to metalinguistic knowledge rather than mental representation of language. (Lichtman & VanPatten, 2021, p. 288)

TEXTBOOKS: DRAGGING THE ANCHOR?

"Findings from the fields of applied linguistics and SLA, which should have fed into language learning approaches and hence language coursebooks, have been slow to do so in any systematic or significant way."

(Mishan, 2022, p. 1)

PART 3:
WHAT EAP TEACHERS NEED TO KNOW CONCEPTUALLY ABOUT TASKS AND TBLT
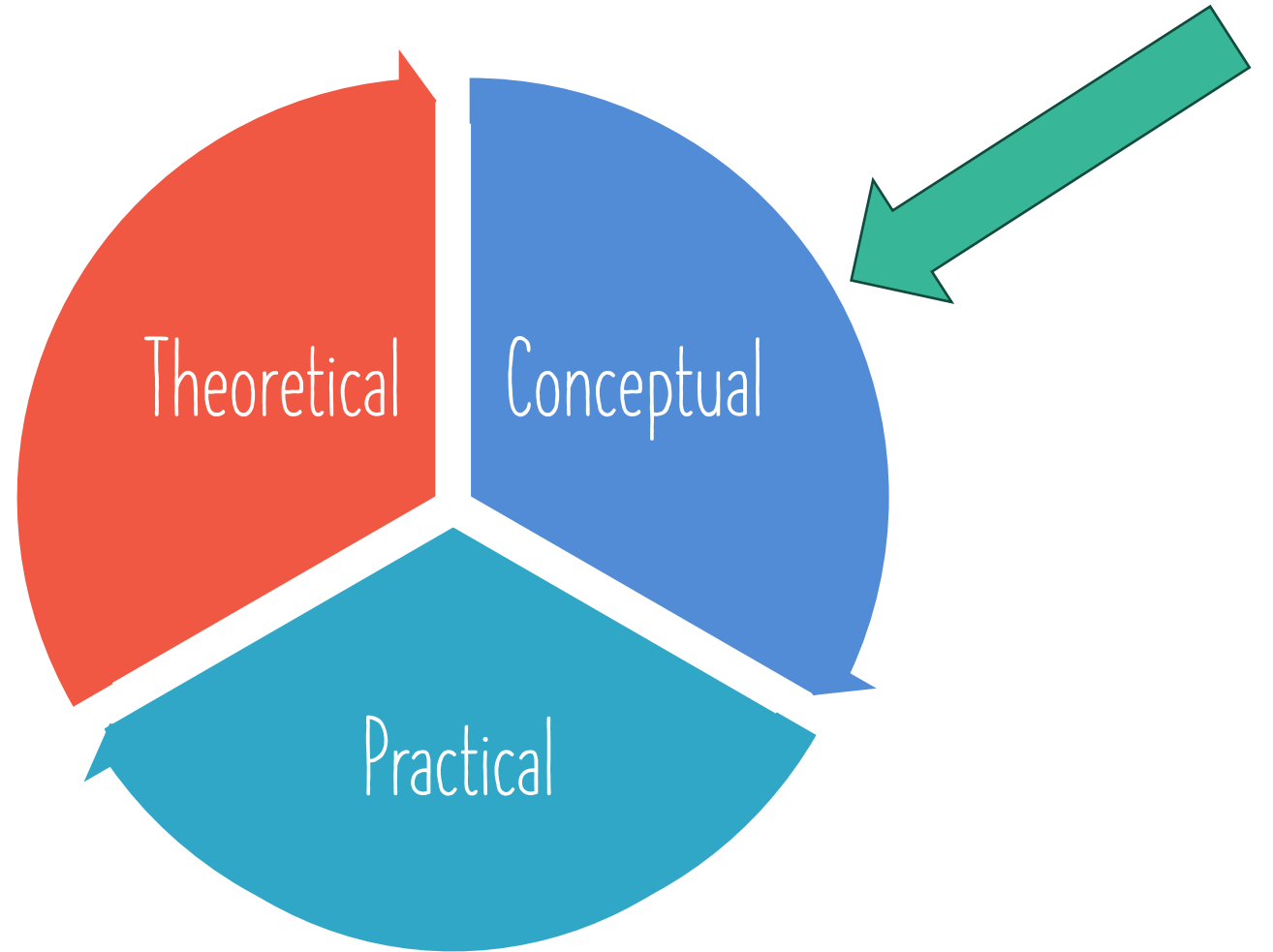

Figure 1: Three dimensions of teacher cognition for TBLT

STRONG AND 'WEAK' VERSIONS OF TBLT

STRONG TBLT

"... by 'task' is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at play, and in between. Tasks are the things people will tell you they do if ask them and they are not applied linguists" (Long, 1985, p. 89)

- Needs analysis - to identify target tasks

- Emphasis in situational authenticity

- Curriculum design - involves developing a sequence of pedagogic versions of target tasks:
  - ❑ Vertical dimension - list of target tasks
  - ❑ Horizontal dimension - progressively more complex pedagogic versions of each target task

BACKWARD ENGINEERING IS INTRINSIC TO STRONG TBLT

Steps in strong TBLT:

1. Identify key conceptual and linguistic demands of target tasks.

2. Develop pedagogic versions of target tasks using conceptual frameworks such as:
   - Robinson's (2022) Cognition Hypothesis
   - Skehan's (1998) Trade-off (Limited Attention Capacity) Hypothesis.

3. Engage learners in pedagogic tasks, providing opportunities for FoF (incidental attention to language forms while primarily focused on meaning) during and around the task performance.

FOF IN STRONG TBLT

1. Primarily reactive FoF:

- Notice gaps in comprehension or production and find resources to fill them (Skehan, 2014b)

- Communication problems generate negotiation for meaning (NfM) sequences (Long, 1996; Newton, 2013)

2. Pre-task planning (Skehan, 2014a)

3. Post-task consolidation (Skehan, 2014b)

REACTIVE FOF: NFM

S6   hypnotist, hypnotist I, I, I know, yes

S4   hyp– I don't know

S5   hypnotist, y'know? know a bit, a little so you can–

S6   I guess that it is gipnotist, hypnotist, it's profession– person who make hypnos – like psychological, it's special name of profession in medicine

S4   ohh medicine

S6   sometimes it's by show on tv when hypnotist go between many people and sleep, sleep, and persuade ahh people make anything

S4   ahhh ohh yeah, I understand –

S6   – hypnotist, I think that it is very high qualification, I not sure

S5   yes yes y'know this word?, very good

(Newton, personal data)

4 Researching a topic

A Information gathering

The table on the right gives information about inequality in the world.

The second column shows the Gini rank of the country from worst to best: the higher the number, the more equal the country.

The third column shows the Gini index, which measures the inequality in family income in a country on a scale from 0 to 1, but expressed as a percentage in the table on the right. If the income is more evenly distributed, the Gini index is lower. If rich people in the country have much higher incomes than the poor people, the Gini index is higher.

The fourth column shows the percent of income earned by the top 1% of earners.

Work with a partner. One is Student A; one is Student B. Student A: use the table on the right. Student B: use the table on . Ask your partner for the missing information and complete the chart.

Inequality in the world			
Country	Gini rank	Gini index	National income earned by top 1%
Argentina		42.3	14.5%
Australia	116	34.3	
China	75		14%
Colombia		54.2	17.7%
India	99		22%
Indonesia	76	37.9	
Japan		32.9	12.9%
South Africa	1		19.3%
South Korea	144	31.4	
Sweden		29.3	10%
UK	111		13.4%
USA	54	41.5	

Sources: CIA World Factbook 2023; Our World In Data 2023

B Interpreting and reporting results

1 Work in small groups. Discuss the questions below.

1 Which countries have the most equal and least equal societies? What do you know about these countries?

2 Which countries have the highest concentration of income in the hands of the top 1 percent?

3 In the graph below, match each point with the country it represents. What is the relationship between the Gini index and income earned by the top 1 percent?

4 What do you find most surprising about the data?

2 Share your group's ideas with the class.

We think that ... has a high/low index because ...

The graph shows that the relationship between wealth and income equality is ...

One thing we found difficult to interpret about the data is ...

WHAT COULD STRENGTHEN THIS TASK FROM A STRONG TBLT PERSPECTIVE?

1. Raise awareness of the demands of the target task and how this task prepares learners for it.

2. Add a reflective/evaluative phase in which learners assess their task performance (and that of their peers) against task accomplishment criteria.

3. Ensure principled (horizontal) progression of such pedagogic tasks across the textbook units, based on progressive approximation of the cognitive, interactional and linguistic demands of the target task.

Table 7. Three ways to conduct a micro-evaluation of classroom activities (adapted from Ellis, 2018, p. 236)

Evaluation Criterion	Approach	Data collection
Motivation and the student experience *Were the students motivated in the activity/lesson?*	Student-based	Self-report: exit slips; survey; interviews; post-lesson written reflection; post-lesson learning discussion (whole class)
Performance *Did the students perform as intended? Did they achieve the intended outcome?*	Response-based	Student artifacts (e.g., written responses to activities); transcriptions of classroom recordings; observation check lists.
Development *Is there evidence that learners have acquired new language or achieved greater control over their existing L2 resources?*	Learning-based	Uptake-charts*; pre- and post-tests; transcriptions of classroom recordings.

TASK SEQUENCING CRITERIA (ROBINSON, 2001, P. 30)

Task complexity
(cognitive factors)
(a) resource-directing
e.g., +/– few elements
+/– here-and-now
+/– no reasoning demands
(b) resource-depleting
e.g., +/– planning
+/– single task
+/– prior knowledge

Task conditions
(interactional factors)
(a) participation variables
e.g., open/closed
one-way/two-way
convergent/divergent
(b) participant variables
e.g., gender
familiarity
power/solidarity

Task difficulty
(learner factors)
(a) affective variables
e.g., motivation
anxiety
confidence
(b) ability variables
e.g., aptitude
proficiency
intelligence

Sequencing criteria
Prospective decisions
about task units

Methodological influences
On-line decisions
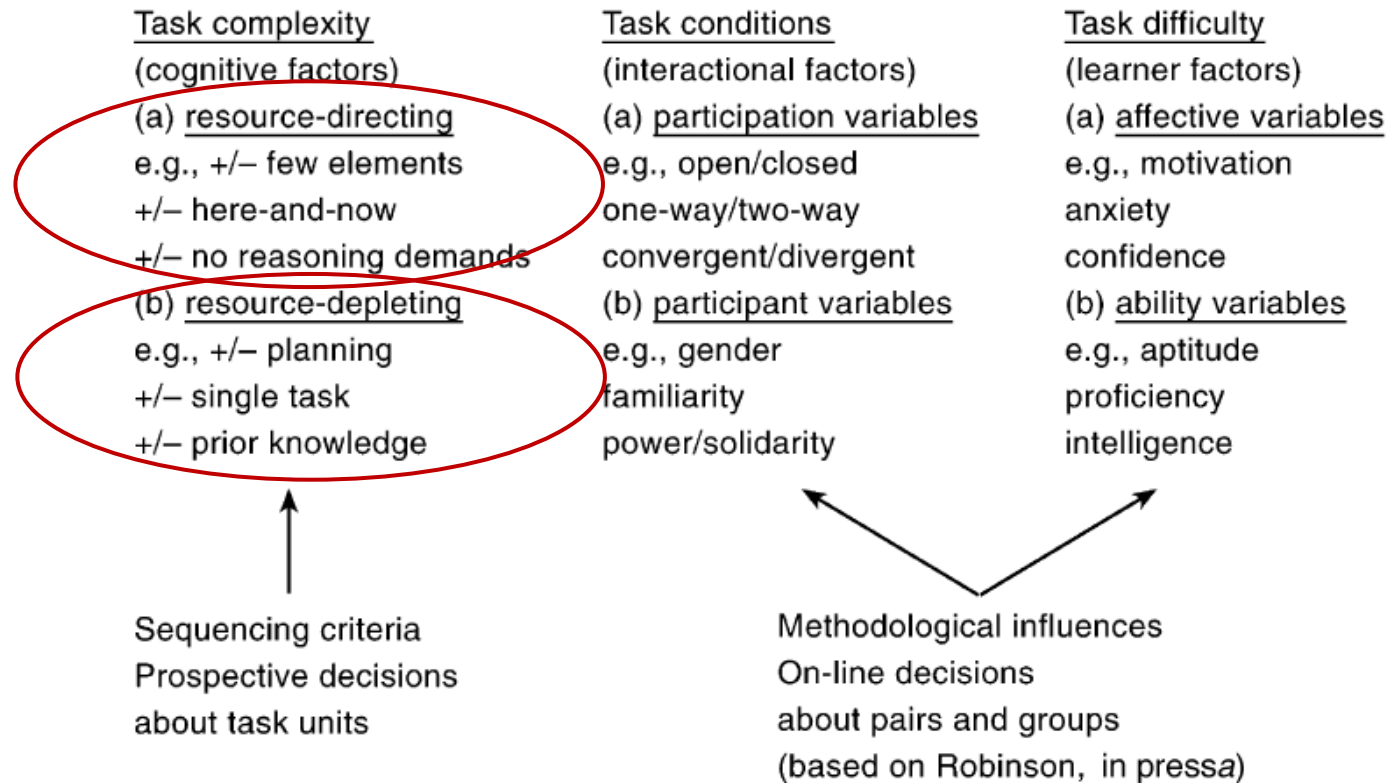about pairs and groups
(based on Robinson, in press*a*)

Figure 1: Task complexity, condition and difficulty

SO THAT WAS STRONG TBLT

- Based on back-engineering of target tasks

- Relatively easy to adopt in EAP, e.g., through theme-based units

- Possibly workable within a modular curriculum model (Ellis, 2018)
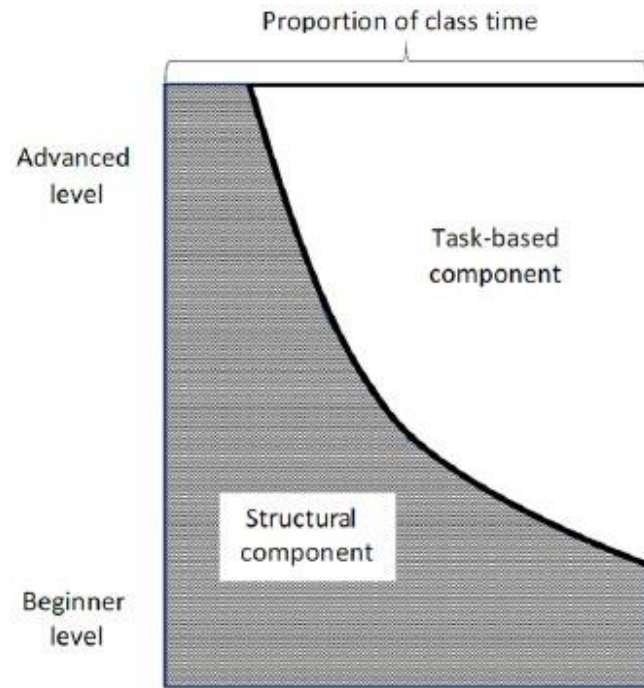
MODULAR CURRICULUM MODELS (ELLIS, 2019)
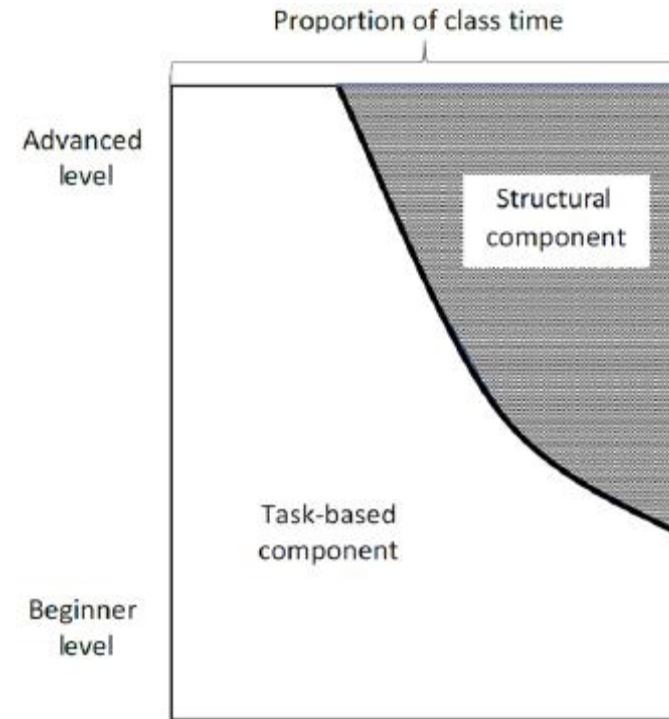

Fig 2: Structure first option

Fig 3: Task first option

STRONG TBLT

How close to this model is your teaching?

What do you think of strong TBLT?

'WEAK' TBLT: TASK-SUPPORTED LANGUAGE TEACHING (ELLIS, 2009)

TSLT is relevant to contexts in which:

- NA and target tasks are not feasible as curriculum design principles

- Language teaching is textbook-based

- Learning goals are exam-focused

- Time constrained teaching

- Cultural expectations of a traditional teacher role and knowledge-based learning

TSLT is characterized by:

- A synthetic syllabus

- Focused tasks

- PPP-type lesson design

- Interactional rather than situational authenticity

BACK-ENGINEERING TASKS IN TSLT - POSSIBLE?

No target tasks to back-engineer!

An alternative approach to backward engineering:

1. Establish criteria for defining tasks (and distinguish tasks from non-tasks)

2. Develop a taxonomy of task-types to help with task identification and classification

3. Use (1) and (2) to:
   - identify and strengthen textbook tasks
   - re-engineer non-tasks by adding task features

CRITERIA FOR DEFINING TASKS (ELLIS, 2018)

Meet 'MGOO'

- **Meaning** - The task encourages learners to attend primarily to meaning/messages.

- **Gap** - To complete the task, learners must fill a gap in information, reasoning, opinions, or experience.

- **Own resources** - In doing the task, learners need to draw on their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources rather than just reproducing structures they have been presented with.

- **Outcome** - The completed task produces a communicative outcome (e.g., a problem solved, agreement reached, etc.).

TYPES OF TASKS: A SAMPLE OF TASK TYPE DISTINCTIONS

Input or output based tasks   (listen & draw vs. talk about a topic)

One-way vs. two-way   (listen and draw vs. jigsaw reading)

Shared- vs. split-information   (group problem solving vs. information gap tasks)

Divergent vs. convergent   (share your travel stories vs. agree on a ranking of items)

Open vs. closed   (compare experiences vs. find the correct answer)

STRONG TBLT AND EAP MATERIALS – CONGRUENCE?

4 **Researching a topic**

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The fourth column shows the percent of income earned by the top 1% of earners.

Work with a partner. One is Student A; one is Student B. Student A: use the table on the right. Student B: use the table on **page 100**. Ask your partner for the missing information and complete the chart.

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Sources: CIA World Factbook 2023; Our World In Data 2023

1. MGOO?
2. Task type?
3. Situational or interactional authenticity?

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4 What do you find most surprising about the data?

more equal ← → less equal

Gini Index

2 Share your group's ideas with the class.

We think that ... has a high/low index because ...

The graph shows that the relationship between wealth and income equality is ...

One thing we found difficult to interpret about the data is ...

1. MGOO?
2. Task type?
3. Situational or interactional authenticity?

31

Plan a camp for teenagers

🎧 1 Cao Jing and Max are talking about camps. Listen to the conversation and tick what you hear about the camps.

But it gets tricky ...

INTERNATIONAL YOUTH CAMP

Talking about future activities

We'll learn useful skills.

There'll be students from different schools.

I'll learn to make a fire.

I plan to improve my spoken English.

I hope to make new friends.

We'll talk about teenage life.

🎧 2 Listen again. Underline the expressions in the sentences above that Cao Jing and Max use to talk about the future.

3 Work in groups. Plan a youth camp.

1 Think of ideas for the camp. You can use the questions below to get started.

- What kind of camp is it?
- Who will be there?
- What will they do?
- What will they learn?

2 Present your ideas for a youth camp to the class.

And trickier ...

Maria: Hi Kevin! What are you reading?

Kevin: Hello Maria! I'm reading a book about Vietnamese weddings.

Maria: I see. Do you need the information for a school assignment?

Kevin: Yes. I'm preparing for my presentation about the similarities and differences between a traditional Vietnamese wedding and a modern one.

Maria: That's interesting! So what are the similarities?

Kevin: Both weddings include the proposal ceremony, the engagement ceremony and the wedding ceremony.

Maria: And the differences?

Kevin: The ceremonies are less complicated in modern weddings.

Maria: Sounds better. I guess the bride and groom will be much happier if they don't have to waste money on unnecessary things.

Kevin: Well, in fact, wedding expenses these days are much greater than in the past.

3 **Read the conversation again and answer the questions.**

1. Why is Kevin reading a book about Vietnamese weddings?

2. What are the similarities between a traditional Vietnamese wedding and a modern one?

3. How have wedding ceremonies changed?

4. Do the couples get any kind of support?

5. What do you think about these changes?

✓   ✓   ✓   ?

M   G   O   O

16   Unit 7   Cultural Diversity

Source: *Tieng Anh 10* (2016) Unit 7

2 a Katie wants to eat healthily. Look at her shopping list on page 147 for two minutes, then close your book.

b Work in pairs. Can you rem... to buy? There are twelve thin...

She wants to b... apples and some ...

3 a When Katie goes shopping she forgets about her list! Look at the things she brings home and answer the questions.

a Which things from her list has she got?
b Which things from her list hasn't she got?

She's got some grapes but she hasn't got any oranges.

b Is there any unhealthy food in her shopping bag?

New Cutting Edge Elementary

M ✓
G ✓
O ✓
O ✓
O ✓

Language focus 2
some and *any*

Grammar

1 **W**e **u**s**e** **...** with uncountable and plural nouns. Complete the sentences with *some* and *any*, using the text to help you.

Have _____ orange juice with your breakfast.
Don't drink _____ juice between meals.
Water hasn't got _____ calories.
If you want a snack, try _____ nuts.

Circle the correct alternative.

We normally use *some / any* in positive sentences.
We normally use *some / any* in negative sentences.

Find two more examples of *some* and *any* in the text and underline them.

2 Notice that, in questions, we normally use *any*.
Is there any milk?
Have we got any eggs?

▶ Read Language summary C on page 153.

Practice

1 a Complete the sentences with *some* or *any*.

1 It's a good idea to drink _____ fruit juice between meals.
2 Water hasn't got _____ calories.
3 For a healthy snack, you can eat _____ nuts or _____ melon.
4 Don't drink _____ coffee before you go to bed – it's bad for you.
5 It's healthy to put _____ sugar in your tea.
6 Chocolate hasn't got _____ vitamins or minerals in it.
7 It's good to eat _____ pasta, rice or bread every day.
8 Don't eat _____ oil – it's very bad for you.

b Are the sentences true or false, according to the text?

Pronunciation

T6.3 Listen and notice the stress.

● /səm/ ●   ●   ● /eni/ ●
Eat some fruit.   Don't eat any biscuits.

Listen to the other sentences and practise the stress.
(Look at the tapescript on page 168 to help you.)

2 a Katie wants to eat healthily. Look at her shopping list on page 147 for two minutes, then close your book.

b Work in pairs. Can you remember what Katie wants to buy? There are twelve things.

She wants to buy some apples and some ...

3 a When Katie goes shopping she forgets about her list! Look at the things she brings home and answer the questions.

a Which things from her list has she got?
b Which things from her list hasn't she got?

She's got some grapes but she hasn't got any oranges.

b Is there any unhealthy food in her shopping bag?

M   X?

G   ✓

O   ?

O   ✓

Meaningful use or language practice?

New Cutting Edge Elementary

SO THAT WAS TSLT ...

1. Increasingly widespread

2. Adaptable

3. But current task criteria are not particularly teacher-friendly and difficult to reliably operationalize for the purpose of back-engineering textbook activities.

4. More research and development is needed here.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS
BACKWARD ENGINEERING THE CONCEPT OF 'TASK' IN TBLT FOR EAP

- The theoretical dimension: Often a gap between the SLA-based rationale for TBLT and teacher PCK
- The conceptual dimension - two areas that need attention
  - STRONG TBLT – Back-engineering target academic tasks is fundamental to EAP. It probably needs to be a more conscious and explicit process, and used in learner awareness-raising
  - TSLT: relies on a useable and interpretable set of task criteria -- backward engineering textbook activities shows gaps that need attention.
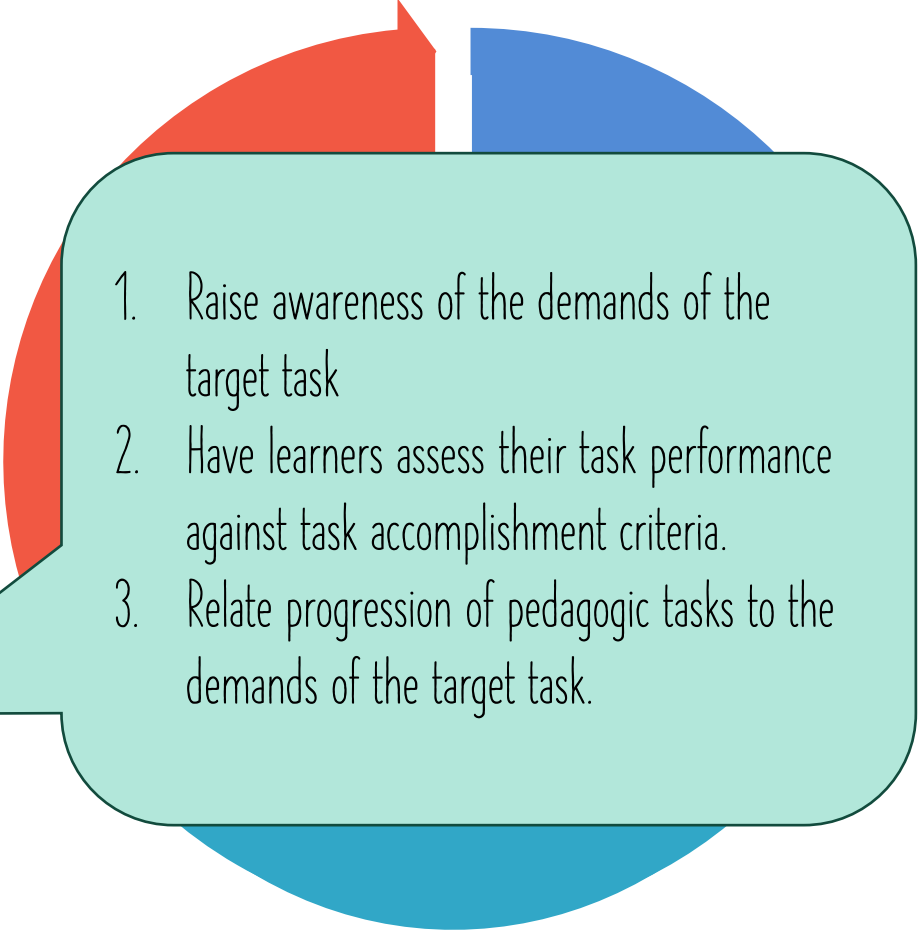 - In both versions, the concept of 'task' is a powerful lever for strengthening EAP.

1. Raise awareness of the demands of the target task
2. Have learners assess their task performance against task accomplishment criteria.
3. Relate progression of pedagogic tasks to the demands of the target task.

Figure 1: Three dimensions of teacher cognition for TBLT

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Thank you!   jonathan.newton@vuw.ac.nz