Second Language Acquisition and Task-Based Language Teaching
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### 3 Psycholinguistic Underpinnings: A Cognitive-Interactionist Theory of Instructed Second Language Acquisition (ISLA)

#### 3.1. Theoretical Disunity in Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

- **P1.** Purely incidental and implicit child L1A is overwhelmingly successful
- **P2.** Purely incidental and implicit adult L2A is highly variable and largely unsuccessful

#### 3.2. When Knowledge Is Incomplete: The Role of Theory

- **E1.** Adult SLA is maturationally constrained
- **E2.** Adults, so defined, are partially “disabled” language learners
- **P3.** Some classes of linguistic features in adult SLA are fragile
- **E3.** Implicit learning is still the default learning mechanism
- **E4.** Explicit learning (including focal attention) is required to improve implicit processing in adult SLA but is constrained
- **E5.** Attention is critical, at two levels
- **E6.** The interaction hypothesis
- **E7.** The role of negative feedback, including recasts

#### 3.3. A Cognitive-Interactionist Theory of ISLA: Problems and Explanations

- **P4.** Success and failure in adult SLA vary among and within individuals
- **E8.** Individual differences, especially input sensitivity, and linguistic differences, especially perceptual saliency, are responsible for variability in, and within, ultimate L2 attainment

#### 3.4. Summary

#### 3.5. Suggested Readings

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- **4.5. Emancipation**
- **4.6. Learner-Centeredness**
- **4.7. Egalitarian Teacher–Student Relationships**
- **4.8. Participatory Democracy**
- **4.9. Mutual Aid and Cooperation**

#### 4.10. Summary

#### 4.11. Suggested Readings

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Language teaching (LT) is notorious for methodological pendulum swings, amply documented in published histories of the field. Currently, “task-based” learning and teaching are increasingly fashionable, and many of the very same textbook writers and commercial publishers who made large sums of money out of the structural, notional, functional, topical, and lexical movements of the past 30 years are now repeating the performance with tasks. Most of what they are selling is task-based in name only, however. Miscellaneous “communication tasks” of various kinds, many not very communicative at all, and use of which pre-dates current ideas about task-based learning and teaching, have replaced exercises or activities, but, like their predecessors, are still used to deliver a pre-planned, overt or covert linguistic syllabus of one sort or another. Tasks are carriers of target structures and vocabulary items, in other words, not themselves the content of a genuine task syllabus. Their role lies in task-supported, not task-based, LT. Alternatively, such tasks figure as one strand in a so-called hybrid syllabus in textbooks whose authors and publishers claim to combine some or all of grammatical, lexical, notional, functional, topical, situational, and task syllabi under one visually attractive cover, seemingly untroubled by, or in some cases unaware of, their incompatible psycholinguistic underpinnings.

Such materials may or may not have merit, aside from their earning power – certainly, many students around the world have learned languages through (or despite?) their use, some to high levels, for a long time – but they are not what I mean by task-based LT, and I will not be spending much time on them in this book. Instead, I will focus on one of the few genuinely task-based approaches. It is not the only one, not necessarily the best one – an empirical question, after all, to which none of us has the final answer – and may ultimately turn out to have all sorts of weaknesses, but it is the one I have been developing over the past 30 years, with growing, and increasingly valuable, participation by a number of other researchers and classroom practitioners in many parts of the world, and so the one with which I am most familiar. Unlike synthetic linguistic syllabi, it is broadly consistent with what second language acquisition (SLA) research has shown about how learners acquire second and foreign languages and has been implemented in a variety of settings. From the beginning, back in 1980, I have referred to it as (uppercase) Task-Based Language Teaching (“TBLT,’ not to be confused with ‘BLT,’ the sandwich).

The purpose of this book, however, is not to “convert” readers to TBLT; many will feel they have achieved positive results without it. Some may find it attractive, some may
find parts of it worth including in different kinds of programs but reject other parts, and some may consider the whole thing an abomination. Nor is the purpose to provide a survey of the field of LT and applied linguistics, with equal time for all the many proposals out there. LT is a dynamic field, featuring a wide range of views on how best to carry it out, many of which conflict, and not all of which could possibly be correct. This book is intended as a contribution to the debate. My aim is to offer what I believe to be a rational argument for a particular approach, with supporting evidence from theory, research, and classroom experience, followed by a step-by-step description of how to implement TBLT for those interested in doing so. I am especially keen to show the linkage between theory and research findings in SLA, the process LT is designed to facilitate, and TBLT. I will make the case as explicitly as possible and as strongly as I feel warranted. The strength of an argument draws attention to an idea and simultaneously makes it easier for critics to focus on what it is about it that they find objectionable. Explicitness helps remove ambiguities, facilitates testing of ideas, and speeds up identification of flaws. That way lies progress, and faster progress.

I first outlined a primitive rationale for TBLT in courses at the University of Pennsylvania from 1980 to 1982 and sketched the ideas publicly in a plenary address to the Inter-Agency Language Roundtable at Georgetown in 1983, a presentation that appeared in print two years later (Long 1985a). Expanded and modified considerably ever since in response to theoretical developments, the results of empirical studies, and classroom experience, TBLT remains a work in progress. Motivated by research findings in educational psychology, curriculum and instruction, SLA, an embryonic theory of instructed second language acquisition (ISLA; see Chapter 3), and principles from the philosophy of education (see Chapter 4), it has gradually evolved into a comprehensive approach to course design, implementation, and evaluation. First and foremost, it remains an attempt to respond to the growing demand for accountable communicative LT programs designed for learners with real-world needs for functional L2 abilities.

In the first four chapters, which make up Part One of this book, ‘Theory and Research,’ I review TBLT’s rationale, including its psycholinguistic and philosophical underpinnings. In Part Two, ‘Design and Implementation,’ I devote seven more practically oriented chapters to describing and illustrating procedures, and in some cases problems, in each of the six basic stages in designing, implementing, and evaluating a TBLT program: needs and means analysis, syllabus design, materials development, choice of methodological principles and pedagogic procedures, student assessment, and program evaluation. Finally, in a single chapter that constitutes Part Three, ‘The Road Ahead,’ I discuss TBLT’s prospects and potential shelf-life and identify some issues in need of further research. An appendix lists abbreviations used.

Many people have influenced the ideas in this book, including numerous researchers in SLA and applied linguistics, and many students in my courses and seminars on TBLT at the Universities of Pennsylvania, Hawaii, and Maryland, and summer courses overseas. They are acknowledged and their work referenced in the main text. While I was writing it, several individuals graciously agreed to read and comment on sections, or in some cases, a whole chapter. Others provided additional information on their work when I asked, chased down recalcitrant missing references, gave me permission to include data and examples from their materials development projects, or joined with me in needs analyses and TBLT teacher education sessions and in implementing some of the ideas in the classroom. I am very grateful to the following for their assistance with
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Second Language Acquisition and Task-Based Language Teaching is dedicated to my wonderful son, Jordi Nicholas Long.

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