

The Role of the Learner in Task-Based Language Teaching: Theory and Research Methods

Craig Lambert, Scott Aubrey and Gavin Bui (Eds.). New York: Routledge. 2023. Pp. xx + 217.

This volume, edited by Craig Lambert, Scott Aubrey, and Gavin Bui, presents a collective effort by second language (L2) scholars to explore the role of the learner in Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). The volume stems from two colloquia—The Biennial Conference on Task-Based Language Teaching in 2015 at the University of Leuven, Belgium, and The Second Language Research Forum in 2016 at Columbia University, United States—focused on contemporary viewpoints and practices regarding the role of the learner in L2 task performance. It builds on the well-established recognition that affective and conative factors are central in L2 acquisition.

In its opening chapter, the editors articulate a clear motivation for the volume, which is to fill a gap in existing literature concerning the integration of learner factors into TBLT research. They advocate for unifying diverse theoretical perspectives and emphasize the necessity for innovative methodological tools to gain a deeper understanding of learner experiences in TBLT. The editors also make important distinctions, such as between affective and conative variables and between nomothetic and idiographic approaches, laying the groundwork for the subsequent chapters. This introductory chapter ends with an outline of the book's structure, which is divided into two parts: theory and methodology.

PART I: THEORY

The first part of the volume consists of five chapters that address theoretical constructs motivating research into the role of the learner in TBLT, such as personal investment, willingness to communicate, emotion, and task engagement, offering potential avenues for future research.

In Chapter 2, Craig Lambert justifies the need for researching affective and conative variables in TBLT by invoking Personal Investment Theory. After defining *personal investment*, he applies the concept to learning by citing empirical evidence for the positive effects of self-reference on motivational processing and memory. Personal investment is also disentangled from related constructs, such as relevance and familiarity. Lambert then operationalizes Personal Investment Theory by discussing how personal investment can be promoted in the task design stage of TBLT (e.g., by incorporating learner-generated content), as well as in the task implementation stage (e.g., by developing sequences of tasks in which the outcome of one task serves as the content for the next). After that, second language acquisition (SLA) research on personal investment is reviewed, with findings from multiple lines of inquiry brought together to demonstrate the importance of personal investment in L2 learning and thus the need for further investigation of this construct in task-based learning. Finally, Lambert proposes four directions for future research on personal investment in TBLT, mostly pertaining to the use of learner-generated content.

In Chapter 3, Scott Aubrey and Tomoko Yashima explore the construct of willingness to communicate (WTC) in TBLT. The authors draw on MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) pyramid model for the factors theorized to contribute to learners' WTC and highlight that some factors tend to be more stable (e.g., personality) than others (e.g., particular communicative contexts). The authors then

introduce *task-specific WTC*, providing a definition and using the pyramid model as an anchor. Next, they review literature in three lines of WTC research: (1) early studies conducted on trait WTC, (2) more contemporary studies conducted on situated WTC, and (3) cutting-edge studies on WTC from a dynamic perspective. After this review, the authors make suggestions for future research on task-specific WTC. They posit their own model to help guide this research.

In Chapter 4, Haydab Almkhaild and Jim King make the case for researching emotions in TBLT. Research from educational psychology and language education are reviewed to establish the central role that emotions play in cognition and learning. The nascent collection of SLA studies on emotions are also reviewed, revealing the range of emotions—both positive (e.g., enjoyment, pride) and negative (e.g., anxiety, boredom)—that have been empirically examined. Building on this foundation, the authors set a research agenda for investigating emotions in TBLT. The authors delineate what needs to be taken into account in this research and identify theories and methods that may be well-suited for exploring how various emotions impact task performance and learning. At the end of the chapter, they offer conceptual directions for future research, such as how the emotions of an individual learner fluctuate over the course of task performance and how emotion emerges from teacher-student-peer interactions in classroom contexts.

In Chapter 5, Phil Hiver and Janice Wu tackle task engagement. They first define the construct and then discuss how it has been viewed and studied by SLA researchers since the early 2000s. Next, the authors differentiate between *task engagement* and *task motivation*, discussing the distinction in detail and summarizing the differences in a table displaying the indicators of each. Then, after putting forth an argument for prioritizing research on task engagement over task motivation, the authors provide guiding principles for future studies. These broadly include: conducting research at the individual level, rather than the group level, to understand individuals' task engagement; adopting a complex dynamic view of task engagement; and considering the context in which task engagement is studied. Lastly, the authors identify methodological approaches, tools, and techniques that may help researchers put their guiding principles into practice.

In Chapter 6, George Smith and Nicole Ziegler zoom in on engagement in technology-mediated TBLT (TMTBLT). They start out with an introduction to TMTBLT, including a brief history of its origins and its increase in popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic. Building on this background, the authors identify models and theories relevant to engagement in TMTBLT, such as Egbert et al. 's (2021) model of task engagement and Mayer's (2005) cognitive theory of multimedia learning. With a theoretical justification for understanding engagement in TMTBLT in place, the authors review research on task engagement in three digital environments: (1) synchronous computer-mediated communication, (2) massively multiplayer online role-playing games, and (3) 3D virtual worlds. The authors wrap up the review of this literature with a summary of the findings, which is followed by suggested directions for future research. Recommendations are provided for each of the digital environments discussed.

PART II: METHODOLOGY

The second part of the book contains five chapters that present research methods for empirically investigating the role of the learner in TBLT. These chapters offer a diverse assortment of methods, ranging from discourse analytic to psychophysiological.

In Chapter 7, Craig Lambert and Scott Aubrey explore discourse analytic methods for TBLT research, focusing on its utility in measuring conative variables like effort and engagement in task performance. The authors highlight the benefits of applying discourse analysis to this area, then demarcate the scope and limitations of the method, underscoring the need to complement the method with others (e.g., self-reports). Next, the authors offer a brief history of the adoption of discourse analytic methods in task-based research—from research on task motivation in the early 2000s to studies on languaging and language-related episodes in the ensuing years. For the bulk of the remainder of the chapter, the authors hone in on the construct of *engagement in language use* (ELU). The authors introduce a model that comprises several facets of ELU (e.g., behavioral, cognitive, and social engagement) and the corresponding measures of language use (e.g., amount of language produced; discourse practices that demonstrate reciprocity and establish solidarity). Studies that have measured ELU are summarized in a table. Lastly, advantages and limitations of employing discourse analytic methods to investigate the role of the learner in TBLT are offered.

In Chapter 8, Peter MacIntyre presents the idiodynamic method as a way to investigate intra-learner variation in conative and affective variables during task performance. To start, the author defines *idiodynamics* by breaking the term down into two parts: *idio*, or the individual, and *dynamics*, or variability. In doing so, he addresses the ergodicity problem and utilizes Complex Dynamic Systems Theory to justify the need to track fluctuations in individual differences (ID) variables at the individual level. Against this backdrop, he introduces the four steps of the idiodynamic method. Then, he reviews studies that have adopted this method to investigate a variety of ID variables, such as WTC and motivation. He also discusses how the method may be used to investigate the relationship between physiological processes (e.g., heart rate) and emotions. Lastly, the author reemphasizes the importance of focusing on intra-individual variability and adopting research methodologies inspired by CDST.

In Chapter 9, Tammy Gregersen focuses on non-verbal behavioral methods for studying affective variables in TBLT. She begins by problematizing the reliance on self-reports for tapping into affective processes and highlighting the advantages of using methods that go beyond verbal indicators. Subsequently, the author reviews studies that leverage non-verbal cues to understand both learners' and teachers' emotional states in L2 classrooms. These studies illustrate the range of behavioral manifestations of different emotions like anxiety. The author proceeds to raise awareness of the challenges associated with inferring emotions from behaviors and offers pathways for researchers to identify non-verbal behaviors that denote specific emotions. The chapter concludes by examining methods through which TBLT researchers can gain a deeper understanding of variability in emotions by analyzing observational data of learners' non-verbal behaviors.

In Chapter 10, Craig Lambert posits psychophysiological research methods for studying the role of affect in task performance and learning. To begin, the author underscores the need for methods that go beyond measuring conscious processes and observable behaviors during task performance. He then defines *affect*, *emotion*, and *motivated attention*, expounding how emotion modulates information processing. Following this, the author introduces psychophysiological methods as a means for investigating the relation between tasks, affect, and cognition. The primary focus is on electroencephalography (EEG), which the author argues can be combined with other psychophysiological methods, such as eye tracking and electrodermal activity, to achieve a better understanding of the role of affect in task performance. Finally, the author cautions the reader about the challenges associated with employing these methods in TBLT research and makes

suggestions for overcoming these hurdles.

In Chapter 11, Zhisheng (Edward) Wen, Mark Feng Teng, and Lili Han suggest tools for measuring *affective working memory* (AWM). The authors first introduce AWM as a particular type of working memory (WM). They move on to discuss the SLA literature on WM and point out the scarcity of empirical studies on this construct in task performance. They then delve into AWM, presenting a theoretical account of the construct before identifying ways to measure it (e.g., emotional reading span tests). To conclude, the authors offer several questions that researchers may address in future research on AWM.

In Chapter 12, the editors draw on the previous chapters to identify three major avenues for future research on the role of the learner in TBLT. First, they call for dynamic investigations that take into account the ongoing interactions between the learner, environment, and time. Second, they advocate for the triangulation of diverse measures at both group and individual levels. Third, they identify practical research—that is, studies that may inform practitioners’ design and implementation of tasks—as a crucial direction. They wrap up by arguing that, though it will require substantial resources and innovation, investigating the role of the learner in TBLT is vital for building the empirical foundation of the pedagogical paradigm.

EVALUATION & CONCLUSION

Overall, this edited volume makes a significant contribution to the TBLT literature. One of its key strengths lies in its comprehensive exploration of affective and conative factors, which are often underrepresented in TBLT research. In adopting a dynamic view of these factors in task performance, the book helps bring the domain up to speed with the affective and dynamic turns in SLA. The volume also helps bridge the gap between theory and practice through its two-part macrostructure. The first part sets a theoretical foundation for readers, and the second part offers them tools for empirically investigating the role of the learner in TBLT. Additionally, at the end of each chapter, the authors present discussion questions and recommendations for further readings, which may serve as springboards for continued consideration of the various theoretical constructs and methods addressed. Similarly, the authors make myriad suggestions for future research directions, broadening the horizons for junior and veteran scholars alike. The volume may also be of practical value to L2 educators, who might glean insight into task design and implementation, especially from its first part.

This volume, however, is not without its limitations. It overlooks some of the central ID variables in SLA: motivation and aptitude (Li et al., 2022). Readers may be left wondering about these variables, both in terms of their role in task performance and which methods may be used to investigate them. There are also some redundancies throughout the book, such as authors reintroducing TBLT at the start of their chapter, as well as inconsistencies, such as the use of multiple forms to refer to the same meaning (e.g., task performance vs. L2 task performance). Finally, the relationship between affect and cognition tends to be portrayed as unidirectional—i.e., affect impacts cognition—with little mention of how cognition can influence affect.

In spite of these limitations, this volume fills a critical gap in the TBLT paradigm. It represents a reorientation towards the learner, who, from the onset of SLA, has been considered the focal point (Han, 2017). In this way, the volume is both refreshing and empowering.

MOHAMED SALAH

Arizona State University

REFERENCES

- Egbert, J. L., Shahrokni, S. A., Zhang, X., Abobaker, R., Bantawtook, P., He, H., Bekar, M., Roe, M. F., & Huh, K. (2021). Language task engagement: An evidence-based model. *The Electronic Journal for English as a Second Language*, 24(4), 1–34.
<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1288722>
- Han, Z- H. (2016). A “reimagined SLA” or an expanded SLA? A rejoinder to The Douglas Fir Group (2016). *The Modern Language Journal*, 100(4), 736–740.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12378>
- Li, S., Hiver, P., & Papi, M. (Eds.). (2022). *The Routledge handbook of second language acquisition and individual differences*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003270546>
- MacIntyre, P. D., Clément, R., Dörnyei, Z., & Noels, K. A. (1998). Conceptualizing willingness to communicate in an L2: A situational model of L2 confidence and affiliation. *Modern Language Journal*, 82(4), 545–562. <https://doi.org/10.2307/330224>
- Mayer, R. E. (2005). Cognitive theory of multimedia learning. In R. E. Mayer (Ed.), *The Cambridge handbook of multimedia learning* (pp. 31–48). Cambridge University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511816819.004>