

2011

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# Review of Task-based language learning and teaching with technology

## **Abstract**

It is interesting to consider that task-based learning and teaching (TBLT) and computer-assisted language learning (CALL) both originated in the 1980s, were long considered marginal to mainstream language education (though this has thankfully changed), and more recently have been the focus of increasing scholarly attention, and yet to date no book has explicitly addressed the potential links between these two fields. What antecedents and principles do they share, and how can they mutually inform each other's contributions to second language pedagogy and research? *Task-based language learning and teaching with technology*, edited by Michael Thomas and Hayo Reinders, attempts to answer such questions and "initiate a closer dialogue between these areas of theory, research and practice in order to explore synergies and differences as well as potential future directions" (p. 1).

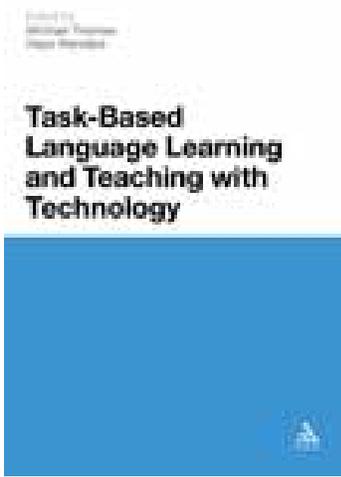
## **Disciplines**

Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education | Curriculum and Instruction | Educational Methods | Higher Education

## **Comments**

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## REVIEW OF *TASK-BASED LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING WITH TECHNOLOGY*

<p><b>Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching with Technology</b></p> <p>Michael Thomas and Hayo Reinders (Eds.)</p> <p>2010 ISBN: 978-1-4411-0153-2 US \$140.00 272 pp.</p> <p>Continuum London</p>	
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### Review by Jim Ranalli, [Iowa State University](#)<sup>1</sup>

It is interesting to consider that task-based learning and teaching (TBLT) and computer-assisted language learning (CALL) both originated in the 1980s, were long considered marginal to mainstream language education (though this has thankfully changed), and more recently have been the focus of increasing scholarly attention, and yet to date no book has explicitly addressed the potential links between these two fields. What antecedents and principles do they share, and how can they mutually inform each other's contributions to second language pedagogy and research? *Task-based language learning and teaching with technology*, edited by Michael Thomas and Hayo Reinders, attempts to answer such questions and “initiate a closer dialogue between these areas of theory, research and practice in order to explore synergies and differences as well as potential future directions” (p. 1).

The book consists of 11 chapters contributed by researchers and practitioners in Canada, Japan, Germany, the UK, and the US. Although the editors do not specify a target audience, they have focused on recent research rather than practical guidelines, so the book will likely be of primary interest to researchers and graduate students rather than language teachers. The predominance of research studies in the collection, as opposed to reviews of research or theory, means there is overlap of topics across several chapters and a lack of attention to some areas. The result is a thought-provoking if somewhat fragmentary perspective on technology-mediated tasks.

A challenge for anyone working in TBLT is to define *task*. In the opening chapter, Thomas and Reinders adopt the six criteria identified by Ellis (2003):

tasks involve a plan for learner activity; they have a primary focus on making meaning; they engage with real-world authentic language use; they focus on any or all of the four language skills; they engage learners in cognitive skills in order to accomplish them; and they have a defined communication-based learning outcome. (pp. 9-10)

The editors further clarify that they prefer *task-based learning and teaching* to *task-based language teaching*, noting the importance of learner interpretation in the implementation of tasks, and the fact that technology tends to deconstruct the traditional roles of learner and teacher. They also mention the book's

scope will be limited to micro- rather than macro-level concerns—that is, to the design, use and evaluation of tasks in particular teaching contexts, rather than to issues of needs analysis, syllabus and curriculum design, because with respect to these, CALL “remains on the periphery” (p. 4).

Following the introductory chapter, the remainder of the book is divided into two parts. Part I, including Chapters 2-6, is entitled *Research on Tasks in CALL*, which the editors say will be used to “map the broader theoretical questions shared by L2 task-based research and their influence on computer-mediated communication”; Part II, comprising Chapters 7-11, is called *Applying Technology-Mediated Tasks* and focuses on “design, development and application” (p. 8).

Part I begins with Chapter 2, in which Andreas Müller-Hartmann and Marita Schocker-v. Ditfurth summarize recent research on telecollaboration to illustrate the value of sociocultural theory in general, and Activity Theory (AT) in particular, as frames for investigating TBLT in CALL. Citing Samuda and Bygate (2008), the authors note how task-based research often neglects the instructional dimensions of tasks and leads to a one-way transmission of imperatives from researchers to teachers. The authors argue that AT affords multiple perspectives and levels of analyses for studying important task-related phenomena, such as the distinction between task-as-workplan and task-as-process; that is, the differences in the way a teacher or researcher envisages a task versus how it is actually engaged in by learners. While informative, this chapter may present a challenge for readers unfamiliar with AT’s terms and concepts.

Sociocultural theory is discussed again in Chapter 3, in which Mark Peterson combines a sociocultural account of interaction (based on mediation, scaffolding and intersubjectivity) with a psycholinguistic account (based on negotiation of meaning and focus on form). Using this dual perspective, Peterson reviews nine studies addressing interaction in tasks used for text-based synchronous CMC. While confirming earlier findings that this technology facilitates negotiation of meaning, the review also highlights shortcomings related to focus on form, such as a high frequency of errors and little evidence of self-correction. Peterson suggests these issues might arise from the researchers’ use of tasks designed for the classroom, and as remedies he proposes new designs that “fully maximize the potential of interaction in the online medium” (p. 59), as well as learner training.

Theories make way for a more technology-driven discussion in Chapter 4, in which Mathias Schulze summarizes the relevance of intelligent CALL (iCALL) for task-based learning. This is no easy task, given that iCALL—which comprises natural language processing (NLP), user modeling, expert systems, and intelligent tutoring systems—can be viewed as an essentially form-focused endeavor, in sharp contrast to TBLT. iCALL’s potential contributions are grouped into pre-task activities and those suitable for “during-task and post-task support” (p. 73). Regarding the latter, Schulze provides examples of iCALL tools that can be used during reading tasks to provide contextualized access to online dictionaries and “inflectional paradigms of words generated on the fly” (p. 74); with writing tasks, learners can be encouraged to notice errors or particular linguistic features via automated text annotation. Pre-task activities might include NLP-based grammar and vocabulary practice. This final point in particular requires a much more inclusive definition of TBLT than many of its proponents may be willing to concede, but regardless, Schulze’s chapter offers plenty of food for thought.

In Chapter 5, we return to the domain of CMC to examine how, in its synchronous versus asynchronous modes, differential effects are seen on the accuracy, complexity and discourse features of learner language. Glenn Stockwell describes a within-subjects study of tertiary-level Japanese learners of EFL which found, among other things, that although vocabulary and spelling exhibited no significant differences across modes, language was generally more syntactically complex in the asynchronous forum postings and more accurate in synchronous text-chat, contrary to some previous research. A potential limitation of this study is that slightly different tasks were employed for each modality and the assignments to which they were related were graded differently. It is thus possible that the design may have confounded the effects of modality, task type and task condition. While this may be considered

hairsplitting, given the topic of this book, some discussion of these issues seems warranted.

Chapter 6 takes up synchronous CMC once more, this time to focus exclusively on the issue of complexity, with proficiency introduced as a dependent variable. Karina Collentine describes a within-subjects study involving intermediate and advanced L2 learners of Spanish at a U.S. university. The task was an opinion exchange in which students had to solve a fictitious murder by first collecting information from characters in a Flash-based activity and then discussing their findings in dyads via text-based chat. Complexity was manipulated by displacing production differently across two conditions; in the first, information gathering was interrupted at regular intervals for the exchange of opinions, while in the second, all information gathering was completed before the opinion exchange. Collentine's findings provide some support for the hypothesis that less time pressure leads to greater complexity, although the specific indicators of complexity differed between levels. This study is noteworthy for, among other things, a detailed description of the task input and conditions employed.

Part II begins with Chapter 7, in which Regine Hampel broaches the topic of task design in distance foreign-language courses conducted through Virtual Learning Environments (also known as Learning Management Systems). To frame the discussion, Hampel uses a three-level model of CALL task development based on Richards and Rodgers (1986/2001), which covers *approach* (theories of learning and language), *design* (syllabus, task types and teacher/learner roles) and *procedure* (actual implementation and use of tasks by learners). Hampel describes some of the approach- and design-level decisions her team made in creating an intensive German course offered through the Open University (UK). The chapter illustrates the challenges institutions face as they increasingly turn to distance and blended language courses, most notably "the apparent conflict between adopting a centralized approach to task design that presupposes a linear format, while also using Web 2.0 tools that are based on a decentralized and anti-linear style of teaching and learning" (p. 150). It is regrettable that a procedure-level analysis of the tasks employed could not be included because the course was still ongoing at the time of writing.

Thomas Raith and Volker Hegelheimer take up task-based learning, technology and teacher development in Chapter 8. Their focus is the use of e-portfolios to implement standards-based reflective practice of TBLT among student teachers in Germany. Like traditional portfolios, e-portfolios usually include artifacts documenting a teacher's learning processes, such as lesson plans, teaching reflections, and examples of student work. Used in the context of Web 2.0 tools, however, they can also integrate supervisor feedback with more objective, video-based self-assessments and the support of a community of peers. Qualitative data from the study showed, however, that even technology-enhanced reflection can fall short without standards grounded in theory. Some of the study's participants were found to be engaging in critical analysis of their teaching, but the analysis was not informed by TBLT principles. This shortcoming was addressed by adding more explicit categories to reflection tasks to help student teachers connect theoretical knowledge to experience. This chapter contains a thought-provoking review of research on task-as-process; although the context is face-to-face teaching, it raises important questions about teacher competencies for TBLT in CALL as well.

Chapter 9 is a case study of TBLT through virtual reality and virtual worlds. Kenneth Reeder describes a CD-ROM based simulation called *Edubba*, which puts learners in the role of intern newspaper reporters in a fictional city where they are tasked with collecting information from numerous sources about a pressing municipal water issue. Like most simulations, *Edubba* features a number of possible outcomes with different costs and benefits. What makes the program unique, however, is the NLP engine used to power its interactions with learners. In contrast to the iCALL systems in Chapter 4, *Edubba*'s is not designed to provide feedback on form. Rather, the linguistic aim of the whole enterprise is to teach the stages of process writing. Simulation tasks are linked to classroom activities such as writing conferences with teachers and peers. This is one of the few cases in the book in which technology is used primarily as task input rather than the medium of communication. Reeder helpfully frames this chapter as a response

to the question of whether and to what extent Edubba qualifies as a task in a TBLT sense.

In Chapter 10, Mirjam Hauck returns to the themes of telecollaboration and teacher development to discuss factors that shape task design and enactment. The setting was a four-way telecollaboration among pre- and in-service trainee teachers of EFL in the U.S. and Germany, as well as L2 learners of German in the UK and Poland. Hauck focuses on a single, three-part task implemented over three weeks, whose aim was to raise participants' awareness about the unique affordances of written, spoken, and visual modalities in Web 2.0 technologies, as well as their impact on communication and meaning making, by means of a "hands-on analysis of web resources" (p. 201). Problems arose when one of the collaborating teacher-researchers faced student resistance to the project. As a result, the task had to be modified and the original aims of developing e-literacy skills were marginalized. The abundance of innovations here means this chapter may also challenge some TBLT-oriented readers' conceptualization of task.

In the final chapter, Gary Motteram and Michael Thomas address the present and the future of technology-mediated tasks. The present is illustrated through "vignettes" about two European Commission-funded projects: LANCELOT, which investigated language instruction through desktop videoconferencing (or 'virtual classrooms'); and AVALON, which did the same thing for multi-user virtual environments, specifically Second Life. Two interesting frameworks for designing and implementing tasks in these complex environments, which were among the outcomes of the projects, are presented and discussed. Next, the authors highlight three main criticisms of TBLT and show how the use of technology can go some way towards addressing them. They conclude with a reminder to keep expectations realistic about what can be achieved through technology and task-based learning, and with a call for these fields to continue to inform and challenge each other.

No book is perfect, and this one might be taken to task (to further abrade a well-worn pun) for equating Chapelle's concerns regarding SLA in CALL (2001) with the concerns of task-based learning, as occurs in the first and last chapters. It goes without saying that while task-based research and SLA have a great many things in common, their concerns are not coextensive. In a similar vein, the use of even a well-designed task in a study should not mean we automatically consider it task-based research. Ellis says one of the goals of such research is "to establish what language and cognitive processes are likely to occur when *input, conditions, and procedures* are systematically varied" (2003, p. 20; italics added). This suggests that researchers' descriptions of tasks must go further than simple categorizations such as "jigsaw" or "open-ended discussion," and that their decisions regarding task selection and implementation must be treated as more than "an unproblematic *fait accompli*" (O'Dowd & Ware, 2009, p. 174). While this collection makes a very persuasive case that task-based research can no longer afford to marginalize technology-mediated tasks, it also demonstrates that CALL research must do more to burnish its task-based credentials. Regardless, it is recommended reading for anyone interested in research from a CALL or TBLT perspective.

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## NOTE

1. The reviewer wishes to acknowledge that one of the contributors to this book, Dr. Volker Hegelheimer, is his co-major professor.

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## ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Jim Ranalli is a PhD candidate in Applied Linguistics and Technology at Iowa State University. His research interests lie at the intersection of L2 vocabulary, technology, and self-regulated learning.

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