**A Proposal for a TBLT Syllabus**

**Approaches to language learning and their differences**

***Synthetic approaches, e.g. PPP***

Until now, classes in the Intensive English Centre (IEC) at our school have largely followed a synthetic approach to the language learning process. This has been implemented through a syllabus which is divided into units organised by topic, and informed by inauthentic texts borrowed from mass-produced, commercial textbooks.

Synthetic approaches like this treat language as object, where the language is arbitrarily cut up into pieces (usually grammatical and/or lexical) and presented and practiced one at a time. The learner is required to ‘synthesize’ these pieces of language and expected to use them, without recourse to error, later for communicative purposes.

Such an approach is informed by Skill Acquisition Theory (SAT). According to SAT, learners first learn declarative (conscious) knowledge *how*, and through practice and repetition this becomes procedural (unconscious) knowledge *that* (Jordan 2017). SAT shares similarities to Krashen’s Acquisition/Learning and Monitor Hypotheses, which state that learning (knowing about) is used to monitor (attend to an edit) language, which will then become acquisition (ability to use the language).

Long (2015) states that synthetic approaches are typically realised in grammatical, lexical or notional-functional syllabi, and methods such as Grammar Translation, Audio-Lingual and Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP).

***Analytic approaches, e.g. TBLT***

An analytic approach to the language learning process does the opposite; instead of a pre-determined, pseudo-communicative syllabus organised according to grammar, lexical items or function, an analytic syllabus is informed by comprehensible, authentic tasks and texts (input) which are context-specific and applicable to the current and future needs of the learner(s).

Analytic approaches like this treat language as medium, where the language is used for engaging, meaning-focused purposes. The learner is required to ‘analyse’ the input and, with the help of the teacher and classmates, induce the underlying rules incidentally while performing the tasks (Long, Lee, & Hillman 2019).

Such an approach is informed by cognitive-interactionist and usage-based theories of second language learning (Long 2015), and the system of ‘interlanguage’ (IL), first proposed by Selinker (1972).

Long (2015) states that analytic approaches are often realised in immersion education programs, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT).

***Key differences***

There are a number of key differences between the two approaches outlined above. First and foremost is their treatment of learner cognition. A synthetic approach imposes an external linguistic syllabus on the learner, whether they like it or need it or not. On the other hand, an analytic approach respects the developmental readiness of the learner. It aims to facilitate acquisition by working in harmony with an internal learner syllabus, not fighting against it.

Second is the roles they attribute to explicit and implicit learning. A synthetic approach favours explicit learning and believes a ‘strong interface’ exists between the two (that declarative knowledge always become procedural knowledge). An analytic approach favours implicit learning, while also recognising the need for some explicit teaching. This is known as a ‘weak interface’ position (that the two are symbiotic and work in tandem).

A third difference is their design. A synthetic approach is typically ’context-redundant’; it is usually enacted through mass-produced, commercially driven textbooks which in attempting to appeal to everyone appeal to no one. An analytic approach, on the other hand, is ‘context-specific’; it seeks to design a syllabus that a particular group of learners will use or will need.

**Support for TBLT in SLA research**

TBLT is underpinned by a psycholinguistic rationale that is evidence-based. Firstly, in respecting the learner’s internal syllabus and IL development, TBLT is informed by the ‘Processability, Learnability, and Teachability Hypotheses’ of Pienemann (1984), which demonstrates that what learners can process and learn determines what teachers can teach. In other words, an external, arbitrary, grammatical syllabus will not result in language acquisition.

Secondly, TBLT’s ‘weak interface’ position is in line with findings that show that ‘implicit learning is more basic and more important than explicit learning, and superior’ (Long, Lee, & Hillman 2019, p. 506), and that implicit learning is the default mechanism for SLA (Doughty 2003, cited in Long 2015, p. 45). The need for some explicit learning opportunities in TBLT to “recruit consciousness” and as an aid to subsequent implicit learning has also been demonstrated by Ellis (2005 cited in Long 2015, p. 50).

Thirdly, because adults are “partially disabled” language learners due to maturational constraints, some linguistic features will be “fragile” and therefore need to be learned explicitly. TBLT’s call for a ‘focus on form’ to bring learner attention to non-salient items in the input and allow them to “notice the gap”. This is attested to in the literature, most famously by Schmidt’s (1995) ‘Noticing Hypothesis’, whereby more noticing leads to more learning.

Finally, Long (2015) cites numerous studies showing the efficacy of negative feedback, such as recasts, as crucial ways of providing explicit opportunities for learning. They are seen as allowing learners to focus on form in context and at the point of need, which means learners will be motivated to attend to feedback, thereby facilitating form-function mapping, which leads to acquisition.

**A brief course outline**

The teaching context of the IEC, and the average profile of its learners, present an ideal situation for the introduction of TBLT; the needs of the learners are as broad and diverse as the learners themselves.

***Description***

The course focuses on the current and future academic, social, and vocational needs of the learners. It involves engaging in a range of real-world tasks within each of these spheres, and in doing so, learners will create and respond to a range of texts that they need in their academic, social, and vocational lives.

***Objectives***

By the end of the course, students will:

1. demonstrate an ability to create and respond to academic texts which are necessary in mainstream classes across all subjects
2. be able to maintain social connection and engage in culturally-appropriate communicative activities
3. be able to apply to work and study at Australian workplaces and institutions.

The table below shows a snapshot of possible needs, task types and target tasks.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Need(s)** | **Possible Task Type** | **Possible Target Tasks** |
| **Academic** | Writing & Responding | Planning and writing a short essayWriting various text types for other subjects (e.g. science experiments, history recounts) |
| Reading & Viewing | Sharing your opinionGiving recommendationsSynthesizing and summarizing texts |
| Speaking & Listening | Discussing issues with classmatesGiving presentationsListening to a teacher during direct instruction |
| **Social** | Completing/understanding forms | Paying a billOpening a bank accountSharing medical information |
| Making inquiries | Calling to book a driving lessonAsking about swimming lessonsEnrolling a child at school |
| Extending invitations | Telling a neighbour you’re having a partyInviting a friend to a birthday dinnerReading documents from school |
| **Vocational** | Completing/understanding forms | Applying to TAFE (college)Reading and responding to casual and formal emails |
| Applying for a job | Completing an online applicationWriting a resume and cover letterAsking someone to be a reference |

**The advantages and challenges for students and teachers**

For students, the advantages and challenges of the course include:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Advantages** | **Challenges** |
| * a course tailored to their immediate current and future needs
* student-centered
* differentiated according to content, environment, process, and product
* high surrender value
* fits with SLA findings
* engaging, interesting, meaning-focused classes supported by extensive reading and listening
 | * face validity - considerably different to ways they have previously learned English
* considerable “buy in” for some students; steep learning curve for students who are used to being passive in class
 |

For teachers, the advantages and challenges of the course include:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Advantages** | **Challenges** |
| * engaging, interesting, meaning-focused classes which are more enjoyable to teach
* not needing to “reinvent the wheel” for each new cohort
* less class-to-class preparation time once course has been designed and implemented
* more engaged students
 | * considerable “buy in” for some teachers, particularly older ones with little desire to change
* a lot of “heavy lifting” to prepare course; time and investment needed from all
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**Course implementation and suggested institutional approach**

Due to current constraints, I suggest the syllabus is implemented gradually across 2 to 3 school semesters (1 to 2 years). This will allow for teacher training and the ongoing identification and development of target tasks, pedagogic tasks, and assessment. As such, I propose the following three stage implementation:

***Stage 1:***

* one semester
* a ‘weak’ TBLT; current curriculum will be used with an ‘integrated’ TSLT (Task Supported Language Teaching)
* ongoing PD for teachers
* needs analysis, interviews with domain experts, identification of target tasks

***Stage 2:***

* one semester
* a ‘hybrid’ TBLT; a continued focus on the curriculum but with greater integration and trialling of tasks under development
* discourse analysis, creation of pedagogic tasks, development of assessments

***Stage 3:***

* one to two semesters
* full implementation; a move to ‘programmatic’ TBLT where unfocused tasks become the building blocks of the curriculum
* refinement of pedagogic tasks and assessments

The course will be complemented by extensive reading and listening programs, and a vocabulary development program based on the New General Service List and Academic Word List.

The course will be underpinned by the philosophical principles ‘learning by doing’, ‘individual freedom’, ‘rationality’, ‘learner-centredness’, and ‘mutual aid and cooperation’ suggested by Long (2015). Not only will these promote a psycholinguistically-positive classroom, but they will also provide the requisite social-emotional support necessary in trauma-informed teaching contexts such as the IEC.

**References**

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