A Principles Approach To Task-Based Language Teaching

By Pierre Bourgoin (2011)

“\textit{The term, principles, may be operationally defined as a set of insights derived from theoretical and applied linguistics, cognitive psychology, information sciences, and other allied disciplines that provide theoretical bases for the study of language learning, language planning, and language teaching.}”

Kumaraviadivelu (2006), p.89

With the changing tides in the theories of second language acquisition (SLA), so methods in language teaching (LT) have waxed and waned. Today, we no longer seek to categorize methods into prescriptive pills we close our eyes and swallow whole. The language classroom is a much more complex, organic and diverse environment that requires language teachers to make informed decisions based on their specific context (Brown, 2000). In this Post-method Era of LT, authors such as H. Douglas Brown, Rod Ellis and Jeremy Harmer have suggested certain underlying principles (or conclusions) that remain central in our understanding of how second languages (L2) are learned and that serve as guides in our attempts to teach languages more effectively. In this paper, I shall attempt to highlight and discuss a certain number of these principles and demonstrate how some of them can be applied in the classroom by linking them to a sample task-based lesson.

Extensive L2 Input

As is unquestionably one the first paramount conditions in acquiring a first language as a child (Brown 2000), \textit{extensive language input} is undoubtedly a necessary factor in second language acquisition and makes a good starting point on the discussion of a principles approach to language teaching. Ellis (2005) presents this as his sixth fundamental principle and Harmer (2001) also draws this vital conclusion as he wades through the various claims LT methods expound. Although the amount of L2 input plays
an important role in SLA, one must also consider the quality of the input language learners receive. Stephen Krashen, who is often seen as taking an extreme view on the value of L2 input in SLA (Ellis 2005, Richards 2002), postulates that “input that contains structures slightly above the learner’s present level” (Richards & Rodgers 1986, p. 160) is essential for the subconscious process of SLA to take place (Krashen, 2009, p.81).

Assuring that our learners receive extensive ‘comprehensible input’ is a challenge. In a country where the target language is foreign, it may be questionable whether students typically spend enough time in the classroom to get the input necessary for acquisition. Ellis (2005) proposes two ways of providing adequate access, that is, “maximize the use of L2 in the classroom” and “create opportunities […] to receive input outside the classroom” (para. 37).

Although Stephen Krashen has postulated that comprehensible input is in itself sufficient to trigger acquisition (Richards, 2002), it is becoming increasingly clearer that to simply ‘trigger’ acquisition does not in itself lead to communicative competence, which is the ultimate goal of language learning (Brown, 2002; Savignon, 2002).

**Communicative Competence**

While the first principle mentioned in this essay acts as a sort of discrete starting point for a discussion on a pedagogical approach to LT, the second forms the heart of a grander organism and encompasses a number of sub-principles within it and therefore will merit a more detailed analysis.

Brown (2002) proposes communicative competence as his twelfth fundamental principle, while Harmer (2001) concludes that communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based learning (TBL), both similarly geared towards communicative competence, offer “real learning benefits”. Therefore, in this next section, I will endeavor to elaborate on the application of TBL in the light of CLT while highlighting various fundamental principles as described by Ellis (2005), Brown (2002) and Harmer (2001).
As Richards points out (2002a, p. 20), “classroom tasks which involve negotiation of meaning should form the basis of the language teaching curriculum, and […] tasks can be used to facilitate practice of both language form and communicative functions”.

In the process of carrying out communicative tasks, learners go through activities that are seen as central to the development of linguistic and communicative competence (Richards, 2002, p.154). One of the first ways teaching through communicative tasks can support communicative competence also concerns Ellis’ second fundamental principle, namely that, “instruction needs to ensure that learners focus predominantly on meaning” (2005).

Although a principles approach to LT doesn’t necessarily maintain the need to adopt a strict adherence to a specific teaching methods, let us see how focusing on meaning can manifest itself in the first three stages a classic task-based lesson on writing a synopsis of a movie (pre-intermediate level).

Stage 1: Pre-task – In Pairs, students match a short description of 7 famous movies with their respective movie posters (Appendix A) > Feedback

(Example of possible S-S discussion)
S1: What is… ‘shark’?
S2: Oh… this is this animal… in this picture. I know this movie… Jaws! Its director is Stephen Spielberg…
S1: Great, ok, next one…

Stage 2: Task – The teacher models the task (synopsis) and students try to guess the movie (Appendix B).

Stage 3: Task – Students ‘have a go’ at the task in closed pairs.
In stage one, students are encouraged to decipher the meaning of lexical items and grammatical structures found in short descriptions and associate them with their prior knowledge about movies and the images on movie posters. In stage two, the teacher presents the task model. By trying to guess which movie is depicted in the synopsis, learners work on deciphering the meaning of a larger piece of discourse. Brandl (208, p.183) defines meaningful learning as learners being involved in the comprehension of an intended message and Ellis (2005) describes communicative tasks, such as the one stage two, as necessary for learners to attend to meaning. Here this is done receptively by providing a model (input), but in stage 3, students then not only attend to meaning, but also perform; and in the process, we touch upon a few other fundamental principles.

Brown’s (2002) eight principle is risk taking as a means for learners to “attempt to produce and to interpret language that is a bit beyond their absolute certainty”. In stage three, students are, in a sense, thrown in the deep end by having to experiment with producing pragmatic meaning in safe, closed pairs. This state of lowered anxiety or inhibitions is itself a fundamental principle (Harmer 2001, p.96; Krashen, 2009, p.81) where students “share their fears in small groups” (Brown 2002, p.16) and notice the linguistic gaps in their language before having to perform publicly. This struggle to communicate using learners’ own available language resources may represent at once tasks’ strength, and weakness…

TBL’s failure to focus-on-form and consequently, its inability to help towards developing high levels of linguistic accuracy has been a major critique of this method.
(Richards, 2002). Skehan (as cited in Richards, 2002, p.157) states that “[tasks-based approaches] do not provide an incentive for structural change towards an interlanguage system with greater complexity”. In other words, learners have a tendency to perform the tasks using the language they know and negotiate meaning using coping strategies that may trade-off towards developing grammatical competence; grammatical competence being an essential constituent towards communicative competence (Savignon, 2002, p 17). Fortunately, in a principles approach to language teaching we can use a personalized approach to task work to overcome these problems.

Richards (2002, p.160) proposes three points where grammar may be included in task work: before, during, and after the task. We can therefore use the usual Planning and Report stages in TBL to give learners a second attempt at the task, but with instruction aimed at elevating the amount and complexity of learners’ linguistic resources.

Stage 4: Planning – In pairs, students prepare a synopsis of a movie that they will present to the rest of the class.

Note that, in the traditional application of TBL, the planning stage would see learners plan a report on their performance on the task (what they did and how it went) in order to present it to the rest of the class (Harmer, 2002, p.87).

In his 3rd principle, Ellis (2005) highlights that “instruction also needs to focus on form”. As focus-on-form can be interpreted to mean that learners need to learn grammatical rules, Ellis (examining the studies of Schmidt, 2001) states that “attention to form refers to the noticing of specific linguistic items, as they occur in the input to which learners are exposed’ (2005, para. 15).

In order to tie this in with our planning stage, we can then provide proactive help to learners by highlighting useful linguistic items from the model (Appendix B & C). Harmer (2001, p.96) concludes that learners discovering things for themselves is likely to lead to better retention. So as a means for a more inductive approach to focusing on
form, teachers can propose that students themselves highlight items that they find useful in order to perform their task. What can ensue is simply clarification of the meaning, form, and pronunciation of such items as to help learners develop an accurate view of these useful linguistic items. This also touches on Brown (2002)’s 2nd fundamental principle of meaningful learning. By having learners take charge of their own learning, they can decide which language is meaningful for them and choose to study language that is at their own current level of acquisition. Ellis (2005) has formulated a principle (5th) in which “instruction needs to take into account the learner’s built-in syllabus”, i.e. the natural order to which learners acquire language. Considering the differences in levels often found in language classrooms, learner-centered instruction based around tasks that makes no attempt to predetermine the language taught and allows learners to pick and choose according to their own built-in syllabus may resolve certain issues that arise in mixed ability classes.

After having highlighted and studied some useful linguistic items, learners are ready to start working in pairs and start planning. The ability to plan before performing a task greatly enhances grammatical accuracy (Ellis, 2005). By careful monitoring, the teacher can offer reactive feedback and further help students develop accuracy in the language they choose to use for their task. This usually promotes the use of unpredictable, open ended, varied, creative language – all features consistent with communicative learning (Brandl, 2008, p.180).

(Example of interaction and teacher feedback)

S1: Ok, we need to say where the movie, hmm… take place.
S2: I know… it’s in Japan. Write ‘it take place in Japan’.
Tr: (Monitoring) Hmm. Look at this word (points to ‘take’), what’s missing?
S1: Er… I don’t know…?
Tr: I take, you take, he/she/it…
S1: Ah! Yes, takes.
S2: Teacher, how do you say... hmm, ... Tom Cruise start to like, hmm... change like a Samurai?

Tr: Well, maybe you can say, ‘he turns into a Samurai’ or ‘he assimilates the Samurai culture...’

S1: Ass...imilate?

Tr: A-S-S-I-M-I-L-A-T-E-S. Look it up in your dictionary to see if you like this word...

By working in pairs to achieve their task, learners must use various conversation strategies such as clarification, confirmation, requesting, repairing, reacting and turn taking (Belgar & Hunt, 2002) in order to decide upon and develop their movie synopsis. Promoting this type of social interaction and collaboration amongst learners has long been supported by research in SLA (Brandl, 2008, p.201; Ellis, 2005, 8th principle).

Stage 5: Report – Pairs present their synopsis to the class and the class attempts to guess their movie.

The fact that learners must present their work to the rest of the class and that the class have their own listening task (guess the movie), plays on two of Brown’s fundamental principles, that of intrinsic motivation (4th) and the anticipation of reward (3rd). The drive to have a real audience and to be understood motivates learners to perform their task to the best of their abilities. Getting it right and providing positive feedback in the form of applause after a presentation can also do a great deal to reward learners for their efforts and build self-confidence (Brown’s 7th principle, 2002).

The report stage, amongst others, also calls attention to Ellis’ 7th principle (2005) in which “language learning also requires opportunities for output”. The Output Hypothesis in SLA postulate that automaticity (Brown’s 1st principle – 2002) is developed ‘through practice and by providing a domain for error correction’ (Krashen, 2009, p.82). This ties in with the next stage in our model lesson.
Stage 6: Feedback – The teacher has learners decipher between correctly and incorrectly formulated sentences from their presentations and offers corrective feedback.

As a way of offering incidental focus-on-form, it is useful to provide corrective feedback at the end of a task (Ellis, 2005). This can be done with the teacher taking notes during the report stage and then presenting this to the class in the form of strong points (to reinforce good language use) and weaker points (to highlight areas to work on).

Although tasks based around movies that are strongly anchored in popular culture may work well with most learners in most contexts, we cannot ignore that individual differences require special care and consideration. This, in itself, will form our last broad principle for discussion.

**Individual differences**

I’ve already touched upon how task-based instruction helps towards taking individual differences in level into account, however, a discussion on the multi-level classroom would only scratch the surface as to how individual differences shape SLA and LT. Students have different needs, learning aptitudes (styles) and motivation for taking language courses. Other variables such as age, sex, working memory, prior language experience (Bowden, Sanz & Stafford, 2005; Brown, 2000) and a great number of affective variables (Krashen, 2009) also impact on an individual’s success in acquiring second languages.

As Ellis (2005) offers his 9th principle of accounting for individual differences in learners, he proffers that “teachers can cater to variation in the nature of their students’ aptitude by adopting a flexible teaching approach involving a variety of learning activities”. This, coupled with training learners to be flexible with their own learning (Ellis, 2005), running needs analyses and simply taking a personal interest in your
learners and using that ‘teacher intuition’ may lead to mastering one of the most challenging facets of LT.

Conclusion

In the spirit of brevity, I have unquestionably left certain important principles out. The language-culture connection (Brown, 2002, 9th principle) and the language identity/ego principles (Brown, 2002, 6th principle) both would have merited considerable discussion and while the list of principles may in itself be endless and their interpretation somewhat contingent upon one’s own experience, I hope that the ones presented in this essay have reflected what most teachers would see as priorities and that the illustration of how some apply in a sample task-based lesson has provided a clear reflection of a principles approach to language teaching in a contemporary setting.

References


Appendix A

What movie is it?

? This thriller, directed by Stephen Spielberg, is about a big shark that attacks tourists on an island called Amity.

? This fantasy is set in a magical land where a young girl and her dog, Toto, end up lost and meet three interesting characters that help her find her way home.

? This animation is about a fish that gets lost in the ocean and ends up in a dentist’s fish tank in Sidney, Australia.

? This drama stars Sylvester Stallone, a man from Philadelphia who trains really hard to become a boxing champion.

? This action movie is set in a place called Gotham City. It stars Michael Keaton and Jack Nicholson and was directed by Tim Burton.

? This comedy stars Robin Williams. It’s about a man who gets divorced by his wife and ends up pretending to be an old British nanny so he can be with his children.

? This action movie is set in Las Vegas and it is about 11 criminals who decide to rob three casinos.
Appendix B

Vanilla Sky

This science fiction movie stars Tom Cruise, Penelope Cruise and Cameron Diaz. It had an original version in Spanish called Abre Los Ojos.

It is set sometime in the future and takes place in New York City. It’s about a rich young man (played by Tom Cruise) who falls in love with a beautiful young woman (played by Penelope Cruise). In the movie, Cameron Diaz plays a crazy woman that loves Tom Cruise and gets very jealous when she sees she cannot have him.

Tom Cruise and her end up in a very bad car accident together and then the story gets very interesting!!!
Appendix C

How to USE some useful words/phrases!

“to direct” v. (active & passive forms)

Ex: Stephen Spielberg is a director (n.). So you can say...

Stephen Spielberg directed Jurassic Park.
Jurassic Park was directed by Stephen Spielberg.

“to star” and “to play” v. (active & passive forms)

Tells who acts in a certain movie.

Mission Impossible stars Tom Cruise. Ok!
Mission Impossible is stared by Tom Cruise. NO!
The spy, played by Tom Cruise, is very... Ok!
Tom Cruise plays a spy. Ok!

“to be set” and “to take place” v.

Introduces “when” and “where” an event occurs.

Ex:
The Matrix (takes place/is set) in the future.
Cast away (takes place/is set) on an island.

Giving more information about a subject. (Relative clauses)

Ex: A movie about...

(someone/something/some place) (who/that) verb...

...a woman who/that fights aliens.
...robots that fight other robots.
...a house that becomes haunted.

(which is also possible)

“to end up” v.

Means to become when the subject doesn’t expect to become. Often this happens suddenly. It is a surprise!

Exs:
Tom Hanks ended up lost on an island. (+ adjective)
He ends up going to Europe. (+ verb+ing)
The two men end up in prison. (+ preposition of place)