

# IMPLEMENTING TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING IN BELGIUM

## Lessons for Canada?<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Implementing Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has been central to numerous policy initiatives around the world in the last few decades. The Belgian experience of TBLT implementation has been the focus of intensive empirical research, which makes it of particular interest to policy-makers and practitioners in other countries. Implementation of Portfolio-Based Language Assessment (PBLA) in adult language learning programs in Canada assumes TBLT to be the dominant teaching approach, even though empirical research on TBLT manifestation in the context is limited. Considering the paucity of accounts on TBLT presence in adult language classrooms in Canada, and the increased demand for TBLT spearheaded by PBLA, this summary of Belgian studies can aid in identifying both promising and challenging aspects of TBLT implementation at various levels: individual teachers and learners, classrooms, schools, and programs. The following features of a scaffolded TBLT implementation model emerged from the analysis: ongoing research (implementation is research-based, research-driven, and research-responsive); availability of quality resources for teachers; and open feedback channels between implementation agents.

Compared to the geographical vastness of Canada, the relatively local Belgian educational context may seem distant, both literally and figuratively. At the same time, the Belgian<sup>1</sup> experience with implementation of task-based language teaching (TBLT) can be of particular interest to teachers, administrators, and policy makers due to its longitudinal research-intense nature. Even though adult language learning programs in Canada have not undergone a nation-wide introduction of TBLT, this approach to teaching and learning has been mandated by the recent implementation of Portfolio-based Language Assessment (PBLA). It is assumed that PBLA implementation should result in TBLT in adult language learning programs in Canada (Ripley, 2012). While TBLT is a cornerstone of PBLA, little is known about how teachers in LINC or adult ESL programs in Canada implement TBLT in their classrooms. Until such accounts are available, some guidance on potential challenges

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1 This article is based on the presentation delivered at TESL Canada conference on June 10, 2017 in Niagara Falls, Ontario.

2 In this article, “Belgian experience of TBLT implementation” refers to the introduction of TBLT in Dutch language teaching in Flanders, the northern part of the country.

and successes of TBLT implementation can be derived from literature reviews on similar contexts in other countries.

This analysis of TBLT implementation in Belgium will focus on the following aspects: 1) implementation goals and supports; 2) research evidence behind the implementation steps and structures; and 3) elements of a successful (scaffolded) implementation model. This paper analyses the Belgian TBLT implementation experience as presented by various authors in Van den Branden (2006), as well as insights from other available sources. In writing this review, I aim to inspire Canadian teachers, researchers, and policy-makers to continue searching for promising avenues of supporting effective TBLT implementation in adult language education.

## Why TBLT?

Task-based language teaching can be defined as instruction focusing on functional tasks with an emphasis on meaning exchange. The central feature of a task is its connection to a real-world rather than a linguistic goal (e.g., speaking about last weekend versus making sentences with irregular verbs). Similarly to other contexts, TBLT introduction in Belgium was envisioned as a progressive change from language-centred, teacher-dominated classrooms to a more learner-centred, real-life communication-oriented environment. In addition to reforming classroom-based language learning, more lofty goals were in sight: increased quality of language education would presumably result in better social and cultural integration of newcomers, thus mitigating educational under-achievement, high unemployment, and social inequality (Van den Branden, 2006). While these latter goals may go beyond commonly agreed upon scope of L2 instruction and its impact, they can be powerful landmarks directing meaningful educational innovation. Since the 1990s, TBLT in Flanders, Belgium, has been introduced across age and achievement levels from kindergarten to adult education, both in first and second language (L1 & L2) education programs in the Dutch language. While my focus here is on adult language education, some significant features of TBLT implementation from K-12 education may be relevant to this discussion. For all language levels and age groups, including adult language education programs, the main vehicle of TBLT implementation was ready-to-use classroom tasks designed by teams of professional task and syllabus designers. These task-based syllabuses were accompanied by detailed suggestions for teachers, as well as extensive school-based one-on-one teacher coaching programs. These implementation scaffolds—ready-to-use tasks and school-based in-class coaching for individual teachers—were selected as the most promising implementation supports based on the extensive classroom-based research that was inclusive of, and responsive to teachers' voices and feedback. After and during the introduction of these syllabuses, a number of longitudinal research projects investigated teacher response to the suggested materials and the coaching programs, as well as resulting classroom representations of TBLT. Findings of the school-based research were continuously revisited in order to adjust implementation strategies whenever and

wherever necessary (Van den Branden, 2006). Below, I will summarize the research that led to the creation of the task-based syllabuses, as well as supports provided for their successful implementation.

## Needs Assessment

### The complexity of needs assessment

Needs assessment is a starting point for TBLT; in order to provide learners with real-life tasks relevant to a particular group of individuals, their teacher needs to have a profound knowledge of language use situations that the learners are facing daily beyond the classroom. While adult language learners are often expected to be key informants on their own linguistic needs, multiple complexities are associated with such an approach. The mere necessity of articulating one's own learning needs may be a culturally novel experience for many adult learners, either educated in teacher-centred environment, or deprived of uninterrupted age-appropriate educational opportunities. Even when individual learning needs may be clear to a learner, language is another barrier in effective communication of those needs to the teacher. While visuals can be helpful in identifying general thematic domains of language use, they might not adequately reflect the variety of specific language-use situations within the domains. According to Van Avermaet & Gysen (2006), learners' subjective learning needs often fail to reflect their objective language learning needs for a variety of reasons including, but not limited to, lack of meta-linguistic and meta-cognitive awareness, which results in limited ability to formulate concrete and relevant language learning goals. Finally, learners often confuse learning needs with individual preferences for a teaching style or skill focus (Van Avermaet & Gysen, 2006). When LINC/ESL students are confronted with the question of what they would like to learn in class, replies such as "to improve speaking and listening", or "learn English" are common. All these challenges do not question the value of continuous assessment of learners' needs throughout the course, but they do raise serious doubts about the weight and validity of student-centred needs assessment as a starting point for curriculum or syllabus design.

### A research-based approach to needs assessment

In Flanders, Belgium, this complexity of needs assessment in adult language education led to a comprehensive research project aiming to identify common domains and situations of language use, as well as to isolate their vocabulary and functional components. Selection of informants for this study reflects the complexity of real-life language functions and newcomers' limited knowledge of these situations: the 453 participants included 56 non-native speakers of Dutch currently taking a language course, 50 non-native speakers not taking a language course, 17 teaching experts, 30 native speakers of Dutch in frequent contact with non-native speakers, and 300 other native speakers of Dutch (Van Avermaet & Gysen, 2006). While teaching experts' responses carried more weight in the follow-up stages of this project, the original phase invited input from a variety of fluent speakers,

without limiting the informants to language learners, in order to determine the range of authentic language use situations. These situations of language use were separated into five needs domains for adult language learners (in the order of increasing linguistic complexity): informal social contacts, education of children, formal social contacts, work/business, and education. In order to facilitate development of teaching and learning materials reflective of real-life use situations across the domains, a vocabulary frequency analysis of the language corpus was conducted, which distilled 2.5 millions language tokens into 1,372 words that are highly frequent across the domains and situations of language use. Similar corpus analysis was undertaken for every K-12 grade level in Flanders, Belgium. This meticulous documentation of lexical frequency in the target language is a crucial step to efficient teaching towards basic proficiency in the target language. Without such a research-based approach to evaluating the basic vocabulary needs of beginning learners, task-based instruction can fail to produce adequate progress. The significance of corpus-based frequency vocabulary lists for development of effective teaching and learning materials for beginners has been noted by Canadian researchers (e.g., Uchihara & Yanagisawa, 2017), but settlement-oriented corpus analysis for lexical frequency remains to be conducted.

## From Needs to Tasks

Other inevitable complexities stemming from needs assessment through identification of real-life tasks in a newcomer setting include three common problems: 1) the problem of specification, which results in an endless list of tasks newcomers may be facing in their daily interactions; 2) the problem of task complexity, which entails numerous daily decisions on task structure and task sequencing; and 3) the problem of performance extrapolation, which questions the validity of the assumption that successful performance on one task means a successful performance on an apparently similar task at a different time and place (Van Avermaet & Gysen, 2006). While the third problem remains open for empirical investigations, the first two were addressed prior to TBLT implementation in Belgium by teams of professional task, syllabus, and curriculum designers. Solutions offered—task-based syllabuses consisting of ready-to-use tasks for K-12 and adult language programs—were not mandatory but optional suggestions on TBLT implementation. TBLT was envisioned as a promising approach to improving the quality of language instruction, and teachers were encouraged to try it in their classrooms by the incentive of extra funding available to schools committed to implementation. By offering teachers optional ready-to-use classroom materials, an opportunity to reflect on the details, outcomes, and rationale for TBLT implementation was provided for teachers.

## Interaction as the key to learning

The key element of TBLT effectiveness is acknowledged to be not in the task itself, but the amount and quality of interaction that arises from it (Van Gorp & Bogaert, 2007). The teacher's role in stimulating this interaction, guiding it, and increasing its quality is paramount. Even after the task is designed, its success in advancing learners' language

competence depends on multiple decisions to be made by the teacher: how much support should be offered before and during task completion to the group(s) and individual learners, and in what form; how to stimulate active engagement of every single learner; what kind of focus on grammatical form would be appropriate for the task and the group; how to elicit negotiation of meaning and content; how to maximize opportunities for language output, etc. (Van Avermaet, Colpin, Van Gorp, Bogaert & Van den Branden, 2006, p. 175). This understanding of the crucial importance of classroom interaction and support of individual learners to ensure the emergence of quality learning is observed by numerous researchers (e.g., Woods, 1996; Kubanyiova, 2012). Teachers in Belgium were supported to focus precisely on enhancing the classroom interaction as a prerequisite to enhanced language learning.

The TBLT implementation model demonstrated numerous scaffolding structures, from research-based needs assessments and ready-to-use tasks and syllabuses, to individual one-on-one in-class coaching offered to teachers by professional consultants. The teacher is the key actor in selecting, adapting or designing a task, as well as ensuring that the task's learning potential is realized during the in-class interaction. This interaction is also dependent on all the diverse learners interacting with the teacher, within the group, with the task, with materials and resources, and with the meaning-making language learning process orchestrated by the teacher. According to Van den Branden (2006), it is the quality of this complex interaction that will determine the effect of a task on language proficiency of the group and individual learners. Attention to classroom interaction is seen as the central, rather than additional or taken-for-granted task of teaching. Therefore, the focus in the national TBLT implementation process in Belgium was on addressing other multiple teaching challenges such as needs assessment, material and assessment design, in order to allow teachers to turn their full attention to facilitating learning in the classroom.

It is worth noting that in the Belgian TBLT implementation model described in 2006, assessment is not presented as a key factor impacting growth in language proficiency, as it is in PBLA. Language assessment and evaluation appears to be documenting learning outcomes after the learning took place, rather than being the central part of the learning process itself. This apparent lack of emphasis on assessment does not mean absence of feedback, but rather acknowledges critical differences between assessment and action-oriented feedback. Such two conceptually different approaches to assessment in PBLA implementation in Canada and TBLT implementation in Belgium in apparently similar settlement contexts indicate the need for empirical evidence to support either one of the two assumptions. Further comparative analysis of various TBLT implementation models, which is beyond the scope of this paper, may produce additional examples of the dependence of certain educational innovations on then-current political climate, rather than on research-based evidence.

## Elements of a scaffolded implementation model

In the Belgian TBLT implementation model, the three critical elements of scaffolded implementation can be observed: research, resources, and productive communication. More specifically, these three factors were manifested in the following: 1) the implementation model was built on a local classroom-based research tradition that provided rich accounts of what teachers and learners do, think, feel, and need; 2) a comprehensive database of quality, ready-to-use resources was developed prior to TBLT implementation; 3) channels for ongoing communication between the actors were provided from the onset, with the goal of effective response and adjustment of the implementation process; and 4) longitudinal research-based monitoring of the implementation process and its outcomes was conducted. It is symbolic that research both starts and closes the proposed list of the key factors for successful implementation. Research-based needs assessment is a foundation of TBLT itself, and if this foundation is extrapolated to the task of TBLT implementation, it would entail careful assessment of what teachers and learners need in order to teach and learn the task-based way. The real-world task for teachers, administrators, and policy makers is improving the quality of both the process and the product of language learning, and extensive classroom-based research is a critical information source for policy development and implementation, as well as for assessing its impact. Such classroom-based research on LINC/Adult ESL programs in Canada is extremely limited and is in urgent need of exponential growth in order to support research-based policy development and implementation.

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Yuliya is pursuing her PhD at the University of Toronto while continuing to teach in a LINC program. Her experience includes teaching TESL courses, mentoring TESL students, as well as pedagogy-oriented research on language learning. Her current project examines how PBLA implementation impacts learning and teaching in adult language training programs in Canada. You can reach her at [yuliya.desyatova@utoronto.mail.ca](mailto:yuliya.desyatova@utoronto.mail.ca).