RESPONSIBLE LANGUAGE TEACHING
A Definition in Flux

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ABSTRACT: The first half of this article is about how I defined 'responsible' language teaching across the first two decades of my career. My current best definition of responsible language teaching is framed around task-based language teaching (TBLT). The second half of this article describes how TBLT works in my setting (Ellis et al. 2019), and how it gives me professional satisfaction. The article closes with twenty task modules and suggestions for how to implement them in Italian language classrooms.
Key words: Italian, pedagogy, task-based language teaching

MY LANGUAGE TEACHING CAREER 1.0

As stated in the abstract, this article is a personal/professional account of my first two decades in the field of language teaching. If you are interested in a significantly longer arch of our profession, see Musumeci (1997), in that book she tracks almost 600 years of trends in language teaching. This pilgrim coincidentally started teaching languages in 1997 because I loved them and I was good at them. Like a lot of young language teachers, I was hired based on my ability to speak the target language(s). The inconvenient fact that I did not know how to *teach* them didn't seem to concern my first employers, they gave me a copy of the textbook and told me to stay one chapter ahead of the students. So that's how I taught in those early years. I would later see that it was a Present-Practice-Produce (PPP) model of language teaching (Willis 1996) but at the time I just stayed one beat ahead of my students and I taught with all the charm I could muster, and all the grammar rules I could articulate. I was able to hold my students' attention in the target language for the first 15-20 minutes of class, and then we took out the book and I started talking about grammar, in English. By the end of class, I usually felt one of two ways:

1. I had gotten all excited about some fine point about grammar (e.g., adjective agreement or past tense formation), and even if I was the *only one* excited over this detail of grammar, it seemed fun and effective.
2. I felt like this was pretty hopeless, my students just weren't getting it, I suddenly sounded like a cranky old man in a 23-year-old's body: "How will they ever learn this language if they don't care about grammar?"

But it was a good job and I got to talk about something I love every day. So, I buried my head in the sand and just kept at it, I suppose my approach was something like this: *thrill 'em and drill 'em*. So, it was a great first job. Until it suddenly wasn't a good job anymore—I hit my motivational rock bottom after two years in the classroom. It was so life-draining to hear myself talk about grammar to a mostly indifferent and non-comprehending audience. I suppose I could have done more research into "language teaching methods" but there were two major obstacles in the way:

1) All of my senior colleagues had been professionally trained in literature, and that's mostly what I saw as the professional path: literature analysis. I had a hunch that there was another road to becoming a professor of modern languages but I did not see it.
2) I was young (24-25 years old), and I wanted to get out in the world and "do something" with my languages. Talking about static grammar to indifferent teenagers was stifling. I was often lonely before and after class and I even felt lonely in the middle of class—while answering my own obvious questions or following my own thesis of why this grammar point is important. Instead of really digging into the possibility that there were different, more interactive ways to teach languages, I took the easier road—I left the field.

I left the field of language teaching at age 25, but it wouldn't leave me. My first 'real' job at an advertising agency in New York City was very exciting. For about the first five weeks. Then it was just a job, just a business job. And that *really* wasn't me.

MY LANGUAGE TEACHING CAREER 2.0

I could not stay at the advertising agency for very long. My overwhelming passion for languages and for teaching was too much. So I

went back to teaching languages. Throughout my 20s I worked at different institutions: colleges, high schools, and private language schools. And I kept trying to find the right setting, the right book, the right approach.

But no matter where I worked, the overall approach remained the same: entertain them in the target language for 10-15 minutes and then cram in grammar points. And the results remained the same: Dismal. My only success stories were the *very* few students who really got excited about grammar, or the very few students who had so much *motivation* to learn this language (and enough money) that they kept traveling to the target country, and therefore learned chunks of the language experientially.

However, the vast majority of my students weren't learning much at all—some were having fun but the syllabus was fundamentally driven by grammar point mastery, and since that wasn't happening, there wasn't any proficiency progress to speak of. Years later I would come across a book that articulates the riddle I was living, "Challenge and Change in Language Teaching," (Willis and Willis 1996). But at the time it felt, ineffably, like an impossible task.

WHAT ELSE I WAS DOING IN CLASS?

Trying, but failing, to share cultural gems like movies and even offering "target-language only" events for my students. I just relied on my passion for languages and my ability to articulate grammar rules in a plain-English way. But it wasn't enough to keep the classroom alive for very long. Outside of the classroom I was always on the elusive quest to find a better book, to write a better book, to find a better audio program, to produce a better audio program. But what I probably meant back then by 'a better book' was a better way to present grammar. I just didn't know what I didn't know.

HOW THE CLASS HOUR FELT

It felt like arduous, emotionally draining work. After the initial burst of pleasant banter in the target language, it was like pulling teeth. They just didn't seem to 'get' grammar, or, I thought, they just didn't care enough to put in the hard work of figuring out grammar so that they could have a breakthrough and learn more.

The other vehicles to share language with them (movies, books, cartoons, songs) were too far beyond their language level. We would do it (watch movies, listen to songs, etc.) but it was over their head—and that was a different flavor of disappointment. Something in my conscience always said there had to be another way but then I would speak to colleagues and we all agreed—what else can we do? Yes, we push them to speak but they have to learn the grammar rules, too, or else it all falls apart, right? It felt like the boring but responsible thing to do. *Thrill 'em and then drill 'em.*

WHAT WERE STUDENTS' ATTITUDES LIKE?

Good at the beginning of class, and then frustrated at the end of class because they couldn't ever quite get the grammar. And who likes to feel like they don't get something? No one. It does not feel good to be engaged in an endeavor and then to be mystified by this seemingly impenetrable code of rules and minutiae and exceptions.

WHAT WAS ALMOST THE TURNING POINT?

I got scared. After another few years in the classroom (and now almost 30 years old), I was petrified that I had made the wrong career choice. Again. My inner critic would go something like this, "You call yourself a language teacher but if 95% of your students aren't ever able to speak the language…well, is it really *teaching* if there's no visible *learning* occurring?" But I did not sustain this critical examination of my practice because my love for languages was so deep that I did not want to work in a field where languages are not the main touch. I also did not sustain the critical analysis because I was ignorant of the source of the problem: Was it my style of instruction? Was it my students' motivation? What other ways to teach languages were out there? The truth is I just didn't know and my literature-trained colleagues could not offer me much direction. But there had to be another way. I had learned a few languages by living in Europe for four semesters, but that couldn't be replicated in the United States, could it?

HOW THE CONFLICT CONTINUED

Regardless of where I was teaching, all my colleagues were bilingual or trilingual, committed to their work, and equally clueless about how to effectively share this multilingualism with 95% of our students. Whenever I tried to provoke my colleagues about the riddle of a better way to teach, the conversation went down the rabbit hole of "let's find a better book, or…maybe we can write our own book!" But I had already written and published a few books by then and I saw the false hope in that solution. If we repackage these grammar rules and fake-sounding dialogues in a new book, we just get the *same* book.

At about this point in my life, my late 20s, I had again lost the magical and fascinating pull of languages and cultures. Despite my best efforts in Language Career 2.0, my work had become a life-draining endeavor again. My students weren't comprehending or speaking much at all, and the grammar rules were not sinking in. And the loneliness resurfaced: It is a small death to hear yourself reciting grammar rules to a class that is disinterested. Then 9/11 happened and like a lot of my fellow New Yorkers I lost a dear friend, Mike Davidson. In the wake of the tragedy and buoyed by the fact that I was alive and curious, I found the courage to say to myself: The way I have been teaching is *not* how we learn languages. We learn languages by hearing them and using them in meaningful, somewhat-pressured contexts. There is a different way to do this in my classrooms. But how do I find out about it? Where can I learn about a different model for teaching? My schooling could not help me much, at that point I had a BA and an MA across several languages and literatures. So, I went to the next-best classroom: the bookstore and the library, where I grabbed every relevant title I could find. Within a month, I had read a dozen general books about learning, education and linguistics. In that blitz, I discovered that there was a scientific field out there called Applied Linguistics. It was still the fateful fall of 2001, and I was reading about a guy named Dr. Paul Pimsleur and the field he had worked in, Applied Linguistics. It was a lightning bolt moment for me: I could become a professor of modern languages on a different route. My ceiling exploded, and I was suddenly a man on an *informed* mission. Whatever Dr. Paul Pimsleur knew, I wanted to know. And that Pimsleur Path very quickly

led me to a subfield of Applied Linguistics, called Second Language Acquisition.

MY LANGUAGE TEACHING CAREER 3.0

I now had the name of the show I wanted to see, Second Language Acquisition (SLA), but it took a couple months before I could find a venue in which to see it. In November 2001, I researched local universities that offered classes and graduate programs in SLA. I eventually found a home again at Rutgers University, where I received permission to do an interdisciplinary PhD in Italian and SLA.

HOW I DISCOVERED TASKS

Among my many responsibilities back at graduate school was this imperative: I had to study and summarize the historic trends of language teaching approaches (Musumeci 1997). As I learned a couple things and *unlearned* a ton of things, my mentor Liliana Sanchez (Sanchez & Toribio 2003) pushed me to look for principles: What research-based approaches demonstrate a way forward for speaking *with* students and not speaking *at* them? What approaches flip the script on the assumed 'accuracy first' protocol? I was pushed to think deeper and more critically about approaches to language teaching and language learning. The first books I had to read in SLA are still relevant, and could help someone get a broader perspective on the variety of approaches in language teaching: Lightbown and Spada (2003, 2008, 2013), Ellis (2003), Lee and VanPatten (2004), Skehan (1998), Vanpatten (2003), Willis (1996), Willis and Willis (1996). After a couple years of this deep dive into the fields of language teaching and SLA, I knew that I primarily wanted to research an approach that prioritized 'fluency development' before, but *not* at the expense of accuracy development. And this definition of my priorities eventually led me to task-based language teaching (TBLT). The right principles were all neatly packaged in TBLT in a way that was adaptable, enjoyable and empirically valid. And it had been researched and written about for almost 30 years by the time I came upon it. Hidden in plain sight?

By the time I finished the PhD, approaching my mid-30s, I had connected the dots. The rigor of research, combined with my real-world ex-

perience (I had taught at five universities and a dozen language schools by then), had shown me a way forward. And that way forward is the framework of TBLT.

How long did the (experimenting) process take?

About 10 years across four colleges, 10 years after my PhD. Yes, even though had I seen the light way back in 2006, it took me another 10 years to find a version of TBLT (and the ability to express why it works to colleagues who are trained in other fields) that can work in the sobering reality of a Modern Languages department at a large college, within a large university.

Making TBLT work in your setting

This article also describes how TBLT works in my (sometimes challenging) setting. Fundamentally I speak *with* my students in the target language and my students share information and opinions (information and opinions that I did *not* previously know) with me in the target language. Of course, they can't express it perfectly—no one speaks perfectly—but through *their* accomplishment of comprehending *and* communicating the information or opinion, the upward spiral of their language comprehension, production, and learning has started. This is all possible through the foundational framework of TBLT (Willis 1996). The upward spiral of student's language usage feels good to witness every day I teach. It feels good and it feels *responsible*.

I wrote this article to share this transformative practice with you. But I can't possibly know the setting in which you work. Maybe you have small classes, or enormous classes. Maybe you meet every day, or once a week. Maybe you have a supervisor who breathes down your neck, or you are left in complete academic freedom. I work in a large department at a community college, within the largest urban university in the United States. And I would bet that at least some of my realities overlap with yours—here are the most salient challenges of my professional setting:

- We are supposed to give (at least) five "traditional" tests per semester;

- My students are not very motivated to be in class, most have to be there;
- The aptitude profiles of my students run along the entire spectrum;
- I never assume grammar knowledge, not even the definition of a noun or a verb;
- My colleagues are not necessarily interested in a different way to teach languages;
- My students often have real-life difficulties, i.e., poverty, teenage pregnancy, immigration concerns;
- My students will likely have a different teacher before/after their time with me;
- There is some fear in my department about the future of our field.

Despite these obstacles, the special sauce of TBLT still creates interactional magic. And given my challenging circumstances, it works supremely well compared to the traditional alternative. My students and I really get to know each other, through the structured baby steps of TBLT, in the target language. Regardless of your setting, I want to share some task modules in this article with you so that you can experiment and improve your practice. That's exactly what I try to do every day in the classroom: experiment and improve.

WHAT DOES A TBLT MODULE LOOK LIKE?

There are three phases: pre-task, task performance, post-task. See the Appendix for an outline; and see my 2014 and 2018 articles for more direction on implementation (Means 2014, 2018). Following is a brief description of each phase.

Pre-task: This is the longest part of the instructional cycle, it often takes up 2/3 of the module in my practice (by this I mean that if I hope to stretch a given task module across, say, 6 hours of teaching time, I will try to spend 4 of those 6 hours on pre-task activities). The teacher's main job is to expose students to task-relevant input. This input is best delivered by the teacher herself, short videos—viewed repeatedly, alongside some sort of confirmation exercise—and short written excerpts.

Task performance: This is the shortest part of the cycle, it could be as brief as 20-30 minutes for the entire class. It is also the richest part of the cycle because learners have to marshal their best resources to perform the

task under conditions that simulate the hurly-burly of real-world communication.

Post-task: This phase 'flips the script' on most traditional approaches to language teaching. Now that students have been focused on the comprehension/delivery of the task performance, the teacher can finally present some of the fine points about grammar or sentence construction. These are the grammar points that *initiate* most modules in traditional/PPP approaches; with TBLT, instead, we *conclude* the module with them. The theory is that learners' minds/brains are more receptive to these details at this point because they have already seen the utility of their message in their successful task performance (Ellis 2018). Now they should be more open to instruction that illustrates how their (successful) task performance could be cleaned up a bit, mechanically.

In order to experiment with one of these modules, I again urge the reader to consult the Appendix for the outline, to see the bibliography for more direction, and to contact me directly.

Twenty (20) task modules:

Presentational Tasks

1. My classmate's bio
2. Two truths and one lie
3. Five things at his/her house, and one summary
4. Five things in his/her fridge, and one summary
5. Three things he/she eats and drinks (always, sometimes, never), and one summary
6. His/her Tuesday routine, and one compliment about his/her routine
7. My classmate's family tree, and one compliment about his/her family
8. Our 1-minute ad for this town/city
9. One trip my classmate took and one thing he/she learned

Spot-the-difference Tasks

10. Two 'identical' living rooms
11. Two 'identical' cityscapes
12. Two 'identical' kitchens

13. Two 'identical' beaches
14. Two 'identical' nature scenes
15. Two 'identical' storefronts

Problem-solving Tasks

16. Write a creative ending to the movie (before we finish it)
17. Write a creative ending to the short story (before we finish it)
18. Identify/request/record/transcribe a short interview with a competent speaker

Jigsaw Tasks

19. Combine knowledge to summarize short film
20. Combine knowledge to summarize short story

CONCLUSION

TBLT has helped me get back to a place of faith, faith that I stuck with the right profession, the right calling. In sharing this personal/professional history with you, I challenge you to think back to the moment when your second language (or third language) got real. Did it have to do with other people? Really connecting with other people? Did it have to do with a sense of your own identity and expression? If your answer is YES, then I invite you to see how TBLT gives you a chance to tap that source of proficiency growth that is deep in *your* heart and memory. In so doing, you will also find a means to remember why you signed up for this job in the first place—because it feels good to share the language(s) you love in order to earn your daily bread.

So now you see how this approach has changed my professional life, and my definition of responsible work, and how it has the potential to change yours. And because I, too, work with a lot of doubters, let me end on a very practical note: Every task module I share here comes from a *research-base* (Samuda et al. 2018).

APPENDIX

TASK MODULE

I. Pre-task
   a. Introduce the task assignment for this chapter (overlaps with the text)
   b. Watch teacher demonstrate task performance
   c. Listening/Reading/Viewing Activities
   d. Speaking/Writing Activities
   e. Pre-task planning time (individual and/or pairs)

II. During-task
   a. Do task with time pressure (if task is oral, no reading of notes)
   b. If oral, record task performance on Voice Notes

III. Post-task
   a. If oral, students prepare transcription, Version A
   b. Teacher provides feedback on written/transcribed tasks
   c. Group assessment on task strengths and weaknesses
   d. Teach relevant grammar points; do relevant grammar exercises
   e. Learners revise written/transcribed tasks, Version B
   f. Illustrate connections between students' performances and grammar points
   g. Chapter-end Quiz

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