

## **Task-based approaches and interaction in the 1:1 classroom: A teacher's perspective**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This account describes an action research study conducted by the teacher of two classes within a Polish Business English context. This cyclical inquiry sought to identify potential obstacles in the application of task-based language teaching in 1:1 classes, and to devise possible means to overcome these. The observations from these research cycles offer implications for classroom practice, particularly the potential consequences of exclusive reliance upon task-based approaches. While task-based lessons in this context appear to partially emulate authentic communication, this seems to offer few overt focus-on-form episodes by virtue of the teacher's non-interventionist stance. As a result, it will be argued that triggering a reactive language focus is highly challenging for the teacher under supposedly natural conditions. While no attempt is made to generalise from this small-scale study, it is argued that teacher research can offer a valuable means to communicate actual classroom experience to the wider research community, thus potentially informing future research.

### **INTRODUCTION**

As a language teacher, I have frequently encountered recommendations from expert teachers and methodologists which appear unsuitable for my own teaching contexts. Until recently, I generally took these suggestions at face value, rejected them and

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rarely returned to them. However, this report demonstrates the benefits of directly engaging with pedagogical recommendations for practice and systematically testing them within our own classrooms.

During my MA-level methodology course, a heavy emphasis was placed on task-based language teaching (TBLT). Having worked for many years in a succession of environments which promoted broadly communicative teaching methods, I had already been directly and indirectly familiarised with some of its key tenets. This teaching history, allied to my own beliefs that language learning is a non-linear, adaptive and meaning-oriented process, made me sympathetic to the overall ambitions of TBLT, although I seemed reluctant to exploit it within the 1:1 business classes I was teaching at the time. This difficulty was heightened by the fact that, for an apparently popular teaching format, 1:1 classes are largely overlooked as an area for both empirical research and specific teaching recommendations.

This paper explores my attempts to apply TBLT within 1:1 classrooms, taking a small-scale action research approach to identify and confront potential concerns through systematic investigative cycles (Burns, 2010). I will initially highlight some assumed conflicts between TBLT and 1:1 classes before establishing a framework to explore these issues within a classroom context. The subsequent analysis highlights potential directions for further exploration of TBLT and 1:1 contexts by other teacher-researchers, and takes an interest in the assumed effectiveness of the reactive language focus phase within task-based teaching cycles.

### **Foundations of task-based approaches**

TBLT approaches arose from dissatisfaction with prevailing communicative teaching methods, especially the supposedly prescriptive 'presentation-practice-production' (PPP) model (Willis & Willis, 2007). Where TBLT primarily differs from so-called traditional teaching methods is an allegedly unique emphasis on actual language use rather than a pre-determined procession of structures (Ellis, 2003; Willis & Willis, 2007). Within Willis' task framework, which positions language acquisition as a cumulative experiential process (1996; Nunan, 2004), the goal of TBLT is not instantaneous

acquisition of isolated form-focussed exemplars but rather cultivating a holistic linguistic resource. This ambition is purportedly facilitated by classroom environments tolerant of error, code-switching and innovation (Van den Branden, 2006; Willis & Willis, 2007). However, even within this meaning-oriented classroom approach, these proposals contained calls from TBLT advocates to ensure that it is accompanied by an underlying focus on language (Nunan, 2004; Willis & Willis, 2007).

Pedagogic claims that TBLT fosters optimal learning conditions are, perhaps retrospectively, founded on four distinct theories of second language acquisition. The first is Long's (1996) claim that, within meaningful contexts, communicative difficulties drive language acquisition via modified input and the noticing of specific linguistic features through an implicit focus on form (FonF). Further support for TBLT is found in Swain's output hypothesis where linguistic resources are seen to be marshalled, and subsequently restructured, in response to active communicative pressures (Swain & Lapkin, 2001). Vygotskian socio-cultural theories are also said to justify TBLT within a model of collaborative learning through interaction, innovation and scaffolding (Ellis, 2003). Finally, a skill-acquisition approach to language learning, whereby procedural knowledge can be trialled, restructured and incrementally automatized through active and meaningful use (Ellis, 2000; Nunan, 2004), also appears broadly supportive.

Although each of these theories is contested, the first three share a vision of language acquisition through natural, goal-oriented interaction. However, focussing on interaction alone may risk offering little more than training in communicative effectiveness (Ellis, 2000; Skehan, 2003), rather than language acquisition. Both the output-focussed and interactionist models rely upon learners recognising gaps within their own language use (Long, 1996; Swain & Lapkin, 2001), which suggests that incidents potentially triggering this process must be considered an essential pre-requisite for language learning via task-based methods. Within a skill-acquisition model, such triggers may prompt the testing of learners' internal hypotheses, and could thus be facilitative of interlanguage

restructuring (Johnson, 1996). Even within a socio-cultural position, explicitly highlighted language issues may offer opportunities for scaffolding and co-construction (Ohta, 2000). Thus, to varying degrees, one measure of success in TBLT is the potential of genuine communication breakdowns to trigger either an implicit or explicit linguistic focus.

As contextualised, spontaneous interaction is viewed by TBLT proponents as the most appropriate means to highlight the interdependency of meaning, use and form, appropriate task design and selection appear central to creating conducive conditions for language acquisition (Nunan, 2004; Swain & Lapkin, 2001). Tasks may actively target specific linguistic goals, though whether this is either feasible or desirable is disputed. For some, including Willis and Willis (2007), a pre-determined linguistic focus thwarts the learner-centred aims of TBLT, whereas Nunan (2004) and Samuda (2001) argue for highlighting form before and during tasks respectively. Additionally, while Willis and Willis (2007) assert that tasks are easily modified to achieve specific goals across teaching contexts, research indicates that the relationship between task types, conditions and delivery are highly complex (Skehan & Foster, 1997).

### **Potential problems of TBLT in 1:1 contexts**

There is a notable lack of research into 1:1 teaching, which reflects both practical difficulties and a possible belief that the individual factors at play defy generalisation. A pedagogical perspective is, however, proposed by Wilberg (1987), who seeks to rectify PPP's perceived negligence of learners' individual needs and prescriptive approach to language. This criticism, coupled with a desire for "authentic communication" (p.8), makes his work appear highly sympathetic towards TBLT. In a later work, Osborne (2005) shows similar concern that 1:1 teaching should reflect learner needs in its flexibility of content and approach. However, Wilberg's preoccupation with intervention and accuracy, and Osborne's reliance on lengthy reformulation of student utterances highlight some potential tensions between their work and TBLT. Nevertheless, it would seem that, for both authors, the 1:1 dynamic allows a more responsive and less didactic teaching approach which is well-suited to TBLT.

My own doubts about using TBLT in the 1:1 classroom centred on the absence of group-based learner collaboration. One specific concern was that constant contact between teacher and learner may inhibit the learner-controlled discourse typically sought within TBLT (Willis & Willis, 2007). As the identity of the interlocutor clearly influences any interaction, it seemed reasonable to question whether a proficient speaker may inhibit collaboration and openness, or, at the very least, affect the language that students produce (Van Lier & Matsuo, 2000; Willis & Willis, 2007). Furthermore, TBLT places enormous value on varied classroom interaction patterns, which I feared could be diluted by having a single interlocutor throughout. Finally, I was doubtful about the potential to generate incidental, collaborative FonF if my students simply relied upon, and deferred to, my linguistic resources (Ellis, 2003; Van Gorp & Bogaert, 2006).

To explore these specific issues regarding TBLT within 1:1 classrooms, I sought to observe the interaction between myself and my students, through the following research questions:

1. Can 1:1 teaching formats replicate the conditions believed conducive to language acquisition within task-based approaches?
2. What adjustments are possible when planning and conducting task-based lessons to maximise the opportunities for language acquisition in 1:1 classes?

My intention, therefore, is not to challenge TBLT approaches directly, but merely to explore their impact within one specific classroom context.

### **Indicators**

When choosing appropriate indicators, I attempted to balance the study's validity, goals and available means of collection. Although psycho-linguistic traditions utilise sophisticated indicators of task performance (Skehan, 2003), these are unsuitable in interaction-based studies. Therefore, I explored four overlapping features based on teacher-student cooperation. This choice, however, was not viewed as unproblematic and subsequently colours the entire study. Alternative approaches may offer valuable, and potentially

complementary, counterpoints to teachers who wish to emulate this inquiry.

After an exploratory reading phase, four broad indicators were chosen, and a brief description and the rationale behind these follows:

- The perceived symmetry of teacher-student interaction
- Students' willingness to innovate in achieving communicative goals
- The nature and frequency of corrective feedback during the lesson
- Cases of an explicit linguistic focus instigated by the student

As seemingly natural, meaningful conversation is considered central to TBLT (Willis & Willis, 2007), the first criterion explored the potentially inhibiting effect of the teacher on dialogic interaction during the lessons. Significant indicators here include the source of topic changes, the absence of Initiation-Response-Feedback loops and back-channelling (Van Lier & Matsuo, 2000). These may contribute to what Van Lier and Matsuo refer to as symmetry (2000), where both parties control and share conversational duties.

The second and third indicators are relevant to TBLT's assumed focus on meaning over form. This focus may be demonstrated by the student's desire to take risks beyond previously studied language and online improvisation during communicative difficulties, even extending to the use of L1 (Ellis, 2003). The absence of explicit feedback during the lesson may also be partially indicative of a meaning-focussed interaction, which could conflict with both teachers' instincts and learners' expectations. The nature and frequency of feedback was deemed valuable, therefore, in determining the ability of the teacher to maintain a primary focus on meaning.

The final feature, and central to any assumed language acquisition through TBLT, is the incidence of FonF generated within the lessons (Swain & Lapkin, 2001). However, its potentially implicit nature makes this feature highly problematic. One possible indicator is what Swain and Lapkin term 'language-related episodes' (LREs), where language itself becomes the focus of interaction, though self-

correction, uptake following feedback and false starts could also suggest a direct language focus (2001). A final concern here is the feasibility of a reactive language focus, which is perceived as preferable to a pre-ordained focus by some TBLT advocates (Willis & Willis, 2007).

Two significant caveats, however, hang over these criteria. The first is a direct challenge to clear and consistent identification, as these phenomena may prove practically elusive. The second crucial point was that these criteria were seen only as indicative features, and not as targets to be attained. However, my dual role as both teacher and researcher raises significant concerns about whether this goal was realistic, despite its potential to offer direct, and less intrusive, insights into the 1:1 dynamic.

## **RESEARCH PROCEDURES**

Two Business English students, a beginner, Waldemar, and a more advanced student, Feliks (both names are pseudonyms), consented to participate in the study during their normal lessons, and the on-going relationship with the teacher-researcher must be assumed to influence the observed interaction. Both students, who will be described in more detail later, were from a large city in Poland, and had lessons twice-weekly through their companies' partnership with me. I selected these students because of their apparent inclination towards more meaning-focussed communication within the classroom, and assumed willingness to adapt to new approaches. Each cycle represented a lesson of one hour and was recorded, though not transcribed.

The full inquiry process is outlined in Table 1, and loosely follows Burns' interpretation of Kemmis and McTaggart's (2010) action research design over a period of ten weeks. This design enabled me to explore my assumptions about the barriers to TBLT in 1:1 classes, and then offered a path to investigate possible methods to minimise these. However, this process deviates slightly from the traditional cycles of Plan → Action → Observe → Reflect to demonstrate the fluidity of these stages within the inquiry process, and their potentially bilateral influences.

TABLE 1

**Ten-week plan for the Action Research project (modelled on Kemmis & McTaggart, 1998, as produced in Burns, 2010, p.9).**

Weeks 1-3	Exploring → Planning	Developing an initial concept
Week 4		Background reading to refine the concept into a plan
Weeks 4-5	Planning → Action	Formulating research questions
Week 5		Devising observation criteria and instruments
Week 6	Action & Observation	Selection and design of lesson material
Week 7		First cycle of lessons
Week 8	Observation ↔ Reflection	Teacher journal writing
Week 9		Initial analysis of lessons via recordings, notes and journal
Weeks 6-7	Reflection → Planning	Learner interviews
Week 7		Processing and reconciliation of observations from first cycle
Week 8	Planning → Action	Consolidation of observations into key issues for second lessons
Week 9		Operationalising key issues within lesson design and planning
Week 10-?	Action & Observation	Design of second cycle lessons, as informed by reflection stages
Week 11-?		Second cycle of lessons
Week 12-?	Observation ↔ Reflection	Teacher journal writing
Week 13-?		Initial analysis of lessons via recordings, notes and journal
Week 14-?	Reflection → Planning	Learner interviews
Week 15-?		Processing, reconciliation and consolidation of key concerns to take forward and/or explore further (a never-ending process?)

As I was both an actor and observer within the research, these stages co-existed, interplayed and influenced each other. Each stage

must be viewed as being entirely embedded in what came before and after, and distinctions such as that between planning and classroom ‘action’ become blurred. It is also interesting that relatively little of this ten-week process involved what might conventionally be deemed ‘action’, an observation which might be surprising to classroom teachers who interpret action research in more instrumental terms.

My observations and reflections drew upon lesson recordings, my reflective diary entries, and recorded interviews with the students across two investigative cycles. I coded this data inductively, whereby emergent themes were identified within the recordings and supported by the other data sources, to allow for qualitative analysis. While inherently subjective and incomplete, diary entries offered an immediate reflection on salient lesson features, thus enabling deeper exploration through the recordings. However, as reflective diary writing is considered most effective when sustained (Towndraw, 2004), I had made efforts to develop this habit after all my lessons.

The recordings and diary entries also informed the post-lesson interviews, which were conducted in Polish and English as required. The interviews followed a semi-structured format and included questions arising from the recordings and within the interview (see Appendix A). However, data gathered through this method may not be entirely reliable, as interviews represent a highly-contextualised interaction (Mann, 2011), and so my dual role as teacher and researcher may have limited the students’ willingness to speak frankly given our ongoing relationship and cooperation.

The limited nature of the data collected is acknowledged, and while this may be compatible within an action research framework, it must be assumed that alternative forms of data and approaches to data collection would necessarily present very different, and potentially intriguing, perspectives.

### **First lesson cycle**

To ensure a realistic depiction of TBLT for the initial cycle, I adapted two lessons from an established pedagogical source. I relied upon familiar topics which were strongly influenced by my existing relationship with both students.

Waldemar owns a property development company, and we had been meeting (sometimes sporadically) for a year. He had always been sociable, and, despite his supposed desire for Business English, he displayed a clear bias towards free conversation in class, which strongly influenced the invitation for him to participate in this study. At the time, his level equated to A1 or A2 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and I was his first English teacher, which gave me some confidence in identifying his needs and existing linguistic resources. His work frequently involved sales, which led me to select a gapped reading task on describing outstanding houses (Willis & Willis, 2007, pp.48-49), as the identification and description of building features appeared directly relevant (the lesson is more fully described in Appendix B). While I chose not to target a specific language focus, the task lent itself to revising 'there is/are' and comparative and superlative forms, two previously-covered structures, as well as allowing for an extension into possible variations and alternatives to these forms.

In the two years I had known Feliks, who works as Communications Director at an international bank, he had always appeared to value flexible, appropriate and nuanced use of English in frequent written and spoken encounters with colleagues globally. This goal was influential in his selection for this study, especially as he had only started learning English at university and subsequently seemed open to a variety of teaching methods. Despite his relatively late start in learning English, he was judged as being within the C1 level of the CEFR. Because of his work with and interest in the media, he received a jumbled reading task regarding profit motives in the media, which had originally been designed to draw out a focus on fixed expressions (Willis & Willis, 2007, p.237). The full task cycle for this lesson is described in Appendix C.

While I attempted to stay true to the original lesson designs, the absence of any inherent information gap in the 1:1 classroom potentially hindered the planning and reporting stages. To overcome this issue, spoken reporting activities which compared the texts with prevailing conditions in Poland were created to maintain a sense of task completion (Ellis, 2003). Further adaptation was also required in

the pre-task stage, which I designed to highlight lexical elements considered relevant in later stages. It is also important to underline that no pre-determined target language was chosen, although the texts were assumed rich enough to facilitate a language focus should no student-led focus emerge (Willis & Willis, 2007).

### **First cycle reflections**

The two lessons provided strikingly different outcomes, which are selectively presented below. These observations are limited to broader issues common to both lessons, and which could be explored within the second investigative cycle, namely the boundaries of symmetry and linguistic innovation during the task, the degree of teacher intervention and the potential to generate FonF. Other concerns, which could be explored in more detail in further inquiries, include apparently blurred distinctions between task stages, and performance variations across them, the role of task-type familiarity and the influence of teacher actions on performance, especially at the lower level.

#### *First lesson cycle: Waldemar*

Perhaps contrary to expectations, TBLT seemingly offered a highly conducive environment for interaction with Waldemar, who appeared unhindered by the lack of “basic speaking skills” often expected at lower levels (Duran & Ramaut, 2006, p.47). This could, however, merely reflect his individual qualities. Within the follow-up interview, Waldemar expressed a desire for “skuteczność” (effectiveness) in communication, rather than “beautiful dialogue”, which suggests that this level of interaction may have been reflective of his personal goals rather than being facilitated by the task-based framework alone. An interesting consequence of this desire was his adaptation of the nominated pre-task into a communicative discussion about different rooms in the home. Later stages saw frequent student-led topic changes to illustrate points, such as explaining the game ‘Jenga’ to facilitate description of one building. This might indicate a high degree of symmetry between teacher- and learner-controlled discourse within the lesson, as well as both interlocutors’ comfort

with this, although this could simply reflect the pre-existing classroom relationship as much as the task-based approach.

In general, Waldemar displayed a high degree of linguistic innovation, as illustrated by expressions like “dream house” and his regular use of Polish and German to supplement his English:

**Extract 1**

*W: This trend, is for me very... normal, geht together, geht together in life.*

His use of German, such as ‘*geht*’, was not entirely surprising as he had studied it at high school and worked in Germany for some time. Even though I do not speak the language, I was quite used to the fact that Waldemar’s knowledge of German exerted a powerful transfer effect on his English. However, we were both surprised at how frequently this occurred. In the interview, he claimed his use of German was an unconscious strategy, and implied that the interlocutor’s desire to understand would ensure successful communication. Polish and German also acted as key prompts for my intervention, commonly coupled with rising intonation:

**Extract 2**

*W: On the, on the boden (German)? Boden, to nie (Polish)...*

*T: Floor?*

*W: On the floor, I have on the floor in kitchen.*

However, aside from lexis, few such requests for assistance were made, which possibly suggests a strong focus on meaning, or points to a reliance on existing interlanguage resources which remained unchallenged. Waldemar’s knowledge that I speak Polish, and our existing relationship, raise questions about whether this code-switching is strictly communicative or represents a limited mutually-understandable code. This provokes wider speculation about whether 1:1 settings merely heighten communicative competence with a single interlocutor rather than a broader variety of interactions.

What little feedback I provided was generally implicit, in the form of recasts, and did not appear to distract attention from meaning nor, outside phonological issues, lead to uptake. Explicit correction only

occurred during the form focus stage at the end of the lesson. However, occasional breakdowns in communication demonstrated that, from time to time, greater intervention may have been desirable:

**Extract 3**

*W: This is dream house.*

*T: Is there a lift?*

*W: For me, yes.*

*T: Yeah, for when you are so old?*

*W: No, no I think two, three years and I change my house.*

*T: Ahh, but I said, is there going to be a lift?*

*W: At this time?*

*T: A lift.*

*W: Yeah, I know, I know. My plan, plan? My plan is at Juli, begin at Juli, this year, maybe.*

*T: Ok, where would I find a cupboard?*

Although Wigglesworth (2001) reports that interlocutor familiarity increases the number of comprehension checks, my reluctance to interrupt meant such breakdowns went unchallenged. It is tempting to consider whether this behaviour reflects my researcher's desire to simply observe, and whether it would be echoed outside 1:1 classes.

Despite a clear communicative flow throughout much of the lesson, the level of inaccuracy provided numerous potential areas for a teacher-led form focus, although with little evidence of any incidental FonF or LREs outside lexis. Although performed reactively, considerable time was spent establishing a language focus around a revision of there is/are, which eventually closely resembled an isolated form-oriented grammar treatment. The possibly predictable nature of this language focus, though, casts doubt over whether it simply represented a convenient opportunity or truly reflected the learner's needs.

*First lesson cycle: Feliks*

In contrast with Waldemar, Feliks was stilted and monologic when measured against experience beyond this recorded lesson, meaning

the interaction was largely teacher-led. In the interview, he attributed this behaviour to the recording condition, a conclusion somewhat supportive of the suggested use of recording to heighten communicative pressures (Willis & Willis, 2007), and consistent with Ellis' (2003) suggestion that public performance prioritises accuracy over fluency. He also speculated that he had been trying to exercise a high degree of control over his language as he associated the task with his professional duties. Furthermore, while familiar, the topic was perhaps rather too academic to cultivate greater engagement, and its original, apparently successful, use with Japanese media students may indicate that task performance is highly dependent on context (Willis & Willis, 2007).

In a small-scale study, it is impossible to move beyond mere speculation over what contributed to his stilted performance. However, a final contributory factor may be the five minutes' planning time, which Skehan and Foster (1997) argue may be allocated towards complexity, fluency or accuracy, but not simultaneously, and that different planning conditions may influence task performance. One of these conditions suggests that solitary planners tend towards long turns, but a concurrent tendency towards greater fluency and complexity did not seem to manifest here. Feliks appeared uncomfortable with planning and later recalled a desire to ensure his response was accurate and reproduced the style of the original text. This again indicates planning time directed towards accuracy, and appears to contradict assumptions that TBLT approaches are not linguistically prescriptive (Willis & Willis, 2007).

A further question arising from Feliks' monologic performance is my relatively passive role, as the recording shows only rare, largely unsuccessful, attempts at engagement. This could have resulted from an adherence to TBLT methodology, my personal teaching beliefs or the wider social considerations of our existing relationship. We might assume that, under group conditions, the task could have generated metalinguistic discussion while reconstructing the text, although LREs were absent in this context. Any linguistic focus again centred on lexical items, and the conservative drive towards accuracy created limited scope for any language focus beyond delayed error correction.

However, a reactive language focus could have been imposed upon frequent examples of communicative yet inaccurate speech:

**Extract 4**

*F: It seems to criticise the way how media currently work and cooperate with the people who are very influential.*

**Extract 5**

*F: I think some ... I mean ... for sure part of these thesis we can find in the article are true.*

**Extract 6**

*F: The media should inform about some things ...*

**Extract 7**

*F: The sales of printed newspapers, and especially magazines is falling down.*

**Extract 8**

*F: ... I am blind for this kind of advertising.*

It seems apparent that Feliks' high proficiency presents a barrier to anything other than isolated one-off correction, and rarely in response to communicative difficulties. Thus, distinguishing competence errors from slips or identifying linguistic avoidance proved challenging, and severely limited my ability to offer any substantial reactive language focus. Consequently, I had to rely on the pre-defined focus on fixed expressions, which appeared isolated and even confusing from Feliks' perspective. Furthermore, as expressed in the post-lesson interview, Feliks deemed this language focus less productive than delayed correction, although, as the teacher, I felt the effectiveness of this delayed correction was diminished by a lack of immediacy.

**Second cycle: Rationale and task design**

A pleasure, and a challenge, of conducting classroom action research is the sheer number of avenues that subsequent research cycles may follow. Based upon my initial observations, it seemed clear that further cycles should follow divergent approaches. The primary areas for action with Waldemar were: addressing the lack of form-focussed

events; prompting uptake; and developing a more sustainable language focus, while maintaining his apparent focus on meaning. Meanwhile, my primary concern with Feliks was achieving the level of interaction during the task cycle that I was accustomed to in our lessons. However, as with Waldemar, identifying and selecting a language focus, beyond lexis, also presented an area for investigation. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that other possibly viable options had to be put aside to ensure the project remained manageable.

Waldemar's second lesson sought to trigger a pre-ordained language focus within a task (Samuda, 2001). As a result, I designed a task cycle to intentionally target the present perfect simple, which was soon to be covered in the book we were roughly following, and which is typically challenging for Polish learners. I was aware that this was Waldemar's first explicit introduction to the form, although he had implicitly encountered it within our lessons. Following a pre-task which focussed less directly on lexical items, the main task involved selecting a prospective employee based on biographical data (Appendix D has a full description of this lesson). This task invited Waldemar to explain his choice, while I acted primarily as the recipient of information. However, as his decision became clearer I began "interweaving" the target form into my own contributions and attempted to scaffold a clearer concept of the structure's meaning (Samuda, 2001, p.129). The aim was to create a "semantic space" which might trigger attempts at the required form (Samuda, 2001, p.122), whereby the interaction itself promotes a learner's awareness of "gaps in their linguistic knowledge" (Swain & Lapkin, 2001, p.99). I aimed to then develop this initial awareness within a more explicit form-focus.

The adaptations with Feliks centred around a variation in the planning conditions and an avoidance of a written model. Additionally, I wanted to explore whether removing a lexical focus from the pre-task phases might reduce the lexical nature of LREs within the task. Whereas in the first cycle Feliks had planned alone, I believed a collaborative planning phase involving the teacher may enable a more fluent task performance. An added advantage was that it encouraged

my involvement in the lesson, and potentially offered more opportunities to exploit reactive LREs. The designed lesson (fully described in Appendix E) focussed on how to deal with difficult questions, and perhaps contained an inherent language focus on communicative strategies, such as being vague or changing the subject, with numerous potential applications in Feliks' work. The final task involved fielding a series of questions that Feliks had earlier highlighted as ones he found awkward within his work. The design intentionally sought a lighter tone to tackle Feliks' apparent discomfort with the fact that the lesson was being recorded.

*Second cycle reflections: Waldemar*

Numerous consistencies emerged in Waldemar's behaviour in both lessons. The most obvious of these was his continued reliance upon Polish and German to navigate the task. I again allowed this reliance and tended to use occasional recasts or clarification checks to offer English translations. Waldemar displayed a largely communicative stance throughout and frequently created his own digressions and responses to the content of the lesson, as opposed to the linguistic forms he was using. Once again, Waldemar's lesson appears to support suggestions that a task-based focus can provide meaningful interactions, even at lower proficiencies. However, this conclusion still must be weighed against the question of whether this level of interaction is indicative of TBLT more generally, or the specific teacher-student partnership presented here.

Nevertheless, the second cycle again reflected concerns that task-based approaches effectively amount to extended exercises in communicative effectiveness (Ellis, 2000). Even having created the semantic space and primed the target structure, it proved immensely challenging to draw Waldemar towards the intended linguistic focus. Within a conversational context, he was perhaps simply primed towards task engagement and more direct signalling of a form-focussed phase may have been required. Three selected examples of my struggles here strongly echo the multiple "false starts" observed by Samuda (2001, p.131) when a teacher attempted to turn her learners' focus away from meaning and onto the target form:

**Extract 9**

*T: So, Agnieszka, has had children, and Marta ...*

*W: Marta will be has, maybe.*

**Extract 10**

*T: ... but she hasn't studied at university ...*

*W: Agnieszka? She make habitur ... matura ... Habitur? Matura? She graduated in eighty-nine, is the same year, my year.*

**Extract 11**

*T: She hasn't worked since 2004.*

*W: Ah, here, yes? You make ten years without work.*

*T: She hasn't worked for ten years.*

*W: Maybe she worked in another country.*

It was, in fact, a source of frustration to me that, having led him to the focus, provided direct examples and explicitly highlighted the form, there were no apparent LREs and only a single, potentially mechanical, case of uptake, which followed an explicit provision of the form at the end of the lesson:

**Extract 12**

*T: So Agnieszka has been successful [as a candidate].*

*W: Agnieszka is successful.*

*T: ... has been successful.*

*W: Has been successful, yes.*

Of course, this absence does not constitute evidence for a lack of noticing the form, but it highlights the challenge teachers may face in knowing how and when to introduce the language focus within a task-based lesson, and how to gauge its effectiveness. Following the lesson, one homework task involving discrete gap-fill exercises was completed largely successfully. However, a second, which required Waldemar to describe his perfect candidate for the job, again avoided the target form. It could be argued that this reflects Waldemar's lack of readiness for the structure, although this suggestion leaves uncomfortable questions about the usefulness of pre-determined textbook syllabi and, crucially, how such readiness might even be

recognised by the teacher. Instead, while it would be naïve to expect instant unsolicited adoption of the target form, its complete avoidance outside limited exercises suggests that teachers require complementary approaches to support the potential uptake of linguistic forms beyond spontaneous encounters within tasks. This suggestion sits quite comfortably with recommendations that instruction is required to fully support and exploit the use of pedagogic tasks (Ellis, 2000; Skehan, 2003; Swan, 2005; Van den Branden, 2006), and that there is “clear support” that explicit instruction is facilitative of language acquisition, especially within a cycle of communicative tasks (Ellis & Shintani, 2014, p.112).

This apparent failure to induce any perceptible FonF or LREs was perhaps further exacerbated by my lack of intervention. My role was limited to asking questions, maintaining the communicative flow and offering confirmation. Occasionally, I would recast what Waldemar had said, but at no point outside the language focus did I offer explicit correction. There were also numerous points where he appeared to seek feedback, again almost exclusively on discrete lexical items by using a rising intonation, and I again declined these invitations. It seems possible that a pre-determined language focus shackled me, and discouraged me from intervening on other points. Listening back to the lesson recording, I felt uncomfortable, as if I had somehow neglected to intervene where I felt, retrospectively, that I should have. In the light of our ongoing relationship, it is also possible that I simply felt there was little hope of encouraging a greater focus on accuracy at that stage, or more probably that I felt Waldemar’s attempts to communicate were not hindered by his errors. Whatever the chosen explanation, it is again clear that a strict non-interventionist stance might be seen as problematic.

*Second cycle reflections: Feliks*

While Waldemar’s second lesson shared many features with his first, Feliks’ experience was quite different. In stark contrast to the first cycle, the second was marked by less asymmetry and was a far more interactive, playful and dialogic encounter:

**Extract 13**

*F: ... yeah, some politicians which, from the beginning, would like to be controversial, like Boris ... Boris the London guy [laughs]*

Furthermore, in the main task, he not only appeared more fluent, but, in line with Foster and Skehan's (1999) findings about teacher-fronted planning, he also seemed to draw upon more complex language. However, this observation was, it must be stressed, based only upon my own impressions. These variations could be attributed to task design, although numerous other factors could be at play. For example, Feliks declared that he was less concerned by the recording device, and that he was simply in a better mood than the previous class. This hints at a great challenge of bringing task-based research into the classroom, namely that task adaptations and design features are still mediated by the broader sociocultural environment and the participants themselves (Ohta, 2000; Wigglesworth, 2001).

Partially linked to his apparently playful interaction, however, was my continued avoidance of intervention and corrective feedback. I recorded in my journal that it seemed a pity to "stop the flow", and my memory of the previous lesson may have exacerbated my reluctance to induce a language focus. This inhibition was despite the recurrence of errors which were common for Feliks, and that I would have perhaps highlighted were it not for the TBLT conditions. However, perhaps intriguingly, neither Feliks nor Waldemar noted any significant variations between my behaviour in these classes and those which had preceded them. While it seems unlikely my passivity resulted from the task-based format alone, it was interesting that I was so self-conscious of what had seemed only minor changes to my students.

However, it is also important to recognise that Feliks is a highly adept communicator, which meant that there were no clear cases of negotiation of meaning or communication breakdown. Once again, most noticeable LREs related to lexis, and were marked by a questioning intonation:

**Extract 14**

*F: [reading] give short, succinct ... succinct ... succinct? Succinct answers.*

*T: If you are succinct you ...*

**Extract 15**

*F: [reading] use vague language. ... And what is vague?*

**Extract 16**

*F: paper newspapers. Paper newspapers?*

Otherwise, there was a single pause over a recently reviewed language structure, which might demonstrate the potential value of tasks in aiding the recycling of lexis and linguistic structures and thus, potentially, the restructuring of interlanguage (Johnson, 1996; Nunan, 2004), but does little to suggest how they would be effective in the complete absence of explicit instruction. This observation again throws up the question of what distinguishes this task-based lesson from a friendly chat. I cannot rule out the possibility that my existing relationships with these students, or my personal beliefs, contribute to my unwillingness to trigger negotiations of meaning. However, it seems possible that, in a communicative exchange, doing so would have merely been staged to fulfil a presumed pedagogic goal. Furthermore, it would seem hasty to assume that classmates would not have been similarly reluctant to intervene, especially as this has been observed in other classroom studies (Foster, 1998; Slimani-Rolls, 2005; Eckerth, 2009). Having engaged in meaningful dialogue, the transition from a socially-bound communicative act to a form-focussed event may be far from straightforward. This does not, of course, mean that language acquisition is not taking place, it simply suggests that further work is needed on the potential for task-based learning to provide this without complementary treatments such as explicit instruction or targeted consciousness-raising.

This sense that language use is promoted over language awareness is further suggested by Feliks' performance in the final task. Despite my role in facilitating the collaborative planning phase, which actually took on characteristics of communicative tasks, Feliks seemed to view this as a discrete activity which did not feed into the

communicative strategies he utilised later. During the interview, he explained that he thought the primary language focus had been the delayed corrective feedback at the end of the lesson. This could reflect a failure on my part as the task designer and teacher, but could also support the argument that the implicit nature of task-based approaches may be perceived inconsistently by learners across linguistic domains (Hulstijn, 1995, cited in Samuda, 2001). This may especially be the case when exploring communicative strategies with a highly-skilled communicator. Once again, though, there is little here to suggest an easy or seamless transition between meaning-focussed communication and any form of language focus.

## **DISCUSSION**

Although a small-scale study providing only selective data offers limited alternative perspectives on existing research, attempts are made here to synthesise two issues: the classroom use of tasks, and concerns regarding the feasibility of any reactive language focus. The doubts inherent to the first research question appear misplaced, as it seems that 1:1 classes can foster the interactions seen to support language acquisition within TBLT approaches without entrenching learner reliance upon the teacher. However, doubts linger as to whether these interactions offered discernible opportunities to enhance interlanguage development.

### **The task in context**

While the task represents a discrete construct in research environments, lessons constitute a compromise within constraining factors which preoccupations with task design alone may marginalise (Van den Branden, 2006; Van Gorp & Bogaert, 2006). Samuda warns against overlooking the teacher as “a mediating factor” in tasks (2001, pp.119-20), and deeper examination of how theoretical constructs align with the actual use of tasks within varied classroom environments is needed. These two cases also endorse further exploration of the relationships underpinning TBLT and 1:1 classes. The assertion that the existing teacher-student relationships contributed to features of these lessons is, of course, based on unrecorded experiences with both students outside this study, but

does align with the claim that individual participants are as influential within task performance as designers (Duran & Ramaut, 2006). In future cycles, it would be fruitful to explore teacher intervention patterns under other pedagogic conditions or even to disrupt the classroom dynamic by introducing other interlocutors.

The variation between pedagogic and research tasks underlines the need for caution when adopting research findings into practice. If, as Foster and Skehan claim, teachers may exploit findings on performance to maximise language acquisition by manipulating tasks (1999), then these variations need to be explored within diverse classroom contexts. Furthermore, it seems that if we accept that merely “tweaking” tasks is sufficient to support their use across varied classroom contexts (Willis & Willis, 2007, p.201), we risk overlooking the inherent complexity of influential factors upon the task’s classroom performance. In acknowledging Wigglesworth’s claim that “different factors influence different types of tasks to differing degrees” (2001, p.187), we cannot assume that the 1:1 context is insignificant, nor that tasks designed for groups will translate directly into other classroom contexts. This presents significant challenges for teachers targeting specific performance goals, regardless of whether they are using ready-made tasks or designing their own.

This position does not, however, signal wholesale agreement with Seedhouse’s rejection of tasks as inherently unpredictable (2005). Indeed, this approach merely demands that teachers monitor performance over longer periods and are empowered to exercise judgment when incorporating tasks. To achieve this, teachers must test and record their observations of methodological proposals more proactively. Although discrepancies between desired and actual performance may be surmountable across a single lesson, the nature of these discrepancies may prove of immense value when shared with other practitioners. It will only be through repetition within different classroom conditions and the sharing of teachers’ own inquiries that task performance effects observed in research environments may become directly relevant for teachers.

**Form focus**

The central role of a learner-generated language focus in distinguishing TBLT from mere fluency practice makes its relative effectiveness, usefulness and practicality a hotly-contested issue (Swan, 2005). The rather nebulous concept of students' readiness to learn hangs over many task-based approaches (Swan, 2005; Willis & Willis, 2007), and, though not limited to the 1:1 classroom, doubts must remain over the exclusive adoption of any methodology which sees natural interaction as the primary driver of language acquisition. If, as Ellis and Shintani (2014, p.153) claim, "attention to form in the context of meaning-focused language" is a fundamental element of TBLT, the apparent absence of such a focus within these cases must be a matter for concern.

Even if task-based methodologies can provoke an incidental, learner-generated language focus, the experience here echoes findings that this attention is primarily restricted to lexical items (Williams, 2001). While it is unsustainable to question the potential value of a lexical focus, it also demonstrates that more proactive solutions may be required in other linguistic domains. As teachers, we may hold unrealistic expectations of a methodological panacea, which addresses all aspects of language equally. There seems little reason to assume that all linguistic dimensions can be treated uniformly, or that tasks can directly enable the noticing of novel forms without priming, which suggests that embracing varied approaches will pay dividends (Swan, 2005). Acknowledging this limitation would not tarnish the potential value of TBLT, it simply suggests that its effectiveness may be enhanced by exploring complementary approaches. This suggestion appears to be particularly true of the "pedagogic challenges" inherent in the timing of any FonF (Samuda, 2001, p.121), and further exploration of this by teachers within classroom contexts could prove highly informative and productive.

The absence of genuine communication breakdown and incidental FonF within 1:1 TBLT classes is potentially significant, and may fail to produce those communicative pressures seen as conducive to language acquisition (Swain, 1995, cited in Swain & Lapkin, 2001). To some extent this may stem from my ability, as an experienced teacher

with an existing relationship with these students, to sidestep communication difficulties despite inaccuracies. However, wider doubts over the reality of incidental FonF triggered by breakdown are apparent with both learners, and may be further exacerbated by the social constraints of teacher-student relationships (Slimani-Rolls, 2005; Ellis, 2001, cited in Seedhouse, 2005). It is also arguable that this failure reflects poorly upon my skill as a teacher within the 1:1 setting, although we can only speculate as to whether such struggles could be common to a larger number of practitioners and contexts. Similarly, if these difficulties resulted from individual learner characteristics, consideration would be required to establish what these might be and how teachers may begin to reliably identify them. Despite the obvious limitations of a study like this, it would seem presumptuous to dismiss these doubts as being founded on outliers, or to assume that similar tensions between a willingness to cooperate and communication breakdown do not occur within other contexts.

The concept of a self-contained interlanguage system raises further doubts over whether explicit LREs are feasible in non-interventionist 1:1 teaching at any proficiency (Williams, 2001; Swain & Lapkin, 2001). My problems in identifying and realising a specific language focus may demonstrate how easily this could be reduced to delayed error correction. In practice, however, even delayed correction may not provide, as Ellis asserts, a “fairly obvious” solution (2003, p.95), as individual error correction in the absence of a communicative context can easily resemble an isolated test of explicit linguistic knowledge. Such a test would appear contrary to the very spirit of the more holistic and meaning-oriented variants of TBLT. Indeed, given its central role within TBLT literature (Nunan, 2004; Willis & Willis, 2007), it appears entirely appropriate that the assumed efficacy of delayed error correction might be questioned, and potentially challenged, across teaching contexts. Within a 1:1 context, where a highly targeted, relevant language focus can be delivered directly, it may be desirable, or even natural, in future inquiries to explore the viability of providing limited, explicit feedback and metalinguistic discussion even without an accompanying communication breakdown (Wilberg, 1987; Swain & Lapkin, 2001). The self-imposed avoidance of intervention may be a practical time-

saving device in group classes, where individual needs are perhaps subordinated to the collective, but in a 1:1 context, such concerns seem misplaced. This conclusion suggests to me that direct intervention in 1:1 task-based classes is not only potentially beneficial, but that it can also take the form of a communicative task in its own right.

## CONCLUSION

It is never prudent to advocate the wholesale acceptance or rejection of any teaching method, nor to assume that language classrooms can be approached uniformly across contexts. It does seem realistic, however, to suggest that viable language teaching methodologies should prove adaptable to diverse classrooms. This short study suggests, with certain caveats, that my wider concerns over the application of TBLT principles in 1:1 contexts were ill-founded. What is less clear, however, is whether this stems from the task-based approach, the inherent nature of the 1:1 dynamic or the teacher and students involved. Nevertheless, this apparent success in replicating the conditions of TBLT cannot completely quell concerns about how pedagogic tasks in isolation may support language development.

This study led me, as a teacher, to re-examine some assumed 'good practices' which have been passed down to me during my career. I have become less reluctant to intervene and explicitly correct within 1:1 contexts, and have even begun to view explicit metalinguistic discussion as a potentially communicative act. Findings such as these underline the need to consistently re-evaluate my assumptions as a teacher, such as the belief of the inappropriacy of TBLT at lower levels, by actively engaging with teaching recommendations and exploring them systematically. These inquiries may not provide generalised or authoritative findings, but enabling wider forums for teachers to present their own contextualised and systematic observations would allow greater insight into the source and impact of decision-making in a diverse range of classrooms. In the case of these students, I continued to perform small-scale inquiries with Feliks, although Waldemar was keen to revert to his normal lessons. His reluctance is, I believe, a particular risk when conducting research within a 1:1 setting, and highlights the need for

teachers to remain conscious of the impact of our inquiries on our students.

I continue to use TBLT as my 'default' approach to teaching in both 1:1 and group settings, though my primary ambition for this is establishing my students' needs and offering a stage for them to recycle their existing linguistic resources. I still believe that task-based approaches allow for the sharing of knowledge and the potential discovery of novel forms and lexis, but feel less comfortable about relying exclusively upon this. What may be more significant, though, is the confidence I feel in this nuanced approach to using classroom tasks, grounded within my own inquiries, when compared to my earlier received beliefs. This has provoked no small amount of discussion with teachers that I have worked with, and I would hope that sharing this account may provoke it further.

#### THE AUTHOR

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## **APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

Standard frame, used in both interviews, in English or Polish:

- What is your main memory of the lesson?
- Did I (as a teacher) do my job?
- Did you feel we worked as partners?
- Did you feel the lesson was useful?
- Would you like to do more lessons like this?

Examples of specific questions for Waldemar, based on lesson recordings, delivered in both English and Polish:

- Did we do anything differently from normal?
- Did it feel like a normal conversation?
- How often do you use German and Polish when you speak English?
- Do you want me to give you the English words when you use Polish?
- How often should I correct you?
- How many pieces of language should we focus on in each lesson?
- Do you think we could do this every lesson?

Examples of specific questions for Feliks, based on lesson recordings, delivered in English alone:

- Did the lesson feel like it was a test?
- How did you feel about having the time to prepare your answer?
- Did I do enough to help you prepare your answer?
- How much did I correct you?
- Did you know what I wanted you to do at the end of the lesson? [Refers to the FonF]
- What is the most useful thing to do at the end of the lesson?

**APPENDIX B: WALDEMAR'S FIRST LESSON (BASED ON WILLIS & WILLIS, 2007:48-49)**

- Pre-task:**
- i) What do you normally find in a house?
  - ii) Where in the house might you find these things?  
cooker; sofa; sink; shower; carpet; tiles; swimming pool; lift; cupboard; wardrobe
  - iii) What do you think is special about the three homes in these pictures?
- Task:** Complete three gapped texts about unique or special homes using a series of numbers provided in the box. (Waldemar was encouraged to share his thoughts and discuss his proposals with the teacher.)
- Planning:** 5 minutes provided to prepare, alone but with notes, a comparison between these three houses and a typical Polish home.
- Reporting:** Discuss the differences between these and typical Polish homes with the teacher.
- Form focus:** Open, dependent on task performance, however expected areas for focus included comparative and superlative forms; there is/are; alternatives to there is/are; numbers; vocabulary of homes.
- Repetition:** In the next lesson, based upon homework: prepare a description of your own home and the most important parts of it.

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**APPENDIX C: FELIKS' FIRST LESSON (BASED ON WILLIS & WILLIS, 2007:237)**

- Pre-task:** i) What do you feel is the role of the media?  
ii) Rank the following verbs in terms of their importance as a role of the media.  
criticise; protect; expose; inform; investigate; sell; promote; support; earn  
iii) Predict the content of the article titled 'Mass Media: For profit or society?'
- Task:** Order the jumbled text 'Mass Media: For profit or society?'
- Planning:** 5 minutes provided to prepare (alone) a consideration of how true these arguments are within the Polish media.
- Reporting:** Discuss the profit motive in the Polish media with the teacher.
- Form focus:** Open, dependent on *task* performance, although a focus on language 'chunks' is recommended in the original *task*. Sample chunk 'negative consequences of *something*' has been highlighted, can student highlight 10 others? Another potential focus may include text linking devices based on the article.
- Repetition:** Prepare a text suggesting how this situation may change in the future.

**APPENDIX D: WALDEMAR'S SECOND LESSON**

- Pre-task:** i) What are qualities needed for doing these jobs?  
Policeman; Football coach; Teacher; Builder  
ii) How about this job?  
Waldemar describes a post recently filled by his company, based upon the newspaper advertisement.
- Task:** Compare the prospective candidates for this position based upon a series of biographical information prepared by the teacher (based upon the original advertisement).
- Planning:** 5 minutes provided (alone) to announce his decision and provide reasons for this selection.
- Reporting:** Waldemar delivers his choice, I listen and ask questions to guide this discussion and attempt to interweave the present perfect to describe life experience at a later stage to create an appropriate semantic space.
- Form focus:** Having established the semantic space for the target form, discussion would focus on each of the candidates with a view to creating a series of written statements about their working lives.
- Repetition:** Based upon homework, describe your own ideal candidate for the job.

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## APPENDIX E: FELIKS' SECOND LESSON

- Pre-task:** i) Are the following questions 'dangerous' or problematic in either a work or personal context?  
e.g. Daddy, where did I come from?; Are the rumours about the takeover true?; How much do you earn? What can you tell us about yourself?  
ii) Watch a video of a press conference gone wrong from the TV show 'The West Wing'. Discuss the reason for the failure of the press officer and think of possible ways to avoid this.
- Task:** Discuss a series of possible methods to avoid difficult or leading questions e.g. Answer the question with another question; Give short, succinct answers; Pass the question on to someone else; Quick, make something up!
- Planning:** Following an evaluation of possible techniques to deal with difficult questions, and collaborative discussion to deal with difficult questions, Feliks sets out strategies to deal with a set of eight difficult questions he frequently found problematic at work.
- Reporting:** Respond to the difficult questions which had been prepared in advance.
- Form focus:** Open, dependent on task performance, but thought to include specific strategies and expressions to deal with awkward questions.
- Repetition:** Prepare written responses to three of the difficult questions.