



## **Task-Based Language Teaching and Vocabulary in the Real World**

by [Charlotte Nolen](#) and [YouJin Kim](#)

The pursuit of many, if not most, second language (L2) learners is to use the L2 in diverse contexts in society. A primary goal of task-based language teaching (TBLT) is improving L2 learners' communicative and pragmatic competencies while carrying out authentic tasks.

### **The Benefits of TBLT**

The focus in TBLT is on designing tasks based on real communicative needs; students utilize their L2 skills and the instructor facilitates learning to accomplish these tasks (Ellis, 2017; Long, 2016).

Another benefit of TBLT is that it connects what happens in the classroom to real-world interactions. Task design becomes student centered, learning environments are autonomous, and tasks themselves are similar to real-world tasks. TBLT practitioners are often interested in how task skills and/or linguistic features transfer for use out of the classroom in a local community. The shift in contexts alters many variables determining effective L2 use, such as known/unknown interlocutors, unpredictable dialogue, and familiar/unfamiliar vocabulary and language use (Robinson, 2011).

In TBLT, one primary focus for tasks is on meaning and encoding messages for better communicative exchanges: It's important that language users understand information from incoming messages and make information comprehensible in outgoing messages. Learners draw on their own resources as well as "borrow" from others (e.g., teachers and people with whom the students interact) for successful task performance (Swain & Lapkin, 1998). Thus, when performing tasks, learners focus on task completion and language becomes the vehicle for successfully achieving the goals specified by the task.

### **Classroom to Real World Task Transferability: A Study**

This article briefly introduces our recent research project, which examined task transferability focusing on vocabulary use. We explored how learners' abilities to perform tasks in the classroom could be transferred to public sites out of the classroom.

## Participants

The multiple case study investigated three 25–32 year old Portuguese-speaking adults (two males, intermediate-high and advanced-midlevel speakers, and one female, advanced-low speaker) from a study abroad program in the United States. These learners each had some prior experience in English but were new to the TBLT approach. The study examined two TBLT units (with each unit lasting 2 weeks) in a pre/posttest design.

## Content and Tasks

Two units of study were designed so students could visit a civil rights museum and a U.S. war history museum.

Classroom tasks for each unit included information gap tasks, a time line task, a picture sequencing task and role-play tasks. The out-of-classroom tasks included oral interviews during and after a visit to the museum for Unit 1 and learners interviewing domain site experts at the museum and production of a newsletter for Unit 2.

Because vocabulary learning is a significant part of L2 acquisition, we examined the transfer of vocabulary knowledge (Plonsky & Kim, 2016). Transferability of vocabulary during classroom and out-of-classroom tasks required observation of all sequenced tasks and then learners' vocabulary use of the same target words (24 target words in Unit 1 and 20 target words in Unit 2) in the classroom and outside of the classroom in the local community.

## Findings

We found that more target words (tokens) were used and discussed through negotiation during tasks performed in the classroom than out-of-classroom tasks (Nolen & Kim, 2018).

Interestingly, the lower level learner used more vocabulary words and negotiated more words out in public than the higher level learners. In postparticipant interviews, both higher proficiency learners stated that unknown interlocutors were more difficult for them to interact with out of the classroom. All three participants expressed that tasks performed in the classroom prior to field trips helped their understanding of the target words (learners perceived self-reported improvement of receptive vocabulary knowledge) when used by strangers in public. The lower proficiency learner stated that his focus was on developing his ability to effectively understand and use new vocabulary. He did not mention that speaking with strangers was an impediment to using and discussing vocabulary in public, as did the two higher proficiency learners.

*The Takeaway:* All three learners stated that tasks in the classroom helped prepare them to complete tasks performed in the museums. Some productive knowledge (the limited use of select target words) transferred during out-of-classroom tasks.

## Connecting TBLT in the Classroom to Authentic Experiences in the Real-World

Examining transfer in TBLT through vocabulary acquisition in multiple contexts may alter and add new social variables for learners, such as the following:

- dialogue with strangers
- unpredictable dialogue
- an unequal status or role of a domain site expert that may impede learners from interrupting them in a discussion and thus impeding negotiation of target vocabulary

Leaving the classroom and performing tasks in public causes additional challenges for students, which results in additional challenges in task design and classroom implementation for the instructor. The three learners in the study observed the transfer of linguistic knowledge differently. The following components were utilized to heighten learners' interest and challenge them in new ways. Consider the following suggestions when designing TBLT units of study:

1. **Conduct a Needs Analysis.** Before designing units of study, you and learners can co-construct real-world areas of interest through a needs analysis. A needs analysis can be a simple checklist of preferences you provide that allows learners to express genuine areas of language use and interest that can become classroom focal units of study.
2. **Prepare Students for the Unexpected.** Challenge learners to think of connecting what is being taught in the classroom to real-world experience. Some interactions outside the classroom may include engagement between learners and unknown interlocutors. For example, in the unit on museums, for classroom role-plays you could include talkative guides and context-specific conversations being held over museum-specific directions; this would allow learners to practice polite interruptions or unexpected interactions over context-specific L2 use, such as directions to the bathroom for lower level learners and a discussion of current civil rights or war trends for upper level learners.

In L2 acquisition, the more realistic the dramatizations in the classroom (e.g., including unknown interlocutors and unpredictable interactions with indeterminate outcomes), the better prepared learners are for potential variation in interactions outside of the classroom.

3. **Prepare Students for Specific Public Places.** In tandem to student preparation, conduct a brief orientation in public sites with unknown real-world task domain site experts to better shape particular interactions when possible.
4. **Vary Task Types.** Sequencing tasks also includes classroom instructional time for both grammatical and pragmatic explanations (i.e., planned and/or unplanned). Use different task types with ongoing modifications and learner-centered discussions, which allow you to better prepare learners for successful target task completion at the end of the unit of study.

## Conclusion

Our study examined vocabulary acquisition during two TBLT units of study. Learners found that tasks in the classroom helped prepare them for L2 use out in society in primary task performance. That said, the study suggests that learners comprehended more than they were able to produce of target vocabulary when transitioning from the classroom to public sites.

Additionally, it's unclear how far the production and negotiation of target words in class transfers to similar tasks outside the classroom. Further, although learners reported that task performance in the classroom prepared them for public domain sites (museums), it remains to be seen how much it prepared them for similar tasks in general public contexts; this is an area that needs further exploration.

For a more detailed description of the study and our findings, please see "[Task-Based Vocabulary Learning: Lessons From a Real-World Context](#)" (Nolen & Kim, 2018).

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