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Connecting Task-Based Language Teaching and Second Language Acquisition Research

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In diesem Aufsatz befassen wir uns mit der vielfältigen Beziehung zwischen der Zweit- und Fremdsprachenerwerbsforschung (SLA/L2) und aufgabenorientiertem Sprachunterricht (TBLT). Wir weisen auf Überschneidungen und Verbindungen zwischen den beiden Ansätzen hin, warnen jedoch vor Versuchen, eine einfache Lösung für die Fragen des TBLT zum Lernen in der Zweitspracherwerbsforschung zu finden. Die Historie der Zweit- und Fremdsprachenerwerbsforschung offenbart ein vielfältiges Verhältnis unter anderem zur Berücksichtigung kognitiver und sozialer Aspekte der Lern- und Lehrerfahrung. Wir zeigen, wie einige SLA-Theorien spezifische Merkmale und andere die Zusammenhänge zwischen verschiedenen Merkmalen und unterschiedlichen Sichtweisen des Gesamtbildes erforschen. Im Gegensatz dazu hat die TBLT eine klare Vorstellung davon, was durch Unterricht als Ganzes erreicht werden soll, aber weniger präzise Vorstellungen davon, wie das Lernen damit verbunden ist. Wir zeigen, wie unterschiedliche Erkenntnisse aus der Zweitspracherwerbsforschung Lehrkräften potenzielle Erkenntnisse bieten. Angesichts der heterogenen Natur der Zweitspracherwerbsforschung argumentieren wir auch, dass Lehrkräften eine zentrale Rolle bei der Auswahl, Verknüpfung und Anwendung dieser Erkenntnisse zu einem pädagogisch stimmigen Ganzen zukommt.

Schlagworte: SLA; TBLT; History
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Connecting Task-Based Language Teaching and Second Language Acquisition Research

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Abstract

In diesem Aufsatz befassen wir uns mit der vielfältigen Beziehung zwischen der Zweit- und Fremdsprachenerwerbsforschung (SLA/L2) und aufgabenorientiertem Sprachunterricht (TBLT). Wir weisen auf Überschneidungen und Verbindungen zwischen den beiden Ansätzen hin, warnen jedoch vor Versuchen, eine einfache Lösung für die Fragen des TBLT zum Lernen in der Zweitspracherwerbsforschung zu finden. Die Historie der Zweit- und Fremdsprachenerwerbsforschung offenbart ein vielfältiges Verhältnis unter anderem zur Berücksichtigung kognitiver und sozialer Aspekte der Lern- und Lehrerfahrung. Wir zeigen, wie einige SLA-Theorien spezifische Merkmale und andere die Zusammenhänge zwischen verschiedenen Merkmalen und unterschiedlichen Sichtweisen des Gesamtbildes erforschen. Im Gegensatz dazu hat die TBLT eine klare Vorstellung davon, was durch Unterricht als Ganzes erreicht werden soll, aber weniger präzise Vorstellungen davon, wie das Lernen damit verbunden ist. Wir zeigen, wie unterschiedliche Erkenntnisse aus der Zweitspracherwerbsforschung Lehrkräften potenzielle Erkenntnisse bieten. Angesichts der heterogenen Natur der Zweitspracherwerbsforschung argumentieren wir auch, dass Lehrkräften eine zentrale Rolle bei der Auswahl, Verknüpfung und Anwendung dieser Erkenntnisse zu einem pädagogisch stimmigen Ganzen zukommt.[3]

1 Introduction

In this article we encourage readers to use their professional judgement thoughtfully to gain insights from research into second language acquisition (SLA) for task-based language teaching (TBLT) or task-based language learning (TBLL). We view SLA research as diverse. It both unifies things that are treated as different in language teaching and simultaneously distinguishes things that language teaching regards as similar. As a result, it does not offer teachers a single, unified answer to questions about how L2 development proceeds.

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One example of what is unified in SLA research is the term itself. Language teaching often distinguishes *second* from *foreign language acquisition* to distinguish contexts with accessible L2 use from those where access is restricted. While context matters in designing experiences, we will outline how what learners do with features of the L2 that they encounter does not differ substantially according to how frequently they encounter the feature. In other words, whether learners are in a second or foreign language context, the general way in which they go about learning the L2 is fundamentally similar. For that reason, we will use the term *L2* rather than either *second* or *foreign*. However, the field itself is generally labelled as *SLA* or *second language acquisition research* – although some researchers prefer the term *development* rather than *acquisition* because they believe that *development* better captures the gradual and mediated (e. g., in classrooms) ways in which learners gain control over what they are trying to learn.

One example of what is diversified in SLA research is what is being learned. L2 acquisition research is strongly divided according to the features of the languages that are being studied. For example, researchers who focus on pronunciation differ in their perspectives from those who focus on vocabulary, writing or grammar. While they share an interest in understanding general mechanisms of learning, the actual mechanisms that they look at are specific to the features that they examine. The commonalities that they share exist only at a very abstract level. As a result, teachers need to identify what their learners are grappling with in order to effectively ask a question of SLA research.

We argue in this article that language educators seeking insights into the process of L2 development relevant to task-based language learning/teaching programs need to carefully consider who their learners are, how and where their learning occurs and what they are learning in order to make the best use of insights from SLA research.

At a general level, we understand L2 development as occurring when any learner in any context attempts to gain some level of control over a language that is different from one that they have already begun to use. Thus, it can occur with learners of nearly any age from roughly two years old, in any context (whether naturalistic or instructed, online or face-to-face) and regardless of how proficient the learner uses the language(s) that they have previously encountered. At a similarly general level, we understand TBLT/TBLL as occurring when a teacher designs activities that engage learners in completing real-world or real-world-like activities that will involve learners gaining (greater) insight into and/or control over some aspects of the language relevant to completing the activity. The design of a task can include greater or lesser explicit focus on the language features to be learned and give greater or lesser weight to the real-world completion of the activity.

Our overlapping research backgrounds (Meisel et al., 1981; Nicholas & Meisel, 1983) have convinced us that a view of acquisition as emergence is both powerful and necessary (Pienemann, 1998). Teachers must engage with the full range of learning, both leading up to emergence and also after that point (Nicholas et al., 2022). However, the consistency with which new capacities emerge across learners and language backgrounds (Pienemann & Lenzing, 2025a) provides teachers with a stable point of reference for the regularities of learners gaining greater control over their L2. Emergence is

not the end of the story, but its reliability as an indicator of growth contrasts with the enormous variability and also uncertainty that characterises learner pathways beyond emergence – something that views of acquisition as mastery struggle to consistently capture.

Despite the apparent differences referred to above, SLA research and task-based language teaching (TBLT) share a common origin story in acknowledging how a focus on meaning and interaction are important for L2 learning but may also inhibit L2 outcomes or progress, for example, if there is an exclusive focus on meaning or inappropriate kinds of interaction. Meaning and interaction were present (even if only in the background) in very early SLA endeavours such as contrastive analysis (e. g., Lado, 1957; Nickel, 1971) (where interlingual relationships were seen as either supporting or constraining learners' communicative efforts) and the morpheme order studies (see Burt & Dulay, 1980) that asked whether the constraints or enablers in L2 development were the same as or different from those in L1 development. When they focussed on learners, all of these endeavours worked within the framing that learners were trying to act meaningfully rather than just produce isolated linguistic features. Despite these commonalities, variation exists within both SLA and TBLT and, consequently, in the relationship between them. As a result, understanding the connection between the two areas is not about connecting one whole with another whole but rather building relevant connections between different parts of two complex entities. It is this complexity and its consequences for informing teaching that we explore in this article.

One key difference between TBLT and SLA research is TBLT's explicit emphasis on reflection and analysis as integral to teaching and learning. TBLT deliberately incorporates explicit analysis within its pedagogy, whereas SLA researchers vary widely in addressing reflective processes.

A second difference lies in focus: TBLT (and even its learning-oriented variant, TBLL) prioritises *what* to teach and *how* to teach it, guided primarily by learner needs, while paying less attention to SLA concerns like developmental progress and the next viable learning step. SLA, by contrast, stresses that not all language features are equally learnable at any given time, requiring teachers to understand what eases or hinders learning along individual pathways.

Third, TBLT holds a clear (if sometimes inexplicit) view of the learner's full communicative repertoire, while SLA approaches differ sharply in whether they address parts or all of it. Fourth, TBLT largely sees L1-L2 similarities or differences as irrelevant to core task design principles, whereas SLA treats interlingual relationships as a major research focus influencing learning pathways and challenges. To understand these differences, our first step considers the origins and subsequent entrenched diversification of SLA research. The phases presented below are not rigid; rather they reflect dominant aspects of each period. The seeds of one phase can be found in an earlier phase and aspects of an earlier phase continue in later phases. Phase 1 lasted from the 1960s through the 1970s. Phase 2 occurred dominantly in the 1980s and well into the 1990s. Phase 3 began late in the 1990s.

2 SLA research – an incredibly compressed history

2.1 Phase 1: Establishing the field

SLA research began with a period of clarifying the similarities and differences between L1 (first language) acquisition and various forms of L2 development (see Corder, 1967; Clyne, 1968; Ravem, 1968; Selinker, 1969, 1972; Nemser, 1971; Dulay & Burt, 1972; Cazden et al., 1975; Hyltenstam, 1977). This foundational work established that, like L1 development, L2 development is creative, not strongly shaped by specific features of the learner's L1, but unlike L1 development, not universally successful (and hence much more varied). SLA researchers such as Krashen (1976) sought to understand relationships between L2 development inside classrooms (*learning*) and other settings (*acquisition*). Researchers such as Hatch (1979) cautioned against simplistic classroom applications of insights from SLA research. The two-fold recognition that L2 learners were active constructors of their L2 (even in classroom learning) and that their constructions were shaped in similar ways emerged in this phase. The idea of constraints on learning resulting in regular sequences in L2 development also emerged at this time and generated debates about what caused those sequences and how to position them in explanations of overall L2 development. This important work was largely descriptive.

In this phase, the main theoretical issue of SLA work focussing on English was whether the behaviourist view underpinning contrastive analysis was useful or whether developmental sequences could be established that did not result from features of the learner's L1. Concern with differences in learner backgrounds such as age and education played a role in only some of these studies (e. g., Schumann, 1976; Bickerton, 1977; Andersen, 1979). Similarly, the role of context (Tarone, 1979) was less extensively explored. An important difference characterised work on German as a second language where learner factors prompted debate about whether SLA and pidgin languages shared important characteristics (Clyne, 1968; Klein & Dittmar, 1979; Meisel et al., 1981; see Nicholas & Meisel, 1983 for an overview).

2.2 Phase 2: Theoretical differentiation

Phase 1 was characterised by attempts to give a distinctive shape to SLA by highlighting the creativity of L2 learners and challenging the assumption that what happened in L2 development depended crucially on relationships to the learner's L1 (Zobl, 1980). Differences between theories were less significant. In Phase 2 theoretical differences came to the fore. Nicholas (1996) presented a "family history" of the beginnings of SLA research identifying three different families of thinking – one based in Skinnerian behaviourism, one drawing on Piagetian developmental approaches and a third connected with Vygotskian theorising. He pointed to the origins in behaviourism of very early transfer-based views of SLA processes that saw L2 development as originating in the transfer of L1 features to L2 production. SLA researchers drawing on mentalist developmental approaches rejected these transfer-based views of L2 development and proposed instead models that built on the learner's creative construction of the L2.

There were two different views of mentalism, i. e., the belief that Language[4] is represented in the human mind. These different views were promoted by Noam Chomsky and Roger Brown. Chomsky's version positioned innate linguistic knowledge as a shaper of language learning (Chiang & Costello, 1983). Researchers in this tradition (White, 1987) sought to model innate linguistic knowledge. Roger Brown's version rejected innatism as fundamental to understanding language acquisition (Brown, 1973, p. 19). He sought to understand the processes that children go through in constructing their representations of the language they are acquiring. These two versions of mentalism were picked up entirely separately and as oppositional in second language research. SLA work in the Chomskian tradition strongly emphasised the role of innate resources (White, 1987). SLA researchers in the Brownian tradition included early SLA researchers such as Pienemann (1981), Meisel et al. (1981) or Wode (1981). Nicholas (1996) also pointed to a third body of work that was beginning to emerge in this early period that could be aligned with Vygotsky's early 20th century thinking (see material in Vygotsky, 2012).

With hindsight, this third body of work can now be divided into two streams. The first stream reflects Hallidayan perspectives on the social embeddedness of language (Halliday, 1975). The second stream is found in Sociocultural Theory perspectives (Lantolf, 2006) that highlight the mediation in the learning process.

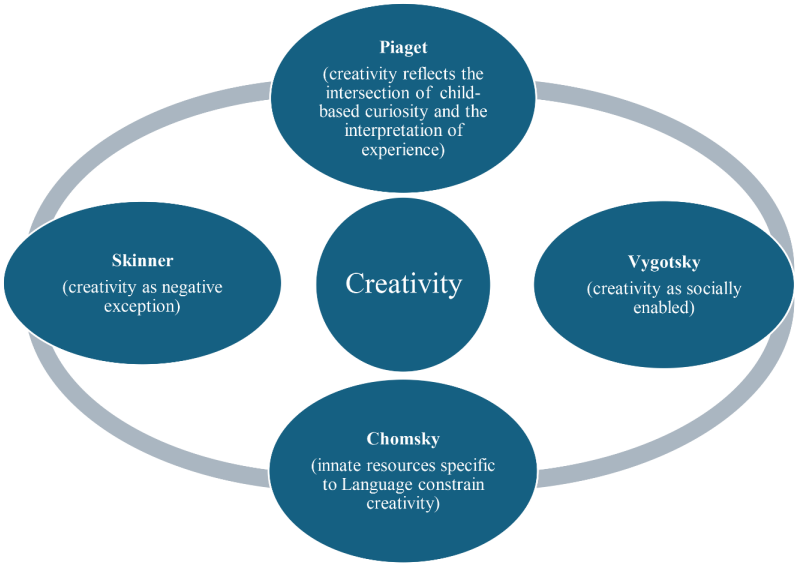

Figure 1: Diverse theoretical assumptions underpinning early SLA research (Source: own illustration)

In Figure 1 above the relationships between this set of diverse positions reflect not only differences in the views of creativity but also differences in the role of individual mental

4 An upper case "L" indicates reference to the abstract construct of Language. A lower case "l" refers to a specific language.

representations associated with that creativity. In Skinnerian perspectives there was little to no room for either creativity or mental representations. Piagetian and Chomskian perspectives shared an emphasis on creativity linked to individual mental representations. In contrast, Vygotskian perspectives downplayed both of these aspects, challenging the relevance of the concept of *individual*. These profound differences mean that findings from different perspectives cannot be easily integrated. In looking for evidence of characteristics of L2 development, teachers need to be aware of the theoretical positioning of research claims.

So far, we have highlighted cognitive issues, but all of these perspectives connected cognition with social experiences/factors/forces – though in different ways. As a result, regardless of the particular theoretical tradition used by SLA researchers, there has been a continuous presence of both social and cognitive issues in SLA research. Skinnerian behaviourism makes the social dominant in the reinforcements that drive learners to conform to social practices. Piagetian-based approaches are embedded in experiences of the physical and social world. While Chomskian approaches are concerned with modelling abstract Language structures, they acknowledge that the trigger for the modelling is real world experience. Vygotskian approaches make explicit that social experiences mediate the development of mind and the elaboration of thinking.

The extensive debates between these positions addressed how best to understand the overall character of SLA. Clear examples of attempts to make sense of this *whole* were found in the European-North American workshops co-ordinated by Roger Andersen and Jürgen Meisel that were designed to explore and debate both data and theoretical positions (Andersen, 1984; Pfaff, 1987).

For people seeking to apply SLA findings, the apparent common purpose of understanding a *whole* was misleading – as will be outlined further in the section on TBLT. These differences between SLA researchers were more significant than they appeared to be since researchers did not agree either on how to define *the whole* or on what the pathway toward some kind of control of that *whole* looked like. Neither could they agree on ways to investigate their apparently common focus. Teachers need to be cautious about treating SLA research as a single *whole* because of these differences, which came to the fore in the third phase of SLA research that will be discussed next.

2.3 Phase 3: Challenging *the whole* of SLA

TBLT/TBLL focuses on the design of tasks and tends to frame the specific language features to be taught as almost incidental. Proper task design is presented as a solution for any learning task. SLA research shows that learning various linguistic features involves distinct processes. Teachers should be mindful of the theoretical framework behind research into different language features. The widening of aspects included in SLA research in Phase 3 has made it harder to identify an overall perspective on the contribution of SLA research to teaching. It is useful for those seeking to apply L2 developmental findings that so many different issues and contexts have been investigated. However, this broadening has brought with it a lessened focus on how different areas of research relate to one another. This makes it more difficult for teachers to con-

nect findings from different studies to inform task design. For example, the major difference between defining acquisition as emergence (see Meisel et al., 1981; Pienemann, 1998) and defining acquisition as progress towards mastery of a feature has major implications for the use of findings in teaching. If the question behind the L2 research seeks to identify when new capacities emerge, that research cannot tell teachers when their learners will gain mastery of a feature.

The end of Phase 2's sense of shared interest in *the whole* of SLA that included both social and cognitive aspects was signalled in Firth and Wagner's (1997) depiction of social and cognitive perspectives as oppositional. They stereotyped previous SLA research as "individualistic and mechanistic" (Firth & Wagner, 1997, p. 285) and "imbalanced in favour of cognitive-oriented theories and methodologies" (Firth & Wagner, 1997, p. 286). Their analysis led them to call for "an approach that problematizes and explores the conventional binary distinction between 'social' and 'individual' (or cognitive) approaches to language use and language learning" (Firth & Wagner, 1997, p. 296). What the field seems to have taken from this argument is their view that "[l]anguage is [...] also fundamentally a social phenomenon, acquired and used interactively, in a variety of contexts for myriad practical purposes [that requires] the evolution of a holistic, bio-social SLA" (Firth & Wagner, 1997, p. 296).

Firth and Wagner's contribution followed a debate about the advantages and disadvantages of different theoretical approaches to SLA (see Beretta, 1991). While Firth and Wagner sought to minimise the significance of Chomskian-based claims about the nature of SLA, others had foregrounded this perspective (e. g., Eubank, 1991). Lantolf (1996) reflected on these debates from a post-modernist perspective and advocated encouraging multiple perspectives. A key theme of all of these discussions was evaluating mentalist approaches that equated them with Chomskian perspectives. One consequence of this focus was that SLA research based in the Brownian perspective on mentalism was often overlooked. The lack of attention to these theoretical differences was reinforced through a focus on making the contribution of SLA to teaching a major purpose of SLA research (see The Douglas Fir Group, 2016). Since SLA researchers working with Universal Grammar did not intend to contribute to language teaching, the potential application of research in the Brownian tradition was overlooked. This slippage misrepresented the complexity of SLA history (see Hulstijn et al., 2014).

Since Firth and Wagner's (1997) argument does not adequately engage with the complexity of relationships between social and cognitive influences in previous SLA research, some of the implications of their work need to be re-considered. For example, Block's (2003) famed argument that there had been a "social turn" in SLA research is aligned with Firth and Wagner's publication. Given the complexity of what had been occurring in the previous phases, Block's "turn" is essentially an expansion of an existing aperture. In common with the framing of Firth & Wagner (1997), Block's perspective overlooks the sustained presence of varying kinds of interaction between social/sociolinguistic and cognitive/psycholinguistic influences in all the early approaches to SLA research. His perspective also fails to acknowledge that the breadth and intensity

of debate (see Long, 1990a; Beretta, 1991; Gregg, 1993; Lantolf, 1996) was embedded in differing interpretations of this social-cognitive relationship.

Overlooking the complexity means missing the nature of the contribution to instructed language learning that SLA research can make. The metaphor of the three families (see Section 2.2) disagreeing but collaborating captures SLA research up to the mid/late 1990s. Developments since then have weakened this sense of a general contribution because the opening of the social aperture has been accompanied by two alternative responses. One response excluded cognition as part of the larger picture (e. g., Larsen-Freeman, 2009). The other response includes many different cognitive phenomena (in e. g., Legault et al., 2019), all viewing acquisition as progress towards mastery.

The field has not yet seen a revisiting of the mentalist-behaviourist debates. To clarify the nature of a contribution to instructed second language acquisition that mentalist approaches can make, this debate will need to occur. Unlike the earlier debates, this debate will now need to involve Vygotskian positions. For teachers, this means that gaining a sense of *the whole* of what is involved in L2 development is very difficult because it is difficult to see the varied relationships between studies of different features. For example, a Vygotskian perspective makes a claim about what is possible for learners with mediation. This contrasts with a Brownian mentalist account of what learners can do independently. As a result, contradictory results will be reported (see Nicholas et al., 2022; Lantolf, 2024).

Some key challenges in drawing general lessons for language teaching from SLA research are highlighted by Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST), first introduced by Larsen-Freeman (1997) and expanded by de Bot et al. (2007). CDST centres on the diversity and complexity of L2 experience, emphasising that learning is inherently unpredictable due to numerous interacting factors (Larsen-Freeman, 2009). Because outcomes can only be understood retrospectively, designing teaching based on predicted learning paths is problematic. Yet, CDST aims to engage with real classroom learning (Larsen-Freeman, 2009). For SLA research to inform teaching that addresses full communicative tasks, it must articulate how wholes and parts of learning relate; otherwise, its contribution remains limited.

From a CDST perspective, Block's (2003) social turn contrasts with earlier cognitive approaches, widening attention to the social while narrowing focus on the cognitive. CDST critiques these cognitive models – often reduced in its literature to 1970s morpheme-order studies (e. g., Dulay & Burt, 1974; Andersen, 1977) – for reflecting overly narrow views of language and cognition. By discounting cognition in this way, much of SLA's potential to explore the interplay between social and cognitive influences becomes obscured.

A consequence of CDST's partial perspective is its uncritical fusion of several major theoretical traditions. Regarding learning, CDST aligns with usage-based approaches (e. g., N. Ellis, 2019) in seeing all elements as interconnected and learning as associative and sensitive to frequency. At the same time, it invokes Piagetian notions of creativity and Vygotskian ideas of mediated interaction (Larsen-Freeman, 2011). CDST does not consider tensions between these views or the cognitive aspects of processes presented as

social. More recent work (e. g., Larsen-Freeman, 2015; van Dijk et al., 2024) describes CDST as a metatheory, ostensibly bridging diverging perspectives, yet in doing so, it blurs key distinctions that help define how different SLA frameworks relate to and diverge from one another.

As noted in the introduction, SLA contrasts with TBLT's explicit focus on reflection as central to learning. Whereas SLA research asks on what and how learners can reflect, TBLT links reflection directly to the development of communicative competence, acknowledging that communication draws on multiple linguistic subsystems. Overemphasising the communicative *whole* at the expense of understanding the roles of individual parts limits teachers' ability to help learners recognise and combine diverse communicative resources. Without addressing these differences, neither researchers nor teachers can fully grasp or enhance the place of reflection in language learning. The diversity within SLA research makes it difficult to identify a simple or singular contribution of SLA research to TBLT. However, if we can pull apart some of the different bodies of work in SLA, we can make it easier to see some of their potential contributions to TBLT.

2.4 SLA – the current situation

Volumes such as VanPatten et al. (2025) represent a continuing attempt to explore relationships between different theoretical positions. However, for people seeking to apply SLA research findings, the presence of multiple theories can make it harder to identify answers/an answer. As we show, SLA research now engages with a much wider range of communicative features (e. g., gestures) and considers relationships between them in much greater detail. However, this same breadth makes it harder to identify a particular suggestion in relation to a single feature that may be causing problems in teaching-learning in a specific context with a specific (group of) learner(s). SLA is not a comprehensively researched area. It continues to expand, deepen and debate. Locating information relevant to a specific single issue or trying to distil a general message requires careful searching and analysis.

Unlike the clearly defined family structure of early SLA research, the current landscape is far more diffuse. Today, most pressing issues in SLA are variably defined, encompassing linguistic features (e. g., vocabulary, pronunciation), research methods (e. g., brain imaging), contexts (e. g., instructed SLA), learner approaches (e. g., motivation), and learning processes both inside and outside the classroom. (e. g., Sociocultural Theory (Lantolf, 2024) or Processability Theory (Pienemann & Lenzing, 2025a, 2025b)), specific learner populations such as children (Philp et al., 2008) or learners with disrupted education or limited literacy (Tarone et al., 2009). Instruction itself is also recognised as an issue (Loewen & Sato, 2017; Lightbown & Spada, 2021; Hiver & Nagle, 2024). Some issues are broader and more theoretical such as the relationship between explicit and implicit learning (N. Ellis, 2017). While some approaches attempt to create an overview of the totality of SLA (e. g., CDST, The Douglas Fir Group), volumes such as VanPatten et al.'s (2007, 2020, 2025) series explore relationships between theories and reveal substantial differences in how researchers representing diverse

theories respond to a list of ten observations. One such observation is, "Observation 4: Learners' output (speech) often follows predictable paths with predictable stages in the acquisition of a given structure" (VanPatten et al., 2020, p. 10).

As evident in VanPatten et al. (2007, 2020, 2025), definitions of the boundaries of SLA vary considerably. Some are age-based, restricting SLA to adolescents or adults, while others, such as Nicholas's (1987, 1992) knowledge-based definition, focus on metalinguistic awareness. Nicholas argues that during L1 acquisition, children discover a universal property of Language – the existence of lexicogrammar linking meaning and sound. In contrast, L2 acquisition begins once this insight has been established, potentially as early as the second year of life, when learners apply this understanding to new linguistic input. These differing definitions contribute to the field's current diversity (R. Ellis, 2021).

This diversity means that approaches to pedagogy such as TBLT cannot turn to SLA as a united field to ask either how to relate various parts of the learning object to one another nor for a united perspective on how learners engage with an additional language. Instead, if TBLT is to effectively engage with SLA research, it is required to ask a much more specific question: For learners of type X in context Y seeking to learn feature or feature group Z, what insights can I use in designing pedagogical decisions A, B etc?

3 Thematic relations between TBLT and SLA

Identifying tasks as a potential centre of language teaching originated in the work of SLA researcher Mike Long (1985). Reflecting a view of L2 acquisition as capturing the learner's active creation of an L2 system, Long (1985, p. 89) defined a task as "a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward". That included "pedagogical tasks" (Long, 1985, p. 92). Long saw tasks as a practical way of simultaneously addressing learner needs, syllabus content and the organisation and conduct of learning and assessment in L2 classrooms (Long, 1985, p. 89). His work was informed by Krashen's (1982) emphasis on naturalistic communication in classroom learning experiences and Pienemann's (1984) analysis of how classroom learning of an L2 reflected constraints on learnability. Now, and drawing on a variety of threads in communicative language teaching, TBLT has four uniting themes: a focus on meaningful experiences; the integration of explicit analysis and reflection into learning; the selection of tasks based on learners' language learning needs; and recycling relationships between parts (often referred to as practice or skill building) (see the various contributions in Van den Branden et al., 2009). These themes are addressed through three phases: a pre-task phase, the task phase, and a review phase. These phases can be repeated at various points in the task. They can engage with either the task as a whole or various parts of the task. It is the preparation and review phases that distinguish a (language learning) task from the real-world (or real-world-like) activity that is at the core of the task that creates the meaning gaps (R. Ellis, 2003).

3.1 Foundations for relevant connections between specific parts of TBLT and specific areas of SLA research

TBLT involves all aspects of an experience structured either within one or across multiple teacher-led experiences (sometimes multiple lessons). It involves preparation for and reflection on uses of the L2 to achieve real-world outcomes. It assumes heterogeneous backgrounds in learning, seeks to involve those diverse learners in meaningful/interactionally-purposeful experiences and connects those backgrounds through cycles of analysis and practice. Learners are encouraged to use the L2 to perform a task and to analyse what they achieved, how they achieved it, and whether they could improve their performance.

Since tasks are part of instructed second language development, in common with other approaches that take the negotiation of meaning as central to effective L2 pedagogy, TBLT involves the teacher addressing the above complexities through elaborating a view of:

1. what learners are to learn (features and their relationships),
2. learners' position relative to the learning goal, including starting point and strategies,
3. required resources and experiences,
4. how these experiences are integrated contextually.

Each of these issues is addressed by different areas of SLA research in interrelated ways. For example, research into developmental sequences or how gender roles are performed in different cultures speak to the second issue but in different ways depending on the teacher's decisions in relation to the first issue of what is to be learned.

In relation to the content to be taught, teachers must decide how much of the communicative repertoire a task should encompass – for example, pronunciation, vocabulary, politeness, genre, register variation, and communication mode (spoken, written, texted, or video-based). In relation to the context, decisions might involve whether learners are encouraged to conform to or critically engage with dominant gender roles in the L2. These choices link various strands of SLA research: studies of developmental sequences or gendered performance inform learner positioning differently, while other research areas address resource demands and contextual integration. The relevance of specific SLA research depends on its theoretical focus – traditional language models offer more resources for structural aspects than for the dynamics of communicative repertoires or the subversion of pragmatic norms. Because neither SLA nor TBLT is uniform, clarifying TBLT's features helps determine which SLA perspectives address each pedagogical question before turning to broader SLA issues.

3.2 Issues central to TBLT

3.2.1 Focus on meaningful experiences

Classroom-oriented SLA research has long established that an exclusive focus on forms (teaching grammar without attention to meaning) (Long, 1990b) is an ineffective language teaching approach. In other words, taking the making of meaning as the under-

pinning approach to effective L2 development is a principle well-supported by SLA research (R. Ellis, 2017; Bardovi-Harlig, 2020; Gass et al., 2025).

The principle of meaning has been explored differently in SLA work on interlanguage pragmatics (the challenges faced and strategies used by learners in finding ways to communicate that are recognised and appropriately interpreted by others). Key works in this area are associated with Kasper (e. g., Kasper & Rose, 1999) and Bardovi-Harlig (2017, 2020) as well as more recently Schauer (2022). Among the principles emerging from this research is that learning pathways are not straight. Instead, they involve complex processes of alignment of multiple linguistic and contextual features, resulting in a learning process that contains multiple adjustments, including overcompensation and avoidance. The U-shaped pathways of this learning speak to the need for teachers to carefully track their learners and the changes in their use of the L2 being learned.

Meaning is also associated with the established work on L2 vocabulary acquisition – either as (very loosely) elements of a semantic web or as learning the nuances of a specific word (see Webb & Nation, 2017). Principles that emerge from this research are that vocabulary learning is aided by recognising that it also involves clusters of features. Frequency plays a role because words can be grouped according to how often they appear in learner experiences. This provides some measure of need, but it is not as simple as saying "the most frequent word should be taught first". Laufer, as reflected in Laufer and Rozovski-Roitblat (2011), has also pointed to the significance of repeated exposure and the conditions under which a less meaning-embedded focus can be more helpful for learning. Explorations of the Involvement Load Hypothesis (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001; Yanagisawa & Webb, 2021) show that the quality of attention to what is to be learned plays an important role in incidental vocabulary learning – in other words, even meaningful exposure is not sufficient. Work within the Processability Theory framework (Pienemann & Lenzing, 2025a, 2025b) has also pointed out that patterns associated with vocabulary – such as noun-like vs. verb-like behaviour – are important points of access to the L2 grammar.

Research linked to meaning has also been extended to other aspects of language and communication, such as the meaning of gestures in their own right as well as in embodied communication, where gestures are precursors or supporters of spoken meanings and seem to support the planning of speech (Lantolf, 2006; Gullberg, 2022). Making meaning is, therefore, not only a result of what learners articulate but also what they do with their bodies and with the support of others. Teachers therefore need to attend to and analyse the full range of resources that learners use and provide feedback addressing relationships between communicative resources (Nicholas & Starks, 2014).

3.2.2 Integrating explicit analysis into learning

SLA research has debated extensively the relationship between implicitness and explicitness in L2 development. It is central to various characterisations of what makes L2 learning distinctive, i. e., the variability in outcomes of (spoken) SLA shows that implicit learning is insufficient in an L2 context, whereas it seems sufficient in (spoken)

L1 development. However, the field has long moved beyond the binary distinction of *explicit* and *implicit*. Nick Ellis has played an important role in clarifying the variable interactions of consciousness with what is being learned. Nick Ellis (2017) outlines some of the constraints on thinking about the role of explicit analysis and points to the ongoing connections between explicit and implicit knowledge and cautions against viewing learning as a one-way progression from explicit analysis to implicit control.

A further layer in this is whether the explicit component occurs only in relation to feedback to learners (on errors they have made) (R. Ellis, 2017) or whether the explicit attention is integrated as part of the overall instructional program (Lantolf, 2024). Both seem to play a role, but the role differs according to what type of explicitness-making approach is taken and how it is integrated into the overall learning experience.

3.2.3 Recycling learning objects and experiences

As already alluded to in the section on meaningful experiences, SLA research has demonstrated that form and meaning are integrated in second language learning and must be integrated in teaching. This is outlined in Long's (1990b) distinction between *focus on forms* and *focus on form* (integrating attention to form with attention to meaning). Van Compernolle (2014, 2019) points out that this relationship is not only part of reflection and feedback but should also be central to conceptualising what is to be learned, so learners see the meaning in sociolinguistic variation across similar communicative encounters.

In support of ensuring that teaching connects form and meaning, Lightbown (1985, 2000) has carefully pointed out that practice does not make perfect. However, De Keyser & Suzuki (2025) have argued that building skills has a clear role in learning. This chapter reflects De Keyser's long highlighting that learning is not instantaneous and that building greater control over what learners do is an important part of learning, as long as attention is given to focus, learners, engagement consistency, and context.

Ultimate attainment is not a necessary outcome for all learners. In many contexts other goals take precedence. SLA research consistently shows that one approach cannot meet every learner's needs. Teachers therefore need to monitor diverse learners' ongoing learning processes to judge their shifting needs across different task phases and throughout the broader instructional experience (Nicholas et al., 2022). This attention to multiple dimensions of learning leads directly to the SLA side of the relationship.

3.3 Issues central to SLA: Tracking and predicting learner progress

Theories as divergent as Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST) (Larsen-Freeman, 1997; de Bot et al., 2007) and Processability Theory (PT) (Pienemann & Lenzing, 2025a, 2025b) agree on a key feature of SLA – learners differ. Variation both within the same learner and between learners is ubiquitous. However, CDST and PT differ radically in what this claim means for their overall perspective on SLA. For CDST, variation is effectively the end of the story since variation between learners and over time within a learner dominates. In contrast, for PT, variation is only part of the story since variation between learners and commonalities in their developmental sequences complement

one another. Learners are simultaneously (for some aspects of their L2) the same as and (for other aspects) different from other learners.

Learners bring with them constraints that limit what they can do with presented material. Pienemann (1984) outlined the Teachability Hypothesis, demonstrating that learner responses to instruction followed regular patterns based on the relationship between what was offered and their stage of word order development in German. Learners more than one stage behind what was taught learned only by rote. Learners one stage behind could extend learning to new examples. Interestingly, a small group of learners on the cusp of being ready to learn the new feature sometimes regressed. These constraints do not indicate a failure to learn. The constraints were developmental challenges for learners. Here we consider both developmental constraints and the consequences of variation for developmental trajectories.

The developmental stage constraint holds that what and how L2 learners learn depends on the fit between their current developmental level and the features being taught. If the gap is too large, only rote learning is possible; if the input represents the upcoming step in their developmental trajectory, learners can internalise it and use it creatively. Because learners differ, any classroom will contain varied relationships to target features, and teachers should therefore anticipate diverse outcomes while still identifying common areas of difficulty. Meaning remains central, but learners will differ in how they deploy grammar to express that meaning.

SLA research shows systematic patterns in how new capacities emerge in learner language, alongside structured variation within each stage. Early-stage learners, for example, typically produce canonical word order yet vary in their inclusion of features: some routinely omit informationally redundant elements such as the copula, or discoursally redundant elements such as personal pronouns, while others consistently supply them. These variationally motivated constraints work alongside developmental stage constraints, so that learners follow different but parallel developmental pathways. Some move relatively smoothly toward extensive L2 resources, while others follow misleading pathways that lead into cul-de-sacs because prerequisite capacities for further development are missing (Pienemann et al., 2022).

4 Conclusion

The SLA contribution to the SLA-TBLT relationship is not a silver bullet and, while SLA is a highly flexible shape-shifter, it is not a werewolf that has to be kept outside the door. The varied nature and differentiated aspects of SLA are reminders that teachers need to be permanently vigilant. TBLT offers many positive ideas about engaging learners in experiences rich in meaning and structured for recycling to maximise learning opportunities. SLA offers an important caveat and support to this optimism by identifying varied constraints on learning and differences in how they operate depending on what feature of the communicative repertoire is focused on. SLA research has demonstrated that while negotiation of meaning is central to L2 development, meaning alone is not

sufficient to guarantee learning. SLA research has also shown that despite commonalities, L2 learners simultaneously differ in ways that a shared focus on meaning will not, of itself, overcome.

The findings from SLA research show that teachers can be hopeful about understanding differences between learners and the diverse learning processes involved in engaging with aspects of the L2 and its communication. The results offer insights into both sources of commonality and difference, so that in designing tasks and task sequences, teachers can more precisely ask "Which aspects of the L2 are involved in this task, and what learning challenges do they present?". This allows them to address the complex challenge of nuancing tasks to account for learners' diverse needs and capabilities.

To meet length requirements, the authors developed strict guidelines for artificial intelligence tools to assist in shortening the text. All AI-generated suggestions were reviewed, revised, and supplemented by the authors, who also made additional independent changes to achieve the required length reduction.

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