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# Los procesos metodológicos de la enseñanza-aprendizaje de lenguas mediante tareas (Book Review)

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# Review of Los procesos metodológicos de la enseñanza-aprendizaje de lenguas mediante tareas

**Reviewer:** Elizabeth Maria Kissling

**Book Title:** Los procesos metodológicos de la enseñanza-aprendizaje de lenguas mediante tareas

**Book Author:** Kerwin Anthony Livingstone

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## Review:

AUTHOR: Kerwin Anthony Livingstone

TITLE: Los procesos metodológicos de la enseñanza-aprendizaje de lenguas mediante tareas (The Methodological Processes of Task-based Teaching and Learning)

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## SUMMARY

This volume outlines the principle methodological procedures used in task-based (TB) language courses. TB courses are organized around 'tasks,' where 'task' is generally defined as an activity having a precise objective, requiring learners to use language, and maintaining primary focus on meaning rather than form (see Ellis, 2003, pp. 1-5 for a review of researchers' differing definitions of 'task'). The volume will be of use to teachers who have committed to a task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach, have designed their curriculum accordingly, and are now ready to focus on the procedures they will follow to implement each task. Another volume in the series, by the same author, deals with the larger issue of curricular design in TBLT.

The first, and main, section of the volume deals with lesson design, which is divided into three phases: pre-task, during-task, and post-task. The discussion of the pre-task phase outlines activities that prepare students for the task and motivate them to participate fully in it. Such activities include completing

either similar or unrelated tasks, observing a model, and planning strategically. The discussion of the during-task phase describes the advantages and disadvantages of imposing a time limit for task completion, allowing students to have input in front of them while completing the task, and including a surprise element in the task. This section also outlines procedures for dealing with the discourse that will arise during the task and contrasts procedures commonly followed in a 'traditional' (teacher-centered, focused on forms) classroom with those of TB courses, in which language is viewed as a tool for communication, not just an object of study. The discussion of the post-task phase provides several options for post-task work, including repetition of the same task, reflection on the task, and focus on form. Several options for focus on form are outlined, including teacher observation of the errors students produce during a task in order to draw their attention to the errors afterward, as well as inclusion of grammatical awareness tasks or conscious-raising activities such as transcription.

The second half of the volume discusses various participant structures that serve as frames within which to develop a TBLT lesson. Participant structures are means of allocating student involvement in activities and organizing the interaction that emerges during activities (Philips, 1983). Participant structures range from completely individual work to relatively social work, including student-teacher, student-student, pairs, small groups, and whole class participation. The author notes that the choice of participant structure will be task-specific and that there are a variety of advantages and disadvantages to each participant structure in terms of opportunities for language learning. The advantages of the social work carried out in TB classrooms are discussed in terms of collaborative dialogue and cooperative learning, and a list of practical issues teachers should consider to facilitate effective cooperative learning is provided. These issues include students' orientation toward the task, individuals' responsibilities during the task, composition of the student group, distribution of information necessary for the task among the students, and the physical arrangement of students.

Though all the sections in this volume are quite brief, the author highlights some very important issues in more extended passages. A perspicuous comparison of TBLT with a traditional focus-on-forms approach to language teaching serves to highlight their differences at all levels of methodological processes and to

make salient the potential advantages of TBLT in terms of opportunities for language learning (pp. 13-18). However, Livingstone cautions that it will be difficult, if not impossible, to create the right kind of classroom discourse if either the teachers' or the students' notions about language learning are incompatible with the TBLT approach. He claims that students must begin to see themselves as language users, not just language learners, and yet at the same time avoid superficially completing tasks without awareness of the language they produce, which would be tantamount to wasting language learning opportunities during completion of the task. Livingstone also cautions that TB courses will not always necessarily produce better results than traditional language courses, but emphasizes that the success of the TBLT approach depends on methodological decisions at all stages of lesson planning. He argues convincingly that teachers' methods during the pre-task, during-task, and post-task phases will be crucial to determining the learning outcomes of students.

The conclusion explains eight principles of TB teaching, taken from Ellis (2003). It also provides three arguments as to why TBLT is an effective approach for second and foreign language teaching, which are that TBLT instruction: 1) is compatible with the cognitive processes involved in SLA; 2) emphasizes active participation on the part of the learner; and 3) is meaning focused and effective for developing linguistic and communicative competence.

## EVALUATION

Given the extreme brevity of this volume (37 pages of text in all), it provides surprisingly broad coverage of the practical methodological choices that teachers must make when conducting a TBLT course, while supporting claims with relevant second language acquisition (SLA) research when possible. References to SLA literature are summarized and do not require a background in SLA to be comprehended easily. The writing style throughout this volume is clear, simple, and direct. The wealth of headings and subheadings may make for a convenient desk reference in which teachers can find what they need quickly. However, this heading system also makes it difficult to read the volume as one fluid, coherent text.

The present volume is intended as a practical guide that will inform TBLT teachers' methodological choices. Readers who do use this volume as a practical

guide, however, will likely desire more concrete examples and extended explanations. For instance, Livingstone asserts that a pre-task activity should be a task in and of itself rather than a mere demonstration of the task to be completed (p. 9), but provides no concrete examples to illustrate the distinction. He cautions that pre-teaching vocabulary can threaten the integrity of the task if students begin to treat the task as a way to practice pre-selected vocabulary, yet he provides no concrete solutions for avoiding such a scenario. Readers who are very familiar with SLA research might find Livingstone's treatment of the research at times perfunctory and overly simplistic. For instance, after citing just two studies investigating the effect of time limits (Lee, 2000; Yuan & Ellis, 2003), Livingstone concludes that imposing a time limit facilitates accuracy, whereas imposing no time limit facilitates fluency (pp. 10-11). Here, he fails to mention the trade-offs between accuracy, fluency, and complexity of learner language, the complex interplay of learner proficiency, task complexity and task type, or the fact that time limits imposed on pre-task planning versus actual task performance affect performance differently, among other concerns. In fact, the bibliography contains 43 citations to highly relevant research in the area of TBLT, but only three date past 2007, and those three are authored by Livingstone himself. At times, the author notes gaps in the literature, such as the dearth of empirical evidence comparing the effectiveness of various post-task focus-on-form techniques. However, there are some conspicuously absent references, such as Ellis (2005), Nunan (2004), Van den Branden (2006), Van den Branden, Bygate, and Norris (2009), and Willis and Willis (2009).

The conclusion is cursory, simply outlining three qualities that justify a TBLT approach. One quality not mentioned is the real-world applicability of the approach, which often selects pedagogical tasks based on their relevance in real-world scenarios. Certainly, many more qualities of TBLT could be enumerated here as well, and the list would perhaps be best located within the introductory pages rather than in the conclusion, which readers expect to synthesize and extend the preceding discussion.

Though this volume has limitations, many owing to its brevity, it makes a significant contribution to the TBLT literature in that it provides a succinct and clear outline of the many methodological considerations that teachers face when implementing a TBLT approach in their language courses. It is the first

Spanish-language volume of its kind. Teachers may find it to be a good companion to more comprehensive volumes such as Willis and Willis (2009), providing an introduction to TBLT methods and a convenient reference to review again and again as they design lesson plans for their TB courses.

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