

INTERVIEWING PROFESSOR LAURA GURZYNSKI-WEISS FROM INDIANA UNIVERSITY: INTRODUCING THE TBLT LANGUAGE LEARNING TASK BANK

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Although tasks have been a key concept in the field of SLA for quite a while, the Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) approach is still perceived as an innovation when we think of modern language teaching (East, 2014), and due to its nature, quite challenging for teachers when it comes to making decisions on how to elaborate and implement tasks that might be appropriate to their instructional contexts. Thus, exploring TBLT in language classrooms is far from an easy task. An alternative to lightening teachers' and researchers' work of finding sample tasks that can bridge the gap between theory and practice is to construct accessible databases that work as online repositories of diverse types

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of tasks that have been used in the classrooms and in research - or yet to be implemented - that are grounded on the basic tenets of TBLT theory, which is the case of the TBLT Language Learning Task Bank.

Launched in September 2020, the TBLT Language Learning Task Bank is an online “database [that] provides a central location for sharing language learning tasks” (Gurzynski-Weiss; IALTBLT, 2020) where teachers and researchers can access tasks in a diverse set of languages to use in their classes and/or research. The website, hosted by Indiana University (IU) is funded by the International Association for Task-based Language Teaching and Learning (IATBLT.org) and is under the supervision of Professor Laura Gurzynski-Weiss, founder and Project Director. Laura is an Associate Professor in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at IU and her main research interests revolve around instructed second/foreign language acquisition and the many variables influencing it. She says that “a cornerstone of [her] research is ensuring that the data [she] collect[s] are impactful beyond academia” (Gurzynski-Weiss, n.d.) and we believe that the work conducted with the TBLT Task Bank is a potential tool that will foster the connection between academic research and quality teaching practices. Therefore, this interview aims at presenting the TBLT Language Learning Task Bank as a valuable tool to English teachers in Brazil - considering the scope of *Ilha do Desterro* - and furthermore, at discussing with professor Laura the challenges, affordances, and impacts of the Task Bank as an online repository available to the teaching and global community at large. Considering the current scenario of online teaching and learning as a result of the pandemic, having access to a digital bank/teaching repository like this is an important resource to teachers, students and researchers alike.

Interviewer: Professor, to begin, could you describe in more detail, what the Task Bank is about and what you think the role of the Task Bank for the global community of teachers and researchers interested in TBLT is?

Professor: First of all, please call me Laura. 😊 Thank you for the honor and opportunity to speak with you and to share this information with the audience the Task Bank was designed to serve: language teachers.

The Task Bank is a central hub for task-based researchers, language teachers, and teacher trainers to share task-based language learning tasks with a global community. We are growing the Task Bank to become the place to go to if you want to find a language learning task to use in your classroom or in your research study. If we can make it the go-to site for all language teachers, it has the potential to provide ongoing support for learning about, implementing, and strengthening TBLT in the classroom, and it also provides an opportunity for meaningful connection with other language educators and researchers.

Interviewer: Professor Laura, we know that the idea of the Task Bank is very much connected to your professional path and that it was actually originated



from teaching methods courses and TBLT seminars you taught. So, can you tell us a little bit more about how the idea of creating a central online hub for tasks to be shared worldwide came to be?

Professor: Absolutely. The motivation for the Task Bank stemmed from my observations as a teacher trainer and as a fellow educator for additional/nonnative languages (L2s). I teach courses such as L2 teaching methods, the second language acquisition of Spanish, task-based language teaching and, in each and every course, we discuss how to design new or edit existing tasks to provide optimal opportunities for L2 learning. Every semester we encounter the same issue of where to find tasks to adjust; what we find in textbooks is most often activities, focused on language form, rather than actual tasks in the TBLT sense, which are focused on meaning. And while one can find a faculty or department website here and there with a modest number of L2 tasks, they are usually language or competency specific; we were unable to find a central location where everyone could quickly access L2 tasks that met the definition of a task according to task-based language teaching (TBLT): a communicative goal/objective; a non-linguistic outcome; a connection to real-world language use; and following one of the three most common task's structures (Ellis, 2003, 2018; Long, 2015; or Willis, 1996).

The formation of the first site started in a 2014 TBLT seminar I taught with a group of phenomenal students at Indiana University, including Carly Carver (now Assistant Professor at Augusta State University) and Ángel Milla Muñoz (now a Spanish instructor in Seville, Spain). I mentioned the “dream site” in the seminar and asked the students to see if they could find anything existing online that was similar. They couldn't, and when I mentioned I would love to work with someone if they were interested in creating it, Carly and Ángel volunteered. They took the ideas and put them to work in creating a functional and modest site, which was available from 2015-2020. Because of additional life and professional projects, we weren't able to do much with the site, but I never gave up the dream. This past summer, in 2020, during an International Association of Task-Based Language Teaching executive board meeting (I am a member-at-large), our site came up and I expanded the potential if only we had the funding, and that a funding search was on my to-do list. IATBLT generously offered to fund the project, I found a wonderful programmer (and former language teacher and IU alumnus, Jonathan May), and we designed the current site (tblt.indiana.edu) over the summer. A sub-committee of volunteers formed the IATBLT advisory board and provided invaluable feedback and the site launched in September of 2020.

Interviewer: It is so interesting to learn about how it came to be, and how step by step, the bank is now available worldwide. So then, with the website up and running, how does the upload and sharing of tasks work exactly? Is it more or less like a paper submission? By taking a look at the Task Bank submission section

people see that Ellis's (2003,2018), Willis's (1996), and Long's (2015) frames are suggested, do you think that by making reference to them the database instigates teachers to investigate and/or learn about TBLT theory grounded on these understandings of what task and task-based language teaching are?

Professor: Everyone and anyone can search and download tasks to use and edit; that is the most important part. In this first stage, until we populate the site with many more tasks that provide clear examples of our definition of a task (a communicative goal/objective; a non-linguistic outcome; a connection to real-world language use; and following one of the three most common task structures[Ellis, 2003, 2018; Long, 2015; or Willis, 1996]), the uploading feature is available to members of the IATBLT, which provides the funding for the site, and anyone invited by an IATBLT member or by emailing thetaskbank@gmail.com. We did this to ensure that anyone submitting tasks for publication would be most likely to follow a TBLT definition of a task, and to ensure that everyone interacting with the Task Bank has a positive experience. Once someone would like to upload a task, and they are an IATBLT member or have been invited by a member or following our response to their email, they create an account and then go to the main site and click "Upload a task." They will see our task criteria to double-check what they have is a task according to the Task Bank criteria, and then they can begin the process. We have a very specific categorization of tasks so that, down the line when there are more tasks, it will be easier for teachers and researchers to find specifically what they are looking for; all of these categorizations are informed by the TBLT literature, both on the pedagogy and research sides of the field. The uploader is asked about the context where they used the task, what other contexts they could envision the task being used for (for example, other age groups or proficiency levels), and they have the option to provide their name, affiliation, and email, to provide an opportunity for further conversation within the global community once the task is published and to ensure their work published on the Task Bank is given proper citation credit. After submission, I'm notified and take a first pass through the task, providing feedback and asking clarification questions if needed; I then pass it to two more board members who do the same. The uploader is notified when the task is ready to be viewed again and sometimes there are minor edits to make. I think this conversation between the uploader and the advisory board - the opportunity to engage and learn from and with each other - is one of the most unique aspects of the Task Bank. It would be easier to have a database where everyone can use their own version of what a task is and upload it without comment or feedback, but that would keep the burden on the teachers to search and determine: is this really a TBLT task? Will this work for my context? By providing all of the categorization and feedback from the Task Bank advisory board and from myself as the project director, our goal is to remove that burden from the teachers searching and be able to say that everything on the Task Bank falls under our definition of a task (informed collaboratively from the field of TBLT), and is categorized so when a teacher is looking for a task ready to go in Portuguese, for example, or for dialogic

task, they can search for tasks that meet their needs quickly and save time. There are videos on how to engage with the site, including how to upload a task, within the “Help” tab. In a future phase we will have videos linked between the Task Bank and the IATBLT.org website operationalizing and providing mini task-based lessons, explanations, and workshops about every aspect of our task definition (for example, expanding on communicative vs. linguistic outcomes) and task categorization (for example, demonstrating how a task can be designed to focus on providing rich input, and what that means for each part of the task).

Interviewer: So we can see that this is a very detailed process and that also, the activity of downloading the task is, in itself, an opportunity to learn about TBLT. And indeed the entire page seems to be very user-friendly, so that the teachers’ search can be facilitated. Then, do the teacher and/or researcher that access the page find more information about using each task? For instance, do they get tips or suggestions on how to use the tasks in the class or for research purposes? If not, is it a future goal of the bank to provide that?

Professor: I’m so glad you asked this question! Right now on the Task Bank, the uploader is asked to select all contexts in which the task could be used right now with minimal edits, and they are encouraged to provide instructions. In fact, that is the most common request for revision we give from the advisory board: please provide enough context and instructions that a teacher can take this task and use it without having additional questions. The newly launched journal *TASK* (John Benjamins) will feature a section entitled “Let’s talk tasks: A conversation between language teachers, researchers, and teacher trainers” that I will be editing. The specific goals of *Let’s talk tasks* are (1) to make TBLT more accessible for all, (2) to explicitly recognize that we all have something to learn from others from backgrounds and expertise that differ from our own, and (3) to do this by presenting and discussing tasks taken from the Task Bank as a point of connection. The section will feature one task from the Task Bank each issue, and will describe how the task was designed, tips on how to use the task in the classroom and research settings, and provide insight on how to adapt the task from the task creator and two additional target audience members. So, for example, the first issue will feature a task created by Dr. Julio R. Torres from the University of California at Irvine. The task was created for research use (although also piloted in a classroom setting), and subsequently used in a Spanish for business course. The other two individuals who engaged with the task are an experienced university-level Spanish teacher (new to TBLT), Julie Madewell, who has taught a Spanish for business course multiple times, and myself, who represented the teacher trainer perspective. In future iterations we will be selecting tasks from other contexts (elementary-level, high school level, language centers dedicated to refugees, for example), languages, and balance the triad of perspectives who engage with the task. And our style for the section is much like this interview here, a conversation, with the aim of feeling like you are in a

café having a coffee with friends (Remember that? Saudade!). My hope for *Let's talk tasks* is that it fosters meaningful interaction between task-based researchers, language teachers, and language teacher trainers. I hope to demonstrate how we all can engage with the Task Bank and TBLT at large, regardless and particularly *because of* our diverse experiences.

Interviewer: And then, once teachers have found the tasks they think fit their purpose, what would you suggest for teachers that want to download and adapt tasks from the Task Bank in their classes?

Professor: Again, another wonderful and timely question! For now, I would say it's most important to think about one of three things (or perhaps all three if there are many tasks that fit your first searches: (1) the goal for your task: what do you need this task to encourage for your students? What is your communicative outcome? So, for example, is it identifying differences or making a decision? (2) What 1-2 task characteristics would balance out what you already have planned for this lesson/week/unit? So, for example, if you have mostly input-providing tasks so far, what about selecting an output-prompting task? If you have mostly individual work, what about searching for paired work? And (3) what is your teaching context: students' proficiency levels, age, literacy, etc. You could search in any one of these three ways, I think, and find what you need. Although, I have to say I am in the process of collecting data in a multi-site study to see how L2 teachers engage with the Task Bank, select a task and adapt it for their context specifically to ensure that the Task Bank is as user-friendly as possible and that it serves the population it was designed to: L2 teachers of diverse backgrounds (broadly defined). I am eager to learn from the participant teachers and will look forward to passing along their recommendations in the future.

Interviewer: We know that the Task Bank welcomes tasks in all languages, and this is an attractive aspect of the bank, right?! To be inclusive and welcoming for teachers and researchers of all language backgrounds rather than focusing only, or mainly, on English. However, it is known that English has played a major role in the world as a Lingua Franca. How do you and the Advisory board plan to work with this diversity, being aware that possibly there will be a major search for tasks in English and, as well, researchers wanting to share tasks for English teaching?

Professor: You are absolutely correct: we want the Task Bank to be a place where every language teacher can find a task for their teaching context. That being said, the site is by language teachers for language teachers; we are counting on the global community of fellow educators to show us what they are interested in by uploading and downloading the tasks that are most meaningful for them. Once we launch on social media, too, this will be a quick and fun way to get in touch with us at the Task Bank and tell us what you need and are hoping to see next (and also hopefully tag the person you think has the resource that we can upload

to the Task Bank!). So if we start with more tasks for English (actually, right now Spanish is the most common language on the site), perhaps teachers of other languages will be inspired to share their tasks.

Interviewer: We hope so too! Now, talking about the TBLT in practice...Many times, we hear language teachers saying that adopting TBLT in their classes is difficult and time-consuming. Do you agree with it, from a teacher's and researcher's perspective? If so, how do you think the Task Bank might contribute to overcoming this challenge? A challenge that has been put on the spot because of the pandemic and the intense shift to online teaching settings.

Professor: I couldn't agree more. And that is a main motivation for the Task Bank: to increase the access to, use of, *and support* for TBLT L2 tasks. So often when interested in learning about and potentially adopting a new teaching method, we receive brief training and then are left to our own devices to implement it (and this is on top of the unrealistic tasks of educators). The Task Bank, if we can make it the popular go-to site for all L2 teachers, has the potential to provide ongoing support for learning about, implementing, and strengthening TBLT in the actual language classroom. And I think it has tremendous potential to provide feedback to L2 researchers who want to see what teachers are doing and find valuable in the L2 classroom; the Task Bank can bridge the ecological gap in a more immediate sense by having the same tasks available for use in the classroom and research. I think this is particularly critical in pandemic times where time and resources are even shorter than usual.

Interviewer: To conclude, could you invite our teachers and researchers from Brazil to access the Task Bank, and as you do so, highlight keywords or concepts that you believe represent the idea of a central database for sharing Tasks with the globe?

Professor: Most wholeheartedly. The Task Bank is created by L2 teachers for L2 teachers. We made this for our fellow educators in the world who, especially in this pandemic, have increasing demands on their time and fewer resources at their disposal for teaching. We hope that the Task Bank can provide a place where you can download and perhaps even share your own L2 tasks with a global community, save some time on your lesson prep, get inspired and inspire others, and feel a sense of community worldwide with others who are looking to make the world a more inclusive and welcoming place where people can learn L2s in meaningful ways and interact with more people and more viewpoints than they could before learning their L2. I genuinely feel that language teaching and learning is an opportunity to make the world a most just and inclusive space, where we can see how we are more alike than different, and work to understand, celebrate, and learn from our differences. And I feel that TBLT is one of if not the most conducive teaching methods to make this happen. I am honored to

share the Task Bank with you today and I very much hope you and your readers make the site your own and help us build this site collaboratively as an incredible support and resource for our global community of fellow educators. Will you join us? Visit our site (tblt.indiana.edu) and connect with us on social media (@thetaskbank) today. I look forward to talking tasks with you soon!

To close this interview session, we would like to thank Laura Gurzynski-Weiss, who kindly accepted our invitation and took her time to share with us key aspects of the Task Bank, a database to share teaching ideas grounded on TBLT main tenets. Which, in our views, can be a way to envisage a healthy relationship between Second Language Acquisition and Language Pedagogy, an issue that has been extensively debated in the field (see Ellis, 1995; Kramersch, 1995). According to Kramersch (1995), since 1984 there has been a desire to make theory accessible to language educators which has been occurring through textbooks, monographs, workshops, public lectures, discussion, to mention but a few. However, mediation has been problematic, first, in terms of how different the domain of theory is from the one of practice (each with its own metaphors, categorization and agendas), and, second, the complexity of mediation itself, which depends on the practitioners' perceptions and the way in which they may adequate the proposals for their own purposes. Considering the rationale that lies behind the way the Task Bank has been conceived, it seems to have the potential to trigger on those interested in tasks the "educator's stance" (Kramersch, 1995), the one that unfolds the theoretical aspects that may be relevant and of utility for language pedagogy.

This interview was conducted by e-mail in March 2021.

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