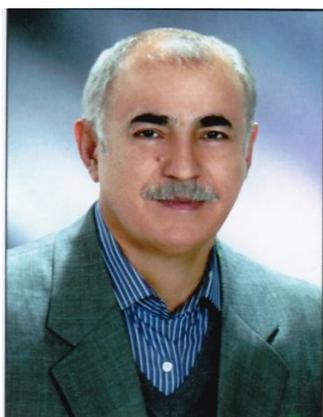


JALDA's Interview with Professor Massoud Rahimpour

Interview by Dr. Davoud Amini

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Massoud Rahimpour

Massoud Rahimpour is Professor Emeritus of Tabriz University. Professor Rahimpour has done his B.A. in English Language and Literature at Tabriz University in 1975, M.A. in TESOL at Oklahoma City University, U.S.A. in 1978, and Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics: Second Language Acquisition/Teaching at The University of Queensland, Australia in 1997. While he was at the University of Tabriz, he was also Head of English Department, Director of the International Academic Collaborations of Tabriz University, Deputy Dean of Faculty and Director of Centre for Teaching Foreign Languages. Professor Rahimpour has also been Honorary Associate professor at the School of Languages and Cultures at The University of Queensland and language instructor at TAFE Queensland. He has also acted as Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of English Language Teaching and Learning, Tabriz University and the Member of Editorial Board of several Journals of Language Teaching Research. Professor Rahimpour has published papers in international and national journals, published books and has presented papers in conferences. He has also supervised tens of M.A and Ph.D. theses. His research interests are Task-Based Language Teaching, Syllabus Design, Second Language Acquisition, Research Methods in Applied Linguistics and Adult Language Learning. Dr. Davoud Amini, assistant professor of ELT at Azarbaijan Shahid Madani University and a former Ph.D. student of professor Rahimpour has arranged this interview with him.

DA: --- Thank you dear professor Rahimpour for kindly accepting JALDA's invitation to have this internet-based interview with us.

MR: --- My Pleasure. Thank you so much Dr. Amini for the opportunity you provided to have a chat with your journal readers.

DA: --- Would you like to share with our readers some information about your current professional and research engagement?

MR: --- Sure. For the last decade, I have been teaching and supervising postgraduate students' theses, acting as the external examiner of Ph.D. theses, and doing research in the field of Second Language Acquisition/Teaching at the University of Tabriz, TAFE Queensland and The University of Queensland. Currently, I am also involved in teaching and preparing Material and Assessment Tasks in AMEP (Australian Migrant Education Program) and SEE Program (Skills in Education and Employment) at TAFE Queensland, South West Region.

DA: --- You have been one of the pioneering researchers to bring Task-Based Language Teaching into the spotlight in Iranian community of Teaching English as a Foreign Language. Would you like to present an overview of the development of TBLT as a language teaching paradigm in Iranian context?

MR: --- Let me start with my initial experience when I first introduced Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) topic in Iran. You know, despite its success, like any new educational reform or any political movement, TBLT also encountered some resistance and challenges (Sheen, 1994; Ellis, 2003, 2017). It was 1997 when I completed my Ph.D. at the University of Queensland and returned back to Iran to continue teaching at the University of Tabriz. When I introduced Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), few classroom teachers knew what TBLT was and most of them thought it was only suitable for ESL contexts and not feasible in Iranian EFL context. I still remember that there was some sort of resistance against implementation of this innovative approach. The main reason for this misunderstanding was that Iranian English language curriculum was, and still is, a traditional structural-based approach and teachers have been employing this approach for decades. These novice teachers who did not have sufficient theoretical background and appropriate practical training in this field did not know how to create suitable tasks and how to incorporate tasks into traditional classroom and what appropriate frameworks to use to implement TBLT. Indeed, teachers were not familiar with this new approach. Long and Crooks (1993) correctly refer to this issue and point out that the structural syllabus is still the most widely used in L2 instruction, particularly in foreign language settings. Long (2016) also points out that untrained teachers with poor command of L2 can do PPP (Present-Practice-Produce) focus on forms methodology, but they cannot perform TBLT. Long and Crooks also explain that arguments in its favour remain mostly logistical. This is partly due to the availability of structural-based teaching materials, and due to the fact that such material are relatively easy to use, even for untrained teachers with little command of English.

Van den Branden, et al. (2009: XIII) argue that though there is broad interest in the potential value of TBLT to make learning and teaching efficient, there is also considerable diversity in both theoretical and practical scope of the TBLT. Therefore, this innovation and change to a long-established traditional linguistic-based approach seemed to be a big burden and lots of logistic challenges on teachers' shoulders, and they showed reluctance and resistance against employing TBLT. As mentioned by Van den Branden (2009), teachers need sufficient time to adapt their teaching practice: incorporation of task-based principles into daily classroom activities which seems to be a slow process and time consuming. Van den Branden adds that teachers do not like to

throw everything they know especially long-established traditional structural-based approach and replace it with something completely new. They prefer and indeed they need special training and also smooth transitions. From TBLT proponents' perspective, these doubts are related to misconceptions of the approach (Long, 2016, Wills & Wills, 2007). Long (2016) points out that most problems, criticism and issues are *nonissues* and only a few criticisms are really related to the important issues and genuine problems which need possible solutions

But despite these challenges and obstacles many university language instructors and high school teachers reacted positively and showed enthusiasm in employing TBLT. In the last decade, Task-based approaches to language teaching and syllabus design have thus attracted the attention of many language teachers, syllabus designers, and material developers in Iran. To provide a true picture of TBLT status in past, present and future in Iran, I should say that TBLT has almost left its earlier stages behind and is now well established at the university levels. To date, hundreds of papers have been presented in the national and international conferences, hundreds of journal articles, M.A. and Ph.D. theses have been published on a variety of topics related to TBLT by the Iranian postgraduate students in Iranian and overseas universities all over the world. Your own Ph.D. thesis: *Task Effectiveness and Cognitive Involvement in Incidental Acquisition of Second Language Vocabulary*, your own and your co-authored papers and your fellow Ph.D. students' and M.A. theses are good examples of this development and I can claim that Iran is now one of the countries in which TBLT is quite active. I hope the ideas initiated in this interview will provide language teachers, material developers and policy makers and postgraduate students an impetus for further research and a locus for carrying on much needed intellectual discussions about TBLT specifically in diverse contexts.

DA: --- Most of the distinguished TBLT scholars you have closely worked with, including Peter Robinson, Michael Harrington and Peter Skehan, have mainly looked at TBLT from a dominantly cognitive perspective. Your Ph.D. work on Triadic Componential Model has been frequently cited in the literature. But you know that societal dimensions of TBLT are also highlighted in other theoretical frameworks such as the Sociocultural Theory. How do you define TBLT regarding this variation in perspectives?

MR: --- I should express my special and sincere thanks to Professor Peter Robinson, Professor Michael Harrington and Professor Roland Sussex, my Ph.D. supervisors, who first introduced me the topic of Task-Based Language Teaching. Much of thinking that went into my thesis, published papers and also in this interview grew out of advice and discussion with them.

I absolutely agree with you. TBLT can be looked at from different perspectives. As you correctly mentioned, it can be viewed from societal dimensions and highlighted in other theoretical frameworks such as Sociocultural Theory. As you know, Sociocultural Theory grew from the work of seminal psychologist Lev Vygotsky, according to whom learning has its basis in interacting with other people. Vygotsky also believed that language develops from social interactions, for communication purposes. As you mentioned, societal dimensions make up an important aspect of TBLT as highlighted within the framework of Sociocultural Theory and they can be employed in Teaching

English. But the team I was working with were more engaged with the cognitive language processing while performing a task.

Task-Based Language Teaching has recently been the focus of attention of many L2 language instructors, syllabus designers and SLA researchers (See Robinson, 1995, 2001, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2011; Long, 2016, 1985, 1987, 1998, Long and Crookes, 1993, Skehan, 1998, 20003, 2010; Rahimpour, 1995, 1997, 1999, 2001. 2002). TBLT, which focuses on the ability to perform a task or activity without explicit teaching of grammatical structures, is claimed to create more favorable condition for the development of second language learning, make the classroom closer to real life situation, focus on the use of authentic, demanding and motivating language, facilitate better learning and promote L2 learner's performance.

Task-based language teaching provides the argument for analytic, chiefly type B syllabuses (Crookes, 1986; Crookes & Long, 1987; Long, 1985, 1989; Long & Crookes 1987). The task in TBLT is considered central to all of the instructional design processes, from the identification of learner needs to the measurement of student achievement. A distinction is made between *target tasks*, which are tasks as they occur in everyday life, and *pedagogic tasks*, which are derived from the target task sequenced to form the task-based syllabus. It is the pedagogic tasks that teachers and students actually work on in the classroom (Long, 1989).

It should be noted that, identifying possible sources of task complexity indeed is necessary prerequisite for making principled decisions concerning the grading and sequencing of tasks, upon which much of the value of the TBLT will rest. Grading and sequencing pedagogic tasks is indeed a major challenge for the task-based syllabus designer (Long, 1989, Robinson, 2011, Harrington, 2002, 2006, Rahimpour 1997, 1999). Very briefly, the pedagogic tasks are graded and sequenced by the degree of difficulty (from simple to complex). Task complexity is not the reflection of traditional linguistic grading criteria; rather it results from task factors themselves. These might include the number of steps involved, the number of solutions to the problem, the number of parties involved and the saliency of their distinguishing features, the location of task in displaced time and space, the amount and kind of language required, the number of sources competing for attention, and other linguistic, cognitive or social factors (Long & Crookes, 1992, 1993).

DA: --- Where, in your opinion, the research and practice of Task-Based Language Teaching is headed to?

MR: --- TBLT is well established at international level in the world, and as I said earlier, TBLT is also well established at the university levels in Iran, too. To date, thousands of papers have been presented in the international conferences or published in journals. Hundreds of M.A. and Ph.D. theses have been written on a variety of topics related to TBLT all over the world. TBLT has come a long way and I strongly hope and am sure that it will lead to better changes and success in Teaching English in EFL context. As Long and Crookes (1992) believe, TBLT holds special promise. Policy makers, curriculum designers, material developers and test makers should give training to both teachers and students and prepare them for smooth transition from a long-established structural-based language teaching to the innovative Task-Based Language

Teaching approach. I know that the process is a bit slow but steady that requires time and patience.

In closing this section of discussion and referring to past, present and future of TBLT status, I can do no better than quote Long's (2016) conclusion who points out that TBLT is still a relatively recent innovation, which requires expertise on the part of course designers and classroom teachers, and considerable investment of time and effort, adequate staffing, funding and other sources if it is to be successful. The goal for researchers and practitioners, as Long proposes, is to move forward together and systematically in what must be a collaborative endeavor.

DA: --- You have been involved in the research on foreign language syllabus designing for years. The recent COVID 19 pandemic has turned the pedagogical scene into a big challenge both for language teachers and students. What recommendations do you have so that a collaboration of language teaching methodology and syllabus design can help relieve the conditions?

MR: ---The pandemic placed us in a hard situation where innovation and flexibility enabled continued educational delivery for our students while ensuring the safety of staff, our students and communities was our number one priority. Though we have made significant changes to our strategic plan - like changes in all aspects of life - we still need more modifications in our curriculum, syllabus design, delivery method, material development and assessment methods. We need to focus on our students' needs and priorities, consider learners' individual differences, focus on innovation in syllabus design, teaching methods and delivery, utilize flexible and blended mode delivery (i.e., face-to-face delivery combined with online technology-based delivery) which will facilitate and create favorable condition for teaching and learning. We need more regular weekly, monthly and term meetings to share news and views to find solutions to our common problems.

Last but not least, I hope and wish the recent COVID 19 Vaccination rollout will change the current situation to a better and safer life, and hopefully we will be back to a very normal situation where we can enjoy our education and our life, too.

DA: --- Thank you for your precious time.

MR: --- You're welcome. It was so nice to talk to you after a long time. I enjoyed talking to you and it reminded me of the old days of Tabriz University classes where we had discussions and conversations on this topic together in our M.A. and Ph.D. programs. I am very happy to see how hard you and your colleagues work together and am really very proud of you and your colleagues who continue this scholarly chain of activities and pass it to the current and the next younger generation. I wish you all success and happy and safe years ahead!