

**Task-based language teaching frameworks in technology enhanced learning  
contexts**

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**This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment for the requirements for the degree  
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This thesis results entirely from my own work and has not been offered previously for any other degree or diploma. The word-length of this thesis conforms to the permitted maximum.

Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the initials 'S.A.' with a flourish.

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## **Abstract**

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) continues to be more widely applied as an approach in second language education. Benefits and challenges of TBLT have been debated over the past thirty years. The advent of technology enhanced learning (TEL) and the use of TBLT in such contexts have revealed further benefits and challenges within this approach. This study summarises TBLT history, before reviewing recent literature relating to TBLT and TEL with specific reference to such challenges as student participation, error correction, fluency, accuracy and the role of feedback.

Literature that addresses the conceptualisation of the TBLT approach in TEL contexts is somewhat scant. This qualitative study, situated in the ESOL department of a Canadian higher education institution addresses this gap through phenomenographic analysis of teacher and student interview transcripts. Findings are analysed with reference to established TBLT frameworks that have been broadly used in classroom-based settings. The outcome space reveals six categories of description in hierarchical sequence of complexity. These categories of description fit within three structural aspects, in which the phenomenon is experienced in three qualitatively different ways. These involve a shift from the enabling factors of the context, to needs-related skills of the individual, and to the facilitation of language acquisition in a collaborative and reflective technology-mediated environment.

Findings are then discussed in terms of a wide range of recommended adaptations to existing TBLT frameworks for more effective use in online and blended contexts, and in terms of associated benefits and challenges. Key contributions to new understanding concern access to digital resources during on-task stages, further opportunities for learner choice and peer training, the incorporation of soft skills training, and the refining of task-related documentation and procedures. Findings are also applied to recommended changes to initial teacher training programmes in ELT and to ongoing aspects of professional development.

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## List of abbreviations

CEFR	Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment
CLB	Canadian Language Benchmarks
EFL	English as a foreign language
ELT	English language teaching
ESL	English as a second language
ESOL	English for speakers of other languages
LMS	Learning management system
MP(s)	Methodological principle(s)
SLA	Second language acquisition
TBL	Task-based learning
TBLT	Task-based language teaching
TEL	Technology enhanced learning
TESOL	Teaching English to speakers of other languages

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Chapter 1 introduces the background, focus and organisation of the research. It seeks to set out how the historical development of task-based language teaching (TBLT) (Ellis, 2004; Long, 1985; Nunan, 2004; Skehan, 1999b; Willis, 1996) and the concurrent growth of technology enhanced learning (TEL) have merged to the extent that their effective, mutual integration (González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014) requires adaptations to established TBLT frameworks.

This study presents original contributions to knowledge in terms of several recommended key adaptations to TBLT frameworks for online and blended contexts. These contributions to new knowledge include the need for unrestricted learner access to digital resources during task stages, peer-to-peer training opportunities in the task cycle, scope for the enrichment of learning through learner choice, changes to the setting up and guiding of learner groups, and the embedding of soft skills development.

Furthermore, this study highlights benefits and challenges in technology-mediated TBLT arising from the data, and presents further relevant recommendations for initial teacher training programmes and professional development.

### **1.1 Research background**

In the field of English language teaching (ELT), a range of approaches and methods have been employed over the course of the last century or so (Richards & Rodgers,

2014). These include a broad range of methodologies from the sequentially arranged structures deductively taught in the Grammar Translation method, which dominated language teaching in the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the behaviourist ideals of the Audiolingual Method, whereby language learning is based largely on habit formation through teacher modelling and student repetition of dialogues (Richards & Rodgers, 2014), and more alternative methods such as the trial and error underpinnings of the problem-solving approach that is inherent in the Silent Way (Gattegno, 1963), whereby a discovery approach to language learning is adopted by students, guided by a mainly silent teacher, who often makes use of facilitative charts and coloured rods (Richards & Rodgers, 2014)

By the 1970s, sociolinguistic concepts paved the way for the Communicative Approach or Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which placed greater emphasis on concepts, such as fluency, authenticity, learner centredness and meaning making. From the underlying principles of CLT, there emerged a number of related approaches, one of which was TBLT, with its primary focus on the achievement of task outcomes through negotiated interactions with others (Ellis, 2003).

Towards the end of the twentieth century, a range of frameworks within TBLT began to emerge. Differences between these frameworks are discussed in detail in Chapter 2. For now, one salient point to bear in mind is that each framework was designed with the expectation that its implementation would be in a traditional classroom context even though the communicative tasks themselves might be hypothetically situated outside the classroom. However, the frameworks each stipulate that, while addressing the communicative negotiations involved in the task stage, learners should largely, or

exclusively, avail themselves only of their own linguistic resources at their disposal. In other words, by and large, learners are expected not to have recourse to a wide range of supporting materials beyond any of those that are deemed necessary by the teacher.

As long as the classroom remains the primary teaching context, the teacher maintains a considerable degree of control over such key variables as time constraints, input of content, types of interaction, learner responsibilities and feedback parameters (Walker, 2011). However, the advent of technology and the general increase in the use of digital resources both in classrooms and in online educational contexts have had significant impacts on the underlying principles and tenets of traditional TBLT classroom-based frameworks (Schrooten, 2006; González-Lloret, 2007, 2015; González-Lloret & Ortega 2014).

These impacts of technology, when added to existing areas of contention in debates surrounding the TBLT approach, such as learner participation, the primacy of fluency over accuracy, the position of grammar and the nature of feedback (Hatip, cited in Hişmanoğlu & Hişmanoğlu, 2011), have raised questions about resulting effects on second language learning (Crystal, 2008; González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014; Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, & Robison, 2009; Walther, 2012).

Additionally, the growing presence of connective technology within educational contexts through such means as the institutional learning management system (LMS), internet access, smartphones and other devices means that both teachers and learners expect a technology-mediated integration of social, academic and professional domains that is virtually seamless. As a result, in the field of TBLT, the opportunities for a greater

range of task types have grown exponentially in a very short time, thereby giving rise to new learning needs and hitherto unfamiliar forms of holistic educational activities (Jenkins et al., 2009).

At the same time, along with these additional considerations for the implementation of technology-mediated TBLT, the role of tasks in national and international language descriptor frameworks, such as the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR), has seen a significant growth in prominence.

Therefore, as educational contexts shift towards a more blended or fully online course delivery system, the need for TBLT frameworks to retain currency and effective applicability has become an increasingly pressing one (Thomas & Reinders, 2010).

## **1.2 Statement of the research problem**

In the context of higher education, there is a general move towards an emphasis on the employability of students upon graduation (Autor, Katz & Kearney, 2006). To this end, a higher premium is often assigned to the professional skills that are developed and honed by higher education programmes (Wang, Zou, Wang & Zing, 2013). In the context of second language learning, soft skills, such as those associated with interpersonal communication, intercultural communicative competence and professional discourse, constitute a natural fit within the framework of a task-based approach with a focus on real-world task objectives in authentic contexts.

At the same time, the need for proficient communicative skills in the workplace is matched by the requirement for high levels of digital literacy. Therefore, there appears to be potential for the synergies of a technology-mediated TBLT approach to facilitate the development of both language skills (González-Lloret 2007; González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014; Schrooten, 2006; Ziegler, 2016) and of digital technology skills (Lee & Markey, 2014; Payant & Bright, 2017).

Although there are a number of studies that have investigated the implementation of specific tasks within a technology-mediated TBLT context (Baralt & Gómez, 2017; Payant & Bright, 2017; Solares, 2014), no study so far has investigated learner and teacher perceptions of TBLT implementation in Canadian higher education TEL contexts with a view to considering possible TBLT framework adaptations.

With this gap in mind, various researchers have identified the need for the greater integration of TBLT within TEL contexts (González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014; Thomas & Reinders, 2010; Ziegler, 2016), but a widely acknowledged framework has yet to emerge. This study aims to address this gap by analysing the perceptions of both teachers and learners who have full-time programme experience (at least one year for teachers and six months for learners) in the same technology-mediated task-based context.

### **1.3 Research questions**

This study addresses three research questions with the overall objective of considering the implications for possible adaptations to TBLT frameworks in online and blended contexts. The primary research question (PRQ) directly addresses the main overall objective.

#### **Primary research question**

*In what ways can TBLT frameworks be adapted for more effective use in online and blended contexts?*

#### **Secondary research questions**

In addition, there are two secondary research questions (SRQ1 and SRQ2). The benefits and challenges of TBLT in traditional classroom contexts have been well documented in the literature. By addressing this question in a TEL context, learner and teacher perceptions can be considered in the light of previous findings. Evidence of the perceived benefits and challenges in TEL contexts can then be used to inform and refine further the process of deriving implications for TBLT framework adaptations from the data. SRQ1 is as follows:

*What do teachers and learners consider the main challenges and benefits of using a TBLT approach in online and blended contexts?*

SRQ2 addresses related implications for initial teacher training programmes and for ongoing professional development for experienced teachers. Some internationally-recognised ELT teacher training programmes, such as the University of Cambridge Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (CELTA), include very little training related to TEL (Cambridge English Language Assessment, 2018). Since the curriculum of such internationally delivered programmes should be consistent, organisations may be reluctant to stipulate more curricular requirements specifically dealing with digital technology in case some programme providers around the world are unable to meet the technological specifications and associated costs required to deliver the programme. By extension, this may also mean that many novice teachers who find themselves newly employed in an educational context that requires effective delivery of a technology-mediated TBLT (or similar) course or curriculum may find themselves facing a steep learning curve. Similarly, experienced teachers who may be expert practitioners in delivering ELT courses in traditional classroom-based environments can face challenges when attempting to implement familiar approaches and methodologies in a far less familiar TEL context.

Findings from the PRQ and SRQ1 will then be used to consider the implications of these findings when addressing the following question.

*How can new and experienced teachers be trained and supported in using a TBLT approach in online and blended contexts?*

When the research questions were generated, the PRQ was formulated with a view to addressing a key gap identified in the literature: the need to adapt existing TBLT

frameworks in order to facilitate more effective integration of TBLT and TEL. At the same time, since its inception, TBLT, in all its formats, has engendered considerable debate regarding its associated benefits and challenges. With these benefits and challenges in mind, SRQ1 was designed to investigate whether these, or newly-identified, benefits and challenges in TEL contexts should be used to inform recommended adaptations to TBLT frameworks for TEL environments. During the analysis stage of this thesis, SRQ1-related data emerged as being the most prominent of the three research questions. Given that benefits and challenges can be identified by teachers and learners at any point, however granular, in the methodological procedures of TBLT implementation, this is, perhaps, unsurprising. As a consequence, the richness of data relating to SRQ1 meant that any recommendations designed to address the PRQ and SRQ2 were, in this regard, well-supported in the study.

#### **1.4 Research context**

The study is located in a large postsecondary college in Ontario, Canada. The Ontario community college system was established in the mid-1960s with the aim of providing students with an alternative education option to that of the traditional university system. Of the twenty-four Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (CAATS), five have now been designated as Institutes of Technology and Advanced Learning. Programmes that are offered are typically vocational in nature and mainly lead to accredited qualifications, such as certificates, diplomas, advanced diplomas and graduate certificates. At the turn of the last century, the Ontario Ministry of Advanced Education

and Skills Development also granted colleges the right to provide a number of applied degree programmes.

Regarding English language programmes for non-native speakers, the majority of Ontario colleges typically offer a range of full-time and part-time options. For students aiming to enter a full-time postsecondary college programme, the English language requirement can often be met by achieving a specific level of proficiency via the completion of an in-house English language programme. In this way, students have the option of a more prolonged and immersive experience in their target educational institution instead of opting to attempt the achievement of a specific grade or level on internationally accepted English language examinations, such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or the International English Language Testing System (IELTS).

At the college in which this study is set, the full-time English language programme consists of five levels of proficiency. Based on their level of English language proficiency, students are tested into a level as their entry point into the programme. The student population in the programme is a mix of non-native-speaker Canadian citizens or permanent residents and international students who are in Canada on a study visa. In recent years, the programme demographics have shifted towards a higher percentage of international students, who now comprise approximately 70% of the programme population.

The curriculum of the five-level programme is based on the CLB, whose language descriptors have a task-based focus, whereby learners demonstrate language

proficiency through the achievement of communicative tasks which have real-world applicability. Although the English language programme at the designated institution does not explicitly stipulate that teachers should follow a strictly TBLT approach in their classes, the curriculum naturally lends itself to the application of a methodology that aligns with a task-based approach. All teachers in the study have obtained qualifications that require knowledge of the TBLT approach.

In terms of technology-mediated teaching and learning, all teachers in the institution are expected to adhere to a prescribed set of minimum LMS usage requirements. With regard to the English language programme, all teachers are required to make greater use of digital technologies in their delivery of course curricular content when compared to many other courses in the institution. Specifically, the programme makes extensive use of online and digital resources, and some of the courses are delivered either fully online or in computer laboratory classrooms.

Therefore, the context of the study, in terms of the participants, programme and institution, is appropriately situated for the investigation of perceptions of technology-mediated TBLT in a postsecondary multicultural environment.

## **1.5 Research approach**

The interpretive framework that underpins this study aligns most closely with that of social constructivism, whereby meaning is conceived as being constructed through human interpretation of interpersonal communication (Crotty, 1998). From an

ontological perspective, this study uses a phenomenographic approach which assumes a non-dualist, second-order position (Trigwell, 2000). Specifically, this approach assumes that humans experience and conceptualise a reality that is both objective and subjective at the same time.

In this study, the phenomenographic approach informs the analysis of the variations in ways in which participants conceptualise a situated phenomenon of technology-mediated TBLT in order to assess implications for potential adaptations to technology-mediated TBLT frameworks. This closely relates to the idea that phenomenography is associated with “mapping the qualitatively different ways in which people experience, conceptualise, perceive and understand various aspects of, and phenomena in, the world around them” (Marton, 1986, p. 31). Following on from this, the study adopts a developmental approach to phenomenography, whereby the categories of description that form the outcome space will be considered in terms of their implications for further objectives or purposes.

The primary objective of this study is to analyse the beliefs and perspectives of students and teachers concerning the shared experience of technology-mediated TBLT in a given environment. However, at the same time, it is recognised that the approach of TBLT covers a wide range of established frameworks and methodologies. For this reason, although a phenomenological approach was initially considered for this study, it was decided that since phenomenology aims “to develop a single theory of experience” (Andretta, 2007, p. 154), this would be inappropriate for the research questions of this study. A single theory of experience may have useful applications for investigating the underlying principles of technology-mediated TBLT, but this was considered less

useful for the purposes of analysing variations in conceptions when applied to the range of established TBLT frameworks. In other words, the primary goal is “to investigate the qualitatively different ways in which people understand a particular phenomenon” (Marton & Pong, 2005, p. 335).

## **1.6 Data collection and analysis**

The purposive sample consisted of eight teachers and ten students from a large postsecondary college in Ontario, Canada. All teachers had at least one year of experience of teaching in the ESOL programme of the institution. All teachers at the institution had at least five years of adult ESOL teaching experience and had completed a minimum level of qualifications which include theory and practice elements that focus on TBLT. All students had experienced at least six months of full-time study in the same programme.

Data were gathered through individual semi-structured interviews. After one initial open-ended question, *In online and blended contexts, what are the possible changes needed, as well as the benefits and challenges involved, when using a task-based language teaching approach?*, follow-up prompts and questions were added in order to gain a more complete account of each participant’s experience of the phenomenon. Typical examples of follow-up prompts and questions included:

*OK, anything else about that?*

*OK, how would you do that?*

*Can you say a little bit more about that?*

*When you said “biases”, what were you thinking about?*

Likewise, follow-up questions to seek further clarifications were posed as needed, as well as to consider any potential ambiguities, although the researcher was mindful of the need to accept stated ambiguities and not to highlight or draw attention to any inconsistencies during the interviews. Typical examples of follow-up questions to seek further clarifications included:

*Let me ask you just a couple of things about what you said before. You mentioned control and the breakout rooms and that you monitored some. How effective do you think that monitoring was, and how did students react to your being in the breakout rooms?*

*From the students’ perspective, would they consider they had more or less support?*

*What do you mean by “traditional”?*

*OK, tell me more about that - “It’s hard to keep it in check” Can you explain that?*

*I think you’re saying that it’s useful for the teacher to be available during the task process – is that what you said?*

*What do you mean by “check in”?*

## 1.7 Significance of the study

It is widely acknowledged in the literature that any use of technology will have an impact on the language learning and communicative interactions (González-Lloret &

Ortega, 2014; Jenkins et al., 2009; Walther, 2012). Specific instances of these impacts have formed the basis of a number of research studies, which are explored in more detail in the literature review in Chapter 2. A common limitation of such studies is that student or learner participants are often unfamiliar with a TBLT approach, particularly when implemented in TEL-based contexts. These point to the need for studies that are more holistic in nature and that select participants who have significant experience of TBLT in technology-mediated contexts.

At a more holistic level beyond specific tasks and classes, a key concern is that the existing and widely recognised TBLT frameworks were designed for traditional classroom-based environments with little or no reference to digital resources and technologies. As the potential synergies between TBLT and TEL have become increasingly apparent, the need for a cohesively integrated framework between the two (González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014) has grown stronger. At the same time, major adaptations to TBLT frameworks have a broad range of implications for such stakeholders as students, teachers, curriculum designers, materials developers, programme leaders, academic management and policy makers.

This study presents an original contribution to knowledge based on a phenomenographic study of TBLT in a TEL context within higher education. The original knowledge contributions focus on recommendations for adaptations to TBLT frameworks and on pertinent modifications to teacher training programmes and professional development provision. Details of these original knowledge contributions are in Chapter 6.

The present study as a whole comprises six chapters, in which the content broadly aligns with a method of thesis presentation based on Perry's five-section model (1998). This model was selected for its intended facilitation of clear organisation by the researcher and ease of access on the part of the reader. The six chapters consist of the following elements: the introduction (Chapter 1), the literature review (Chapter 2), the methodology (Chapter 3), the findings (Chapter 4), discussion and implications (Chapter 5) and the conclusion (Chapter 6).

## Chapter 2: Literature review

Chapter 2 presents a review of literature relevant to the study. The principal objective of a literature review is to present a framework into which the current study can be sited (Perry, 1998). Furthermore, Perry argues that a thesis literature review should explore “the relevant literature to identify research issues which are worth researching because they are controversial and have not been answered by previous researchers” (Perry, 1998, p. 72).

Regarding this line of argument in the current study, it should be stressed that TBLT developed initially as a largely classroom-based approach. Therefore, this literature review will include an examination of the historical emergence and development of TBLT. Specifically, the development of the most widely-applied TBLT frameworks took place when TBLT was primarily concerned with classroom-based contexts. Therefore, many experienced (and novice) teachers have received formal training only in the classroom-based application of TBLT. In other words, an understanding of existing issues and conceptions involving TBLT in classroom-based settings is important if the study is then to explore conceptions regarding the transferability and application of the TBLT frameworks to online and blended contexts. Likewise, an analysis of conceptions of TBLT over time in various contexts can inform the secondary research questions in terms of the challenges, benefits and training needs regarding TBLT in postsecondary TEL contexts.

Before looking at some key aspects behind the history of TBLT, some terminology definitions should first be considered. The terms *approach*, *method* and *technique* were

defined in the context of ELT in the early 1960s. An approach is seen as a set of underlying beliefs and conceptions about language teaching and learning; a method is viewed as the structured presentation of the material to be taught, whereby the presentation methods align with the underlying theories of the relevant approach; a technique is considered as the means and stratagems by which immediate objectives are achieved in the classroom or teaching context, whereby all techniques are associated with the method in use, and are therefore affiliated with a particular approach (Anthony, 1963). In a much-cited publication, Richards and Rodgers reassessed these distinctions and put forward the view that a *method* is an overarching term that houses the three essential aspects of *approach*, *design* and *procedure* (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). In this model, the approach includes concepts about the nature of language and language learning; the design includes several elements including objectives of the method, activity types, learner and teacher roles, and the syllabus framework itself; the procedure refers to techniques, practices and behaviours in the classroom or learning context that can be observed when a specific method is being deployed (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Unless otherwise indicated, references in this study to method, approach, design and procedure will broadly align with these distinctions set out by Richards and Rodgers.

As a final note here on terminology, the changing landscape of language teaching and learning with regard to both TEL and task-based instruction has prompted some calls for a change in task-related terminology. Ellis (2003) uses “task-based language learning and teaching”, a term also advocated by Thomas and Reinders (2010), since it appears to capture the need for learners to be fully involved in the design and development of their own learning within a task-based and TEL context. For the

purposes of this study, and with brevity in mind, the more widely-recognised term of TBLT is used.

## **2.1 Historical development of task-based language teaching**

As an approach, TBLT has grown in prominence since its arrival in the domain of ELT approximately thirty years ago. The founding principles of TBLT can be seen in the Communicative Approach or CLT, which itself has its roots in sociolinguistic concepts of the 1970s (Savignon, 1991). Dissatisfaction with structure-based approaches such as Situational Language Teaching and behaviourist-influenced approaches such as the Audiolingual Method led to the view that the mastery of specific linguistic structures fell short of what was needed in terms of communicative proficiency (Widdowson, 1979). Various interpretations of CLT include an emphasis on functional rather than structural aspects of language learning (Littlewood, 1981), a focus on the need for a transactional or interactional purpose between at least two parties (Widdowson, 1978), as well as a general focus on the learner-centred and experiential aspects of the approach.

As CLT developed, a distinction was drawn between *strong* and *weak* forms of the approach. Howatt (1984) defines the weak version as one in which learners have opportunities to interact in communicative activities that are integrated within a wider language learning framework; and in which students are considered to be learning to use the language, as opposed to the situation in the strong version, where students are considered to be using the language in order to learn it (Howatt, 1984). This weak

version of the CLT approach has clear associations with the underlying theories of TBLT.

As well as CLT, a number of other learning theories have been cited as instrumental in establishing the foundations for the TBLT approach (Hişmanoğlu & Hişmanoğlu, 2011). These include information processing (Levitt, 1989), input processing (van Patten, 1996), neo-Vygotskian sociocultural theory (Lantolf, 2000) and the interactionist approach (Mackey & Gass, 2006). Therefore, it can be seen that TBLT shares several features with constructivist learning theories and that the influence of CLT is significant. On the other hand, while these theories contributed to TBLT developments, the rise in prominence of the TBLT approach is also seen in terms of a reaction to other approaches or methodologies. In other words, along with these influences, concerns within the field of language teaching about commonly used methods precipitated further interest in TBLT.

Two examples of methods that were challenged by the arrival of TBLT were Presentation, Practice and Production (PPP) and the Audiolingual Method (also known as audiolingualism). As a first example, PPP, despite its widespread popularity and relative ease of use for novice teachers, has received criticism for its somewhat mechanical format and its attempts to limit language production activities to prescribed language items. Such factors have been deemed as less authentic language practice and as less likely to provide adequate preparation and practice for communicative proficiency beyond the learning context. Such concerns led to an increased interest in the potential of TBLT to address these areas (Ellis, 2003; Long & Crookes, 1992). Regarding the second example, that of audiolingualism, the TBLT approach broadly

distanced itself from the more behaviourist and mechanical rote-learning approach of audiolingualism. In contrast, the TBLT approach avoids the conceptualisation of second language acquisition (SLA) in terms of a prescribed sequential list of grammatical structures and lexical items to be mastered through internal processing. Rather, a key driving force behind second, or additional, language acquisition according to underlying TBLT theory is the necessity of a task focus that is unrelated to specified aspects of lexis or language structure. By negotiating the task requirements with others with the aim of achieving an outcome with perceived real-world relevance, learners apply their existing linguistic competence in a process of meaning making with others. In this way, knowledge is viewed as being socially constructed during task-orientated and meaningful interactions with others (Ellis, 2003).

As language learning in TEL contexts developed, early technology-mediated activities tended to focus on structural and lexical areas of language in exercises that were often seen as consolidatory in nature and as complementary tasks which supplemented the more communicative tasks that took place in the classroom. This juxtaposition of predominantly classroom-based education supplemented by adjunct technology-mediated tasks meant that, despite the growing use of educational technology, the established classroom-based frameworks of TBLT were able to continue broadly unchanged.

This lack of change can be seen illustrated in the literature almost by dint of omission. By way of example, Van den Branden's much cited 2006 publication, which was a collection of works assessing TBLT implementation challenges and possible solutions (Van den Branden, 2006) has just one chapter out of ten that deals with technology-

mediated TBLT by means of a small-scale study in a TEL context. A principal conclusion from this study reveals “strong indications that a number of learning conditions are positively influenced by the use of interactive multimedia” but that the size of the study means that “we cannot make any stronger assertions” (Schrooten, 2006, p. 149). In other words, a little over a decade ago, major publications which focused on TBLT were still primarily concerned with traditional classroom-based contexts with very little consideration of digital technology.

However, as technology-mediated TBLT has become an increasingly integral part of many educational contexts, whether in classroom, blended or fully online contexts, the need for TBLT frameworks to adapt in light of these changing contexts has become more pressing.

## **2.2. Overview of the task-based language teaching approach**

In general terms, TBLT does not constitute a single well-defined methodology of teaching (Ellis, 2009). The aims and outcomes of TBLT learning activities, overall lessons and full curricula are founded upon staged procedures that centre on communicative tasks (Lai & Li, 2011; Nunan, 2004; Richards, 2005). As students draw upon their linguistic resources during the negotiation and completion of task objectives (Skehan, 1998a), the primary focus of communicative transactions is on meaning making (Skehan, 1998b) rather than, for example, on the accuracy of specific linguistic structures or on the prescriptive use of certain functional exponents or lexical items. The central premise of TBLT is that the language acquisition process is driven by

negotiated interactions that learners can perceive as having direct relevance to authentic tasks outside the learning context (Long, 1985; Samuda & Bygate, 2008; Widdowson, 2003).

### 2.2.1 Variations of the TBLT approach

Since TBLT has no single commonly acknowledged framework of approach, various forms have been put forward, some of which have gained wider prominence and recognition. In the context of this study, four of the most widely acknowledged TBLT frameworks, as summarised in Table 1, will be considered (Ellis, 2014).

Characteristic	Variety of approach			
	Willis (1996)	Long (1985, 1991, 2014)	Skehan (1998b)	Ellis (2003)
<b>Natural language use</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Type of task</b>	Real-world production tasks	Real-world production tasks	Pedagogic production tasks	Both pedagogic and real-world input-based and production tasks
<b>Linguistic focus</b>	Primarily unfocused tasks	Both unfocused and focused tasks	Only unfocused tasks	Both focused and unfocused tasks
<b>Linguistic support</b>	Yes	No	No	Possibly
<b>Focus on form</b>	In the pre-task and post-task phases but not in the main task phase	In the main-task phase	Mainly in the pre-task phase	In all phases of a lesson
<b>Learner-centredness</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Not necessarily
<b>Rejection of traditional approaches</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

*Table 1: Differences in four approaches of TBLT (Ellis, 2014)*

As Ellis (2014) notes, the principal commonality across the variations in terms of approach is the concept of language as a means of facilitating natural communication rather than as a focus for study in itself (Ellis, 2014). Further analysis of the variations reveals a number of significant differences as well as similarities.

In terms of task types, both Willis (1996) and Long (1985, 1991, 2014) favour a broadly exclusive focus on *real-world* production tasks as opposed to on pedagogic production tasks, which are favoured by Skehan (1998b). In other words, ‘real-world’ tasks are often ones that bear close resemblance to interactive communicative transactions from everyday life. Traditionally, such communicative tasks have often been situational (e.g. in a hypothetical restaurant, shop, airport, university campus, etc.) and may include productive tasks involving either or both productive language skills (i.e. speaking and writing). Skehan (1998b), on the other hand, places greater emphasis on pedagogic production tasks, meaning tasks that, while interactive in nature, tend not to reflect tasks that would actually take place outside the learning space (i.e. pedagogic tasks would include find-someone-who activities, spot-the-difference activities and mutual dictations). In contrast, Ellis (2003) advocates a wide range of task types incorporating both real-world and pedagogic tasks, as well as including input-based tasks where learners are required to process given information. These frameworks were developed primarily with the understanding that the context for framework delivery would be classroom-based, where the variables of the learning environment might be relatively straightforward either to control and manipulate or at least to monitor and observe. With the emergence of digital technology, this fundamental tenet of TBLT has been called into question with regard to the continuing relevance of the existing frameworks for TEL contexts.

In Table 1, it can be seen that the issues of linguistic focus and linguistic support that are provided to students to assist in task completion receive different degrees of emphasis among the four variations. Specifically, Willis (1996) and Skehan (1998b) broadly favour unfocused tasks, whereas both task types feature in the variations of

Ellis (2003) and Long (1985, 1991, 2014). Unfocused tasks are generally not intentionally designed with any particular structural, lexical or phonological focus in mind, whereas a focused task will lend itself to the usage or practice of particular linguistic features, although learners will likely remain uninformed about this aspect before they undertake the task. In their variations, both Long (1985, 1991, 2014) and Skehan (1998b) propose that any form of pre-task linguistic teaching in terms of targeted lexis or grammatical structure should generally not be provided. On the other hand, Willis does advocate support and Ellis (2003) views support as a justifiable option. Since debate in this area tends to centre on questions of natural, rather than induced, directed or otherwise nudged, language usage, the issue arises as to whether conceptions of available linguistic focus and support in TEL contexts give rise to different questions and the need for alternative methodologies.

Regarding focus on form (i.e. where grammatical features are drawn to the attention of learners in the course of CLT, in contrast with “focus on forms” where grammatical structures are taught more systematically), it can be seen there is wide disparity among the four variations about the optimal lesson points or task stages during which learners’ attention should be directed towards form rather than meaning. Given the relative ease of access to supportive resources in a TEL environment, it may be that technology-mediated TBLT frameworks should adapt to reflect the more flexible and needs-based ways in which people typically use form-related resources in real-life situations. At the same time, the potential for this access to detract from learner attention to fluency during the task phase may continue to raise concerns in TEL contexts about the impact of such factors as corrective feedback and focus on form interventions.

In terms of learner-centredness, the fundamental position of Willis (1996), Long (1985, 1991, 2014) and Skehan (1998b) indicated in Table 1 is that TBLT should primarily focus on interactive tasks between small groups of learners. Ellis (2003), on the other hand, allows for the option whereby teacher-led tasks are possible, particularly when the task is broadly based on input. Once again, the conditions of TEL-based environments may mean that adaptations to current TBLT frameworks are required in order to account for types of interaction and affordance other than those available in the traditional classroom-based scenario of small groups working synchronously on collaborative tasks.

The range of established approaches in TBLT means that teachers and learners with a range of educational backgrounds and qualifications are likely to have widely disparate prior experiences of TBLT. Consequently, while all participants in this study have the shared experience of TBLT within this contextual TEL environment, the range of options for a TBLT approach means that the shared experience itself also likely involves variations in the way TBLT in a TEL context is experienced by both teachers and learners. In terms of a research approach, such considerations add weight to the choice of phenomenography, rather than, for example, phenomenology. Since phenomenology typically seeks to investigate the lived experience of a phenomenon and to establish a single theory of experience (Giorgi, 1999), these objectives seem misaligned with those of the present study. Specifically, the range of acknowledged options within TBLT and the resultant spectrum of experiences and associated perceptions together mean that a phenomenographic approach is better designed to capture and analyse a required range of perspectives and conceptions (Marton & Booth, 1997) as sought by this study.

### 2.2.2 Task-based language teaching methodology frameworks

In addition to these variations in terms of underlying principles of a TBLT approach, TBLT also has several frameworks of methodology (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Willis, 2006, 2013). The framework methodologies illustrate how teachers can implement tasks through task preparation, task supervision and staged language analysis. Although varying somewhat in range and in terms of underlying principles as outlined in the previous section, there are broad similarities.

Table 2 presents Willis's slightly updated framework methodology (Willis, 1998) of the original framework (Willis, 1996); there is again clear reference to three key stages of TBLT: pre-task, task cycle and language focus.

## **PRE-TASK PHASE**

### **INTRODUCTION TO TOPIC AND TASK**

*Teacher explores the topic with the class, highlights useful words and phrases, and helps learners understand task instructions and prepare. Learners may hear a recording of others doing a similar task, or read part of a text as a lead in to a task.*

### **TASK CYCLE**

<b>TASK</b>	<b>PLANNING</b>	<b>REPORT</b>
<i>Students do the task, in pairs or small groups. Teacher monitors from a distance, encouraging all attempts at communication, not correcting. Since this situation has a "private" feel, students feel free to experiment. Mistakes don't matter.</i>	<i>Students prepare to report to the whole class (orally or in writing) how they did the task, what they decided or discovered. Since the report stage is public, students will naturally want to be accurate, so the teacher stands by to give language advice.</i>	<i>Some groups present their reports to the class, or exchange written reports, and compare results. Teacher acts as a chairperson, and then comments on the content of the reports.</i>

*Learners may now hear a recording of others doing a similar task and compare how they all did it. Or they may read a text similar in some way to the one they have written themselves, or related in topic to the task they have done.*

### **LANGUAGE FOCUS**

<b>ANALYSIS</b>	<b>PRACTICE</b>
<i>Students examine and then discuss specific features of the text or transcript of the recording. They can enter new words, phrases and patterns in vocabulary books.</i>	<i>Teacher conducts practice of new words, phrases, and patterns occurring in the data, either during or after the analysis.</i>

*Table 2: Components of a TBL framework (Willis, 1998)*

A later model by Ellis (2003), shown in Table 3, follows the three-stage design of Willis (1996, 1998), but differs in ways that include a possible focus on form in all stages of the task cycle as well as a specific reference to teacher control over task variables, such as time pressure and topic regulation.

<i>Pre-task</i> <i>(consciousness-raising activities)</i>	<i>Framing the activity</i> <i>(e.g. establishing the outcome of the task)</i> <i>Regulating planning time</i> <i>Doing a similar task</i>
<i>During task</i>	<i>Time pressure</i> <i>Regulating topic</i>
<i>Post-task</i> <i>(focused communication activities)</i>	<i>Number of participants</i> <i>Learner report</i> <i>Repeat task</i> <i>Reflection</i>

Table 3: A framework for designing task-based lessons (Ellis, 2003)

Another example of a methodological framework, shown in Table 4, is that of Nunan (2004), in which the notion of real-world tasks acts as a stimulus or “activation rationale” (p. 20) for learners developing language skills.

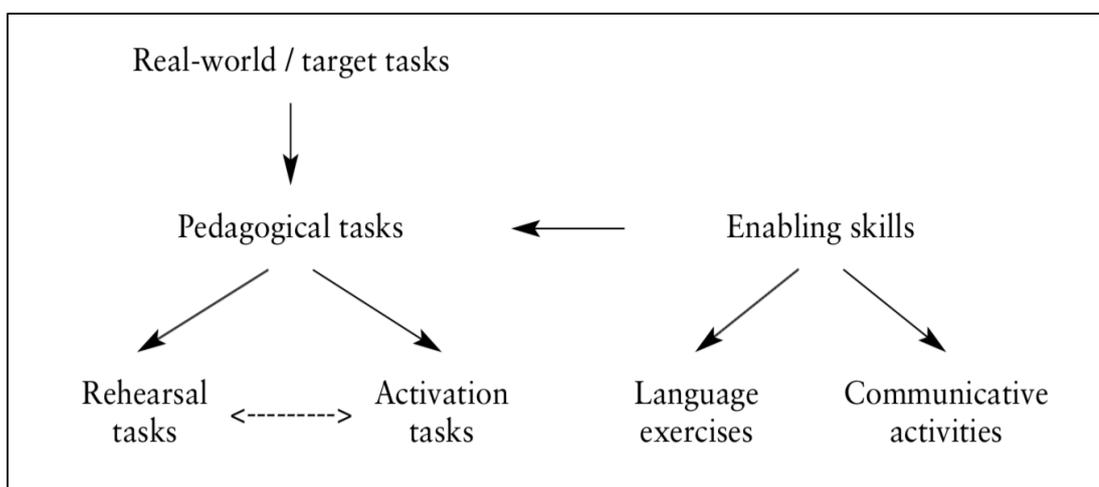


Table 4: A framework for TBLT (Nunan, 2004)

With reference to TEL-based contexts, it should be emphasised that these frameworks are largely aimed at classroom-based contexts, in which there may be limited or no access to technology-mediated resources. Echoing the signal from this work (Nunan,

2004), the index from a book published a year later, *Teachers exploring tasks in English language teaching* (Edwards & Willis, 2005) contains just one reference to the Internet (in this case, a corpus reference), and no mention at all either of computers or digital technologies.

According to Nunan (2004), “language classrooms are unnatural by design, and [...] they exist precisely to provide for learners the kinds of practice opportunities that do not exist outside the classroom” (p. 22). Again, these instances raise the question of whether frameworks designed explicitly for one type of learning context, one that is seen as “unnatural” and is considered quite different from the real world outside, should be significantly adapted in order to align more closely with TEL contexts, in which interactive and communicative options with the real world may now be almost second nature for many learners and teachers.

### 2.2.3 Task definitions in task-based language teaching

In order to consider fully the types of adaptations that might make TBLT frameworks more effective in a technology-mediated environment, the conception of what constitutes a task in the TBLT approach should be explored in some detail. Tasks constitute the focal point of the TBLT approach. This fundamental component of the approach has led to an ongoing debate in the literature about the nature of a task itself, in this context. The debate is fuelled further by the fact that a task may itself have a range of functions depending on its purpose in the particular educational process under scrutiny. Tasks, in the TBLT approach, can be described as the unit of analysis at

various stages or levels. Descriptions may include their role as part of specific lesson plan aims, as fundamental learning activities in terms of methodology, as well as their function in performance descriptors or assessment criteria for evaluative purposes (Van den Branden, 2006).

Some examples of task definitions in the TBLT context include a task being “an activity or action which is carried out as a result of processing or understanding language” (Richards, Platt & Weber, 1985, p. 289); “any structured language learning endeavour which has a particular objective, appropriate content, [and] a specified working procedure” (Breen, 1987, p. 23); “an activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information” (Prabhu, 1987, p. 24); “activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose” (Willis, 1996, p. 23); “a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning” (Nunan, 2006, p. 17); and “a workplan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct prepositional content has been conveyed” (Ellis, 2003, p. 13).

A number of commonly recurring themes have been identified from the range of task definitions. These running themes include the centrality of meaning making in the task (Van den Branden, 2006), a focus on non-linguistic outcomes (Samuda & Bygate, 2008) and the importance of learners’ awareness of the task’s connection with activities that take place in real-world social and professional contexts (Long, 1985; Skehan, 1999b).

With regard to descriptions of tasks within a TEL context, it has been argued that research in this domain should move beyond the wide continuum of task definitions that have previously been applied in TBLT research (González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014). Following this assertion and drawing on recent literature, the following five definitional aspects have been put forward as basic tenets of tasks in the context of technology and task integration:

1. *Meaning as primary focus: Any target language objective should largely be hidden or implicit during the task stages.*
2. *Goal orientation: The overall task design should focus on language in an experiential context. This involves: i) a communicative objective that demands some form of information transfer among learners who sense some form of intrinsic motivation or affective engagement with the process; and ii) an outcome at the end of the task process, either of a communicative nature, such as an oral or written text or a non-communicative outcome, such as a successful service transaction or game result.*
3. *Learner-centredness: The task should focus on learner needs and expectations in a way that requires learners to tap into their linguistic, non-linguistic and notably their digital skills and resources. The incorporation of digital skills as a pre-requisite of all task design represents a significant departure from many previous analyses and studies of TBLT in TEL contexts.*

4. *Holism: The task should have clear relevance to real-world authenticity and should integrate form, function and meaning linguistically.*

5. *Reflective learning: Based on Dewey's principles of education, the task cycle should promote the construction of knowledge through cyclical stages of reflection and self-reflection. In other words, in addition to clear and direct engagement with authentic experiences and language, task design should provide learners with opportunities to access higher order cognitive skills. (González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014, pp. 5-6)*

A key proposal behind these definitional aspects is the integrative approach to technology within TBLT. Although TEL resources have been used extensively in TBLT-based contexts, it is clear that there is not yet substantial research into how TEL and TBLT can be cohesively integrated into “an organic and mutually informative whole” (González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014, p. 10). Such gaps in the literature have informed the development of the research questions that drive this study. In this case, the ongoing search for the cohesive integration of TBLT in TEL contexts has led to this study's primary research question, which investigates TBLT frameworks for possible adaptations. With this in mind, as well as considering possible TBLT framework adaptations, definitional aspects of tasks such as those of González-Lloret and Ortega (2014) cited in this section will also be considered in light of the findings of this study.

#### 2.2.4 The shift towards TBLT and TEL integration

The rise in prominence of TBLT has broadly coincided with the rapid escalation of TEL in educational contexts. The need to analyse the relationship between TBLT, TEL and second language acquisition was clearly articulated almost 20 years ago:

*Anyone concerned with second language teaching in the 21<sup>st</sup> century needs to grasp the nature of the unique technology-mediated tasks learners can engage in for language acquisition and how such tasks can be used for assessment. To meet the challenge, the study of the features of computer-based tasks that promote learning should be a concern for teachers as well as for SLA researchers who wish to contribute to knowledge about instructed SLA. (Chapelle, 2001, p. 2)*

As is acknowledged in this preceding quotation by Chapelle (2001), such rapid changes in language teaching and in technology clearly presented challenges and still do. At the same time, many language teachers (as well as learners) have been obliged to engage with the new digital literacies in their field (Pegrum, 2009). These digital literacies may extend to related aspects, such as online professional developments, various LMS platforms, digital portfolios, synchronous and asynchronous communication, myriad apps, Web 2.0 technology, MOOCs (massive open online courses), geographically-dispersed classes and online intercultural communication to name just a few of a growing list (Thomas & Reinders, 2010), which since then has continued.

Although the amount of research conducted in the area of integrating TEL and TBLT has been less than substantial, there has been an increasing recognition of the potential

for closer alignment between TEL and TBLT. Such recognition, more than ten years ago, includes how “[t]he potential benefits of integrating information and communicative technology (ICT) into language training seem vast” (Schrooten, 2006, p. 129) and, more recently, how the “need for suitable curricular responses has arisen in contemporary designs for language teaching and learning where tasks and technology are genuinely and productively integrated” (González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014, p. 17).

Furthermore, the publication this decade of four significant works that specifically address the relationship between TEL and TBLT signifies that the landscape of TEL and TBLT is undergoing greater exploration. The four works are by Al-Balushi (2010), the edited collection of Thomas and Reinders (2010), that of González-Lloret and Ortega (2014) and the more practically-orientated book by González-Lloret (2015). Additionally, key overviews of research in this domain have been undertaken by Reinders and White (2010), Lai and Li (2011) and Thomas (2013). However, as yet, the production of an integrated and cohesive framework remains an objective.

As evidenced in Section 2.2.3, a number of key overarching concepts have been put forward as a means of approaching an effective integration of TBLT and TEL. Firstly, these concepts include using the five definitional aspects of tasks, set forth by González-Lloret and Ortega (2014). These five definitional aspects can also be seen as a means of assessing the suitability and potential of using TEL in both specific and general TBLT instances. Secondly, it should be borne in mind that any use of technology has an impact not only on the construction of knowledge, but also on factors such as social interactions and the use of language (Crystal, 2008; González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014; Jenkins et al., 2009; Walther, 2012). Thirdly, in our social, professional and educational

environments, technology has given rise to a huge range of new and varied tasks (e.g. navigate transport systems using a smartphone, participate in a virtual conference, organise an event via social media, etc.), thereby creating new educational needs as well as unfamiliar types of holistic activity (Jenkins et al., 2009). This combination of newly proposed definitional aspects, uncertainty around linguistic and communicative interactions and an exponential growth in task types and related activities all point towards the need for a re-evaluation of existing TBLT task frameworks in TEL contexts. As indicated by González-Lloret and Ortega (2018), this includes the need to remain open to ideas of major adaptations to TBLT frameworks and how “it is important not to overlook the potential for pragmatic development of embedding technologies into tasks that may be less traditional than the TBLT mainstream community usually has in mind” (González-Lloret & Ortega, 2018, p. 208).

### 2.2.5 The shift towards task-based language descriptor frameworks

In terms of language descriptor frameworks, the prominent role of tasks has similarly increased over recent years. In this particular research context of the present study, the ESL curriculum is largely based on the CLB, which includes a twelve-point scale of language descriptors that focus on proficiency in the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. The CLB descriptors are used extensively in the context of Canadian higher education ELT for a range of purposes including lesson planning, curriculum design, learner assessment and the development of educational materials.

There are clear affiliations between the CLB and TBLT. Firstly, the CLB have a strong task-based foundation in that the twelve benchmarks align with performance descriptors, otherwise known as can-do statements, which accord with linguistic performance in specified tasks that relate to social, educational or workplace contexts. Secondly, tasks, conducted in one of the language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, are described as “communicative tasks learners will encounter in the real world” (CLB, 2012, p. 12). In other words, as with TBLT, the perception, inherent in the CLB, of task relevance to authentic tasks outside the learning context is of prime importance. Thirdly, the CLB emphasise the need for sociolinguistic knowledge as a vital component in helping to achieve successful communicative transactions when engaged in achieving task objectives with other people (CLB, 2012). Fourthly, the CLB do not prescribe a sequential list of grammatical structures or lexical items in order to achieve a specific level of proficiency. In other words, as in a TBLT situation, learners can draw on any available linguistic resources in order to achieve the requirements of a particular task (Ellis, 2003). In this way, although it should be noted that the CLB are not intended to promote or align with any specific language teaching approach, they demonstrate a clear link with the meaning-making focus that is central to the underlying principles of TBLT.

The other principal language descriptor framework used widely in Canadian higher education contexts is the CEFR. Tasks within both the CLB and CEFR can be undertaken as single stand-alone authentic activities in one skill area. However, the frameworks are designed in such a way that thematically connecting tasks across all four language skills is relatively straightforward. In this way, a cyclical and repetitive foundation for the production and reception of linguistic themes is promoted. This

linking of tasks relates directly to the so-called *strong* form of TBLT, in which tasks are not viewed as stand-alone authentic activities, but are built into task sequences that are authentically linked in themselves (Benevides & Valvona, 2008). This linking of tasks can potentially “create a sustained authenticity which allows for the recycling and reinforcement of the language forms used” (O’Dwyer, Imig, & Nagai, 2014, p. 233).

National and supranational language descriptor frameworks, such as the CLB and the CEFR are frequently used in high-stakes language contexts, such as employment criteria, higher education admission, immigration, and national education policy. As noted above, there are several clear alignments between such frameworks and a TBLT approach. For learners who are working towards the achievement of specific descriptor levels or bands, there is an increasing likelihood that if these learners opt to undertake any associated education course, such a course will take place in a technology-mediated TBLT context. With this in mind, although being mindful of any potential washback effect from the nature of task-based assessments, there are clear indications that, as the TBLT approach and major language descriptor frameworks move towards greater constructive alignment, there is a pressing need for an effective TBLT framework for TEL contexts.

### **2.3 Benefits of TBLT**

A range of advantages and benefits involving the use of TBLT has been put forward since its inception. Since this study looks at TBLT in both online TEL contexts and

those including blended delivery, some studies that include technology-mediated classroom environments are also included.

With reference to benefits, firstly, there is some evidence to suggest that learner autonomy may increase when a TBLT method is used. For example, a study at a Turkish university involving learners on preparatory reading classes found higher levels of self-directed study when a TBLT approach was followed (Demir, 2008). Similarly, an analysis of students following TBLT courses in the United States of America found an increase in learning skills (Leaver & Kaplan, 2004). Secondly, greater degrees of improvement in areas such as fluency and structural complexity have been found where students studying narrative writing skills were taught according to TBLT principles as opposed to a more structure-based approach (Rahimpour, 2008). Thirdly, higher levels of participation and rapport between teacher and learners have been found in TBLT contexts (Ruso, 2007). Fourthly, factors such as enhanced creativity and interpersonal skills among learners have been identified as positive benefits that may result from a TBLT approach (McDonough & Chaikitmongkol, 2007).

In terms of perceived overall benefits of a TBLT approach, the following list has been put forward:

- *TBLT offers the opportunity for 'natural' learning inside the classroom.*
- *It emphasises meaning over form but can also cater for learning form.*
- *It affords learners a rich input of target language.*
- *It is intrinsically motivating.*
- *It is compatible with a learner-centred educational philosophy but also allows for teacher input and direction.*

- *It caters to the development of communicative fluency while not neglecting accuracy.*
- *It can be used alongside a more traditional approach.* (Ellis, 2009, p. 242)

It should be pointed out that this list of benefits appears to be aimed primarily at a classroom context. Whether these benefits are also perceived in a blended or fully online context is not explored in the same paper (Ellis, 2009). Such benefits will be considered in the light of the findings in this study.

More pertinently, as regards this current study, a range of TBLT benefits has been identified in TEL-based contexts. Firstly, levels of knowledge sharing and a willingness to engage in peer scaffolding were found to be higher in a study of undergraduate students on a French language course. The study involved participation in group tasks using synchronous chat functions (Kenning, 2010). Whether this extends to other forms of communication in TEL contexts should also be considered.

Secondly, evidence of improved interpersonal skills was also present in some TEL-based studies. For example, analysis of learner interactions that do not focus directly on the task in hand has found that these interactions may have a positive impact on relationship building in learner groups (Yu & Zeng, 2011). This and other factors that may have impacts on relationship building in TEL contexts will be considered in view of the findings.

Thirdly, a number of studies in TEL-based contexts, and more specifically in synchronous computer-mediated communication, have found benefits relating to the

area of form. For example, one study concluded that TBLT may promote a greater focus by learners on structural features of language (Yilmaz & Granena, 2010).

Fourthly, a number of studies have identified possible advantages to using TBLT in TEL contexts with specific regard to language structure. Benefits in this area include the potential for a greater degree of the noticing of grammatical forms (Kirkgöz, 2011). In this qualitative study, 28 trainee English teachers employed a TBLT approach when using video recording during teaching practicum sessions. Findings from the study included the conclusion that TBLT may be “beneficial in achieving a balance between accuracy, fluency and a higher level of complexity” (Kirkgöz, 2011, p. 3). Also, although this Turkish study took place in a blended context, it is important to recognise that much of the TBLT methodological cycle took place in either a face-to-face or classroom setting, including focus-on-form stages and the preparation of the recordings themselves. Therefore, the evidence for the potential benefits of TBLT in a TEL context in this area may be tempered in this study by its being partly situated in familiar classroom contexts for several stages of the TBLT elements.

Since there may be a greater range of factors that influence noticing in TEL contexts, the possible benefit relating to noticing merits further attention. The Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990) focusses on the idea that language learners must first become aware of the differences between their usage of the target language and that of the input forms, before their actual language acquisition can take place. There are some affiliative links between noticing and the theoretical foundations of TBLT. Specifically, stages in TBLT frameworks typically include those where learners are expected or at least encouraged to become aware of language elements, such as grammatical forms,

lexical items and phonological features, as learners negotiate group tasks and drive forward the process of language acquisition. In this way, learners may be able to “systemise what they have observed about certain features of language, to clarify concepts and to notice new things” (Willis, 1996, p. 58).

Other links between TEL-based TBLT and noticing concepts have been put forward. In a study relating to spot-the-difference tasks, a study by Lai and Zhao (2006) analysed the concept of noticing in textual interactions between learners as well as in face-to-face activities. English language learners paired in dyads of mixed language proficiency responded that they performed a higher level of self-correction when completing online tasks. Likewise, the study found that learners undertook a greater degree of self-correction when engaged in online activities (Lai & Zhao, 2006). Interestingly, the levels of negotiated meaning were higher in classroom tasks, whereas the online context was the environment in which learners actually noticed more of these negotiated meaning examples. In other words, such findings should also take into account the fact that two modes of communication are being compared. Areas that may affect these levels of self-correction and negotiated meaning in face-to-face and text-based communication include the demands of cognitive processing, the visual saliency of textual errors, the more permanent nature of text compared to speech and the availability of paralinguistic features in the face-to-face tasks.

In the same study, Lai and Zhao (2006) identify further areas of relevant interest in areas such as recasts, whereby raising awareness of errors may be attempted during communication without unduly affecting the general flow of the interaction. This study found that actual noticing of attempted recasts was low in both modes of

communication. This key finding suggests that more explicit interjection by teachers may be useful at such stages of the TBLT cycle in order to direct attention towards relevant errors. It may also indicate that there is a need for learners to receive more explicit information about the range of feedback and correction techniques that teachers often employ in a typical TBLT lesson. In short, the study provides some evidence that a TBLT method in a TEL context may be beneficial in helping learners to notice their own errors, which is a claim also made by other studies (Abrams, 2003; Payne & Whitney, 2002; Smith, 2004).

At the same time, care should be taken not to assume that such benefits in noticing and self-correction will readily transfer from text-based interactions to actual uptake in spoken communication in face-to-face or synchronous contexts. Uptake is usually defined either as reporting by learners after a lesson (Slimani, 1989) or in terms of actual language usage following teacher or other feedback (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). Regarding successful uptake in language usage following text-based communications, one study indicates that higher levels of performance under test conditions may be possible following text-based communications (Shekary & Tahririan, 2006). Once again, however, it should be stressed that this does not necessarily indicate that beneficial uptake will be observed long-term in face-to-face or synchronous interactions.

## **2.4 The position of grammar in TBLT**

The possible benefits in the previous section concerning factors such as noticing and subsequent uptake have clear associations to a long-standing debate in TBLT regarding

the teaching and learning of grammar in any framework. In TEL contexts, the effectiveness of TBLT in terms of developing learners' grammatical knowledge and usage has formed the basis of a number of studies.

A study involving Mexican students at the pre-intermediate level of an English language course at the National Autonomous University of Mexico focussed on learners' perceptions of TBLT design, the efficacy of TEL resources and the effectiveness of the approach compared with traditional textbooks when addressing the learning of grammatical forms, which, in this case, involved several narrative tenses and constructions (Solares, 2014). The study, involving three groups of learners, concluded that learners perceived that the task design itself had a beneficial effect on their writing ability, with the technology-based group seeing less recourse to the TEL resources, albeit positive ones. However, in terms of the learning and production of grammatical forms, the data in the study indicated that all three groups (i.e., i) task and technology; ii) task only; and iii) textbook) made significant improvements in their performance with the target narrative tense structures. In fact, the group using traditional textbooks actually made the greatest level of improvement, albeit at a level that was considered to be not statistically significant. Interestingly, since the textbook-only group received less input and feedback as well as spent less time on in-task work, it can be argued that the traditional textbook mode using a PPP methodology was more effective in terms of improving the target structures. However, given the claims of TBLT to offer a more holistic learning experience, it can also be argued that both the task-plus-technology group and the task-only group may also have made improvements in areas such as reading, writing and communication strategies, as well as making similar gains in areas of grammatical structure (Solares, 2014).

In some ways, this study highlights some difficulties in contrasting different approaches in smaller scale studies. For example, although the three groups were initially tested to ascertain that their proficiency in the target structures was at a similar level at the outset, it should also be noted that the learners were unfamiliar with both TBLT approaches and with the specific digital resources. In addition, the textbook-only group was already familiar with a PPP-based methodology and textbook delivery. This unfamiliarity with TBLT approaches is relatively common in TBLT-based studies and may have a detrimental effect not only on learner performance in linguistic tasks, but also in areas such as engagement, motivation and levels of collaboration, as learners may spend more time in familiarising themselves with aspects such as the methodology, the software and the collaborative aspects of the task.

More significantly in this study, perhaps, is the focus on learner performance involving specific grammatical structures. This testing focus appears to be more aligned with the learning objectives of a standard PPP lesson or curriculum, whereby mastery of a step-by-step list of grammatical forms frequently provides the framework for part of the curriculum. In contrast, the more holistic focus of TBLT would not normally involve a prescriptive emphasis on specific grammatical structures for a specific task, even though certain structures may lend themselves well to the successful achievement of a more holistic and real-life objective.

Therefore, there is also an argument for ensuring that the analysis of learner performance should relate more directly to the underlying aims of the teaching approaches being investigated. In this case, the overall level of linguistic performance in terms of writing proficiency would be more aligned with the principles of TBLT as

well as other potential benefits of the collaborative TBLT process such as the transferability of communicative skills to real-world contexts. Instead, research such as this study by Solares (2014) appears to focus more on the effectiveness of TBLT as a comparator with PPP for effective progress in the acquisition of grammatical knowledge and proficiency. To some extent, these limitations are acknowledged in the study as the researcher notes that the narrow structural focus on narrative tenses alone could have been widened. Additionally, the writer points out that the use of an online blog in one learner group appeared to foster a greater sense of communal interaction which “may thus afford benefits that augment and go beyond the output hypothesis underpinning TBLT approaches” (Solares, 2014, p. 103).

The potential limitation inherent in comparing specific variables such as learner proficiency in certain grammatical structures following instruction in TBLT and other approaches raises questions about how approaches should be analysed and whether certain variables lend themselves more easily to analysis. For example, the meaningful spoken interactions between learners that underpin so much of TBLT theory have received far less analysis in TEL contexts, whereas text-based interactions, often asynchronous in nature, are much more straightforward to conduct. This suggests that studies of TBLT in TEL contexts should consider the broader aims of the TBLT approach when attempting to make comparisons across approaches or methodologies.

Returning to the Solares (2014) study, TBLT advocates might here argue that this type of analysis highlights the capacity of TBLT to provide “much greater exposure to target language... than a traditional course” (Ellis, 2009, p. 235). In this Mexican study, the task of a *Story Telling Contest* becomes a language input source as learners review the

stories of others in the task-centred groups. As Solares (2014) references in the study, this can be viewed as evidence for task design including some form of what Samuda and Bygate (2008) describe as a “holistic activity which engages language use in order to achieve some non-linguistic outcome while meeting a linguistic challenge, with the overall aim of promoting language learning, through process or product or both” (p. 69). Given the acknowledged limitations of this study and the potentially broader scope of TBLT to foster more holistic improvements in areas not only involving linguistic performance but also technological ability and interpersonal communication, there is an argument for ensuring that more research be done that investigates these factors when analysing TBLT-based studies in TEL contexts. This also points to a gap regarding research that includes the more holistic benefits of TBLT in TEL contexts.

## **2.5 Student participation**

Before the advent of TEL, a number of challenges in TBLT were identified. These included aspects, such as TBLT principles, learner participation and contribution issues in group-based tasks, an over-emphasis by learners on the need for accurate production, and evidence of learner progress in fluency at the possible expense of accuracy (Hatip, cited in Hişmanoğlu & Hişmanoğlu, 2011).

If TBLT aims to provide an approach that is intrinsically motivating, representative of real-life communicative tasks and unequivocally learner-centred, then the question of student participation in TEL-based contexts cannot be ignored. A range of factors can influence levels of student participation during tasks in traditional classroom contexts. In TEL-based environments, these factors may be further influenced by additional

aspects of the learning environment. Areas affecting effective student participation may include the following: general technological proficiency; familiarity with the LMS, application, social media or other software being used; level of intercultural communicative competence in multicultural contexts; higher degree of concern for accuracy due to perceived text permanence or recordability; uncertainties about online identity; and disengagement due to geographically-dispersed groups (Lai, Zhao, & Wang, 2011).

A number of studies have analysed various aspects relating to participation in TEL-based TBLT contexts. A study of learners on an advanced level German language course looked at a TBLT component of a larger course by including two 75-minute task-based tutorials. Surveys involving fifteen participants found that although learners expressed satisfaction with the tasks themselves, the teachers involved reported lower levels of task engagement by learners and less willingness to participate effectively as a group member (Hampel & Hauck, 2004). This was a small-scale study, wherein the TBLT component formed just a minor part of the overall course. Therefore, it is possible that learners lacked familiarity with task-based language learning principles and practices. Also, a common concern levelled at TBLT in traditional classroom contexts is its possible unsuitability for lower level learners. This German study included only advanced language learners, so it does not address this particular concern in TEL-based contexts.

A larger study was undertaken in the context of an American high school where 38 participants, who were enrolled in an online beginner-level Chinese course, took part in a TBLT study (Lai et al., 2011). As part of the study, researchers worked with

instructors in order to create educational materials that aligned with a TBLT approach. These materials complemented the content of an e-textbook that did not conform to a TBLT-based approach. It should also be noted that the teachers had not previously taught languages either in an online context or via a TBLT approach. Similarly, the majority of learners had not previously followed a TBLT approach. Again, this is a key limitation of much research into technology-mediated TBLT contexts, which indicates a gap in the research where further studies are needed that involve participants (teachers and learners) who are familiar with both TBLT and technology-mediated contexts. The present study aims to address this gap in the research.

Key findings from the Lai et al.'s (2011) study include a potential benefit of TBLT in online contexts, whereby the fluency of the TBLT participants was deemed to have improved to a greater degree than that of a control group. However, conclusions drawn from the study also included a number of potential drawbacks regarding the use of TBLT in TEL-based contexts. Firstly, tasks tended to be dominated by a small group of learners, thereby raising concerns about the potential benefits of task participation in TBLT for all types of learner in this context. Also, levels of rapport and mutual engagement between geographically-dispersed learners tended to be low, which raises questions about the effectiveness of TBLT in motivating and engaging students in TEL contexts. Specifically, these drawbacks relate directly to the foundational social constructivist principles at the heart of TBLT. Therefore, in considering the effectiveness of TBLT in TEL contexts, these findings suggest that questions about participation levels and motivational factors may be of importance when addressing possible recommendations for changes or additions to TBLT frameworks. Otherwise, such findings appear to indicate that many learners may not derive sufficient benefits

from the TBLT approach in some TEL contexts. The questions raised by such studies regarding possible negative aspects of technology-mediated TEL contexts also indicated a gap in the research, where these potential challenges concerning the approach should be investigated in contexts where participants are familiar with both the approach and educational context.

With regard to student participation in TBLT in TEL contexts at a more fundamental level, an American high school study raises questions about teacher and learner understanding of the approach itself. One of the main concerns about TBLT has been its possible unsuitability both for novice teachers and for learners with little experience of the approach (Zheng & Borg, 2014). In other words, this issue suggests that before undertaking a programme of study with a TBLT approach, learners should undergo a familiarisation process with the associated aims, methods and types of assessment and feedback. Similarly, there appear to be arguments both for the inclusion of TBLT theory and practice on all initial teacher training programmes (Van den Branden, 2006) and for the possible argument that novice teachers may be more comfortable with other approaches in the early stages of their careers (Zheng & Borg, 2014). However, for novice teachers, the inclusion of more comprehensive training in TBLT on initial teacher training programmes may offset such concerns. In terms of research, these long-standing, perceived disadvantages of TBLT again suggest that conducting studies into TBLT in TEL contexts should ideally involve participants who have a degree of familiarity with the approach. Although this may not always be possible, these perceived drawbacks of TBLT, plus the additional factors brought into play by TEL contexts, suggest that limitations of research may be increased when participants are largely unfamiliar, either with TBLT or with elements of the TEL context.

## **2.6 Language complexity**

As well as the level of learner participation involved in any instance of TBLT, the degree of language complexity that accompanies the set task is of interest in TBLT debates. When performance in tasks is measured for linguistic purposes, the focus tends to be on one or more of the following areas: structural complexity, grammatical accuracy, fluency level and lexical range. When designing tasks in online contexts, technology offers a broad range of options in terms of complexity levels and task variables. Understanding the potential for affecting task performance through varying complexity and conditions is a key factor in a framework for TBLT in TEL contexts.

In the field of cognitive psychology, two recent approaches have addressed the level of task performance by considering task complexity and task conditions. The first approach, that of Cognition Hypothesis (Robinson, 2011), asserts that the raising of task complexity can axiomatically raise the structural complexity and grammatical accuracy levels of language production. Contrasting this approach is the Limited Attentional Capacity construct, which includes the proposal that when attention is directed towards one area of language production, this will negatively affect another area. In other words, the finite amount of cognitive processing space available means that an increased focus in one area will inevitably lead to compensatory demands being made in other areas (Skehan, 2014). However, evidence to support the principle of expanded cognitive ability, and thereby structural complexity and grammatical accuracy levels, through the raising of task complexity is somewhat limited (Skehan, 2014).

On the other hand, there does appear to be some evidence to support the claims that levels of language complexity in task performance can be raised through the variation of certain task conditions. For example, a recent study analysed learners' speaking performance in tasks under different types of condition involving repetition and planning (Wang, 2014). In the study, the performances in video narratives of 77 undergraduate Chinese students of English language were analysed based on manipulations regarding strategic planning, online planning (n.b. in this instance, online planning refers to planning that takes place during the act of speaking itself rather than to any technological support) and the repetition of tasks. The study concluded that strategic planning prior to task completion could raise the levels of both language complexity and fluency, and that task repetition had a beneficial effect on linguistic complexity, fluency and accuracy.

In this study by Wang (2014), these findings are analysed through the lens of Levelt's theory of first-language speech production (Levelt, 1989, 1993, 1999). According to Levelt, when producing their first language, speakers automatically go through the stages of conceptualisation, formulation and articulation. This hierarchical series of stages goes from the larger units, such as conceptualising the overall intended meaning, through to the connected articulation of each required phoneme. It has been argued that, for L1 speakers, the conceptualisation stage is the one that may require conscious thought, whereas the formulation and articulation stages can proceed subconsciously, even as the next cycle of conscious conceptualisation is taking place (Kempen & Hoenkamp, 1987). However, for L2 speakers, this largely automatic procedure has several additional sources of pressure, any of which can interfere with the delivery of

proficient language when speaking. Four of these key sources of pressure have been labelled as follows:

- *resource deficits*
- *processing time pressure*
- *perceived deficiencies in their own language output*
- *perceived deficiencies in decoding the interlocutor's message.* (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997)

Such pressures can cause problems for L2 speakers primarily at the conceptualisation and formulation stages. In TBLT, one fundamental principle is that specific structures are not usually prescribed, or in any way forced, during the task completion process. Therefore, learners are expected and encouraged to navigate the task requirements using any combination of their own available linguistic resources. In terms of time pressures in Levelt's theory of speech production, this means that as L2 speakers move from the conceptualisation to formulation stages, they can find themselves compelled to reconceptualise what they wish to express. In other words, the frequent discrepancy between the initial conceptualisation stage and the lack of available linguistic resources through which to formulate its expression can lead to the necessity for compromise in terms of how students negotiate a task. As regards TBLT in TEL contexts, this may have many implications for task design, including factors such as the nature of student interaction and the type and availability of support mechanisms.

## **2.7 Effects of technology-mediated task design**

Choices made during the technology-mediated task design process can have a range of impacts. For example, the nature of student interaction and collaboration is a fundamental consideration of task design in TBLT. In terms of TBLT in TEL environments, collaboration between learners is mediated through such means as forms of communication and technological resources. The selection of technologies will not have a neutral effect on the affordances at play in the learning process (Hampel & Hauck, 2006; Thorne, 2003). Additionally, the collaborative nature of learners working on a task generates a mutual perspective, which can have “a profound effect on how the task is performed” (Ellis, 2003, p. 190). Therefore, any framework designed to underpin TBLT in TEL contexts should address questions of learner interaction.

A further consideration as regards task design is that a key TBLT tenet posits that a holistic approach to second language acquisition through authentic, real-world tasks can drive the acquisition in an analytical process (Samuda & Bygate, 2008). By varying task features, learner proficiency and performance in the task can be affected. This has prompted considerable research into how learning can be optimised through task design manipulation (Adams & Alwi, 2014). However, much of this research has been conducted in more traditional classroom settings (Gilabert, 2007; Kim, 2009; Michel, Kuiken, & Vedder, 2007), and therefore, the impact of task design in TEL contexts has been identified as a key research area, given the possible effects on cognitive resources and language processing in technology-mediated contexts (Robinson, 2005; Skehan, 1998).

As indicated in the preceding paragraph, most research centring on the predictions of the Cognition Hypothesis has been situated in face-to-face contexts. Addressing the questions arising from the idea that in TEL contexts a key medium of communication is text chat, a study was carried out by Adams and Alwi (2014) into the effects of task-design manipulation on linguistic performance within text chat. Some researchers have argued for a possible benefit of text chat in terms of its writing nature. In other words, there is more opportunity for learners to focus on form through the more permanent nature of text chat and through re-reading and re-scrolling through messages (Fiori, 2005; Sauro, 2009). This aspect has clear links with ongoing debates surrounding TBLT, such as the teaching of form, the relative emphasis on fluency and accuracy, the relationship between tasks and improved linguistic fluency, and how work on synchronous spoken proficiency should be addressed in a TBLT framework.

Regarding notions of text chat itself, this form of communication has been labelled as a new form of literacy: one that includes features of both written and spoken language as well as its own characteristics, such as emoticons, simplified structures, more flexible lexis register and abbreviated forms (Danet & Herring, 2007). This hybrid nature of text chat as a means of language production has been identified as an area of challenge for research into second language acquisition (Adams & Alwi, 2014). In terms of being an effective means of engaging in language practice and learning, text chat has been seen in positive terms by a number of researchers (Ortega, 2009; Sauro, 2011; Smith, 2008). The reasons for this effectiveness include the opportunity for communication with L1 speakers (Blake, 2005), exposure to intercultural communicative norms (Belz & Müller-Hartmann, 2003), chances to collaborate on authentic tasks, and as a means of more self-directed study.

As a medium of communication within the TBLT approach in TEL contexts, text chat can of course be synchronous or asynchronous. Where learners are engaged in synchronous communication with the goal of completing a collaborative task, text chat in TEL contexts is often the preferred method of communication. Given such constraints as bandwidth and screen resolution compatibility (Hampel, 2010), text chat may, in many locations, be a more reliable option over video and audio communication in educational contexts (Gonzalez, 2003). However, these preferences and constraints should not mask possible concerns about the effectiveness of text-based communication in driving forward spoken proficiency in educational contexts that may allow few opportunities for synchronous oral communication.

In terms of effective language teaching and learning through TBLT in TEL contexts, the impact of task design on the effectiveness of text chat is of obvious interest. Addressing this gap in the literature, Adams and Alwi (2014) conducted a study to assess the predictions of the Cognition Hypothesis (Robinson, 2001, 2005) in task-focussed group work. The study consisted of analysing the influence of prior knowledge, which constitutes one aspect of task complexity, on English language production by engineering students (mostly Bahasa Malaysia speakers) engaged in group work. Specifically, the study aimed to investigate the effects of having prior subject knowledge on the accuracy, complexity and quantity of language production. Learners were required to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of various electrical engineering software packages in order to reach consensus through text chat, focussing on which software a company should adopt. Learners with an electrical engineering background were deemed to have prior knowledge status, and learners with a chemical engineering background were deemed to be without the relevant prior knowledge.

In this study by Adams and Alwi (2014), according to the predictions of the Cognition Hypothesis, an increase in task complexity, in this case by manipulating a resource-dispersing variable through an absence of prior knowledge, language performance should, in theory, be affected in several ways. Most notably, these should constitute a decrease in complexity, fluency and accuracy. However, the results of this study did not generally bear out the predictions. In the study, the absence of prior knowledge was in fact associated with an increase in both complexity and accuracy. The study concludes that on this evidence, the Cognition Hypothesis may not be an accurate predictor of language performance in terms of task complexity when situated in a TEL context (Adams and Alwi, 2014).

Although there have only been a small number of TBLT studies based on the Cognition Hypothesis in TEL contexts, the few existing studies find little evidence to support the predictions in this area. For example, another study (Nik, 2010) looked at the resource-dispersing variable of decreasing task structure. On the one hand, in support of the Cognition Hypothesis, this study found that less accurate language was produced, but on the other hand, there was no discernible impact on complexity, thereby contradicting the Cognition Hypothesis predictions. Likewise, another study (Alwi, Adams, & Newton, 2012) concluded that increasing the complexity of a task actually resulted in fewer interactional modifications, again contradicting the predicted Cognition Hypothesis outcomes. This study also highlights the possibility that the Cognition Hypothesis may be an inappropriate theory through which to analyse this type of language production in TEL contexts (Alwi, Adams, & Newton, 2012).

The very nature of text chat as an acknowledged new medium of communication gives grounds for questioning the appropriateness of applying theories founded on traditional spoken and written language. With specific regard to text chat, it is clear that a pause occurs between the production and transmission of a message (Adams & Alwi, 2014). This obviously contrasts markedly with spoken language production in group settings, wherein production and transmission occur more or less simultaneously. Therefore, the composition of text chat offers learners the time and space in which to edit and self-correct any chat contributions, thereby leading to the conclusion that text chat transcriptions may lack form-focussed information that pertains to actual spoken language production (Smith, 2008).

Text chat itself has been identified as a potentially beneficial medium of communication in terms of second language acquisition (Belz, 2006; Lee, 2004; Toyoda & Harrison, 2002; Yilmaz, 2011). However, from a TBLT perspective in TEL contexts, it is important to note that the design of the task itself may maximise or accentuate specific areas of learning (Peterson, 2010; Stockwell, 2010). By way of example, one study indicated that the commonly used tasks of dictogloss (also known as grammar dictation) and information gap tend to focus on the development of different areas of language acquisition (Yilmaz, 2011). This TEL-based study concluded that a dictogloss task promotes a greater focus on forms than information gap activities. Likewise, when engaged in text-based discussions about linguistic forms, the context of a dictogloss task led to more linguistically focussed solutions than in information gap tasks. In other words, this adds further weight to the argument that when assessing task design in TBLT in TEL contexts, due consideration should be given to task type and likely associated impacts on language usage.

In general, research in the area of TBLT in TEL contexts has tended to focus on a single technological mode of communication such as text chat. However, some research has focused on a combination of communication tools (McLoughlin & Lee, 2007), partly in recognition of the multimodal nature of current communicative norms outside the educational context. For example, a recent study on using TEL communication tools in process writing within a TBLT framework focussed on the combined affordances of using both chats and wikis as communicative tools (Oskoz & Elola, 2014). By including two separate writing tasks addressing different essay genres, namely argumentative and expository, the study concluded that the use of synchronous chat enabled learners to work collaboratively on issues such as content and overall essay structure, whereas the use of wikis was more closely associated with more granular analysis of form and lexical choice (Oskoz & Elola, 2014).

Other findings arising from this study include further evidence to suggest that different genres of writing in TBLT may give rise to varying functions of communicative interaction. It has been noted that much research into chat-based interactions in TBLT has tended to focus exclusively on factors relating to meaning, repair mechanisms and focus-on-form (Ortega 1997, 2009; Oskoz & Elola, 2014; Sauro, 2011). However, given the underlying aims of TBLT as a means of fostering a more holistic approach to learning and collaborative knowledge construction, it can be considered axiomatic that research in TBLT should extend beyond such localised and specific factors. Again, this present study aims to address this gap in the literature by examining perceptions that extend into the holistic focus of the TBLT approach.

Such findings as these in the study by Oskoz and Elola (2014) raise a number of questions about the effectiveness of multimodal approaches to communication in TBLT. These include issues around relative affordances of different media, the influence on critical thinking, collaboration, and scaffolding within resultant zones of proximal development. For these types of question, calls have been made for more research into “the way in which modes can be combined and the way they function (e.g. in time with respect to the speed of communication over the Internet, or synchronicity/asynchronicity)” (Hampel & Hauck, 2006, p. 8).

## **2.8. Broader aims of TBLT in TEL contexts**

The underlying principles of TBLT include aims that extend beyond learning the language itself and beyond the immediate parameters of the learning environment. As previously noted, two of the foundation principles of TBLT are the relevance of tasks to the real world beyond the learning context, and the communicative nature of tasks which are designed to work towards a perceived outcome. The task itself is “intended to result in language that bears a resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world” (Ellis, 2003, p. 16) or to have “some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities” (Skehan, 1998, p. 95).

These aims can be linked to broader institutional objectives. For example, in the context of Canadian higher education institutions, as well as many other global areas, two related factors in recent years have had a significant impact on many English language learning programmes. The first of these is the widely accepted concept that graduates

of higher education should be equipped with the skills to deal with global challenges (Autor, Katz, & Kearney, 2006) in terms of being “more interculturally and globally competent communicators” (Wang et al., 2013, p. 245). A second factor is the rapid increase of the use of technology in the delivery of ESOL programmes.

The connection between intercultural competence (IC) and language has formed the basis of a broad range of research over the last thirty years or so (Byram, 1989; Kramsch, 1993; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Moeller & Nugent, 2014), which in this way has been running somewhat parallel to the development of TBLT. Using various models, the essential findings of much IC research involve an emphasis on how students participate with others and collaborate in an increasingly multicultural global society (Sinicrope, Norris, & Watanabe, 2007). Numerous studies have been undertaken that investigate the promotion of IC within TEL contexts. Again, to illustrate the connection with TBLT, much of this research portrays the learning environment as student-centred, interactive and collaborative (Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002; Council of Europe, 2001; Moore, 2006).

One of the identified challenges with teaching IC as a stand-alone topic is that when learners enrol in educational programmes, they all tend to have widely differing cultural opinions and global perspectives. It is therefore unlikely that learners will develop similar levels of IC at the same rate. Naturally, this has further implications for both curricular and assessment decisions (Moeller & Nugent, 2014). Addressing this challenge, researchers have postulated that developments in IC should be viewed as a linear process without any specific measurable learning objective, but rather as self-contained tasks in interculturality (Byram, 1997).

In language learning contexts, the multiplicity of student cultural perspectives may be less of a challenge, and may even prove beneficial. Since the primary focus of any language programme is naturally likely to be on linguistic proficiency in one form or another, any aspects of interculturality within, for example, a task can then constitute part of what is usually termed the non-linguistic objective of the student collaboration. In this way, the linguistic aims of a TBLT lesson are upheld along with the more self-contained and individually linear learning constituted by the interculturality element.

A few studies in the literature exemplify how a task related to IC carried out within a TEL context may also form part of a TBLT curriculum. For example, Furstenberg (2010b) documents how the Cultura model in French contexts is used as an approach to IC development in a language learning environment. In this model, French and American learners engage with each other in TEL contexts with a view to fostering greater understanding of the others' beliefs and culture. Learners use their own native language but collaborate and interact with the target language group using various TEL resources, such as online discussion forums and video conferencing. Underscoring that this approach bears some resemblance to the underlying theories of TBLT, Furstenberg states that "By virtue of engaging learners in a dynamic process of inquiry, discovery, exploration and interpretation, together with learners from another culture, such a project invariably favours a collective, constructivist approach to learning" (2010b, p. 56). This example, and the Cultura model (Furstenberg, 2010b) as a whole, may offer useful insights into ways that IC development can be successfully integrated into a TBLT framework in TEL contexts. Although learners in this example are effectively interacting via two languages (i.e. each using just their own first language), which makes the interaction process very much less aligned with TBLT principles, the model

could be adapted for multilingual groups, so that the target language is used by all learners as they collaborate in crafting beliefs and hypotheses while developing their own knowledge and attitudes (Furstenberg, 2010b). This indicates a gap in the research regarding an investigation of multilingual groups engaged in IC-related tasks in technology-mediated TBLT contexts.

Another related study looks at the documentation of intercultural growth as a collaborative task, whereby learners begin a process by recording initial conceptions of a culture or particular aspect of it, which in this case was the citizens of Berlin (Byram et al., 2002). Following the recording of initial perspectives and beliefs, learners analysed various types of text in order to gather related material. This material is later used by students to explore contrasts and connections, both with their own cultures and with the originally documented material at the beginning of the task, in order to produce a final comparative document or presentation. Again, the methodological process has clear connections with TBLT, and the integration of TEL resources could be achieved for each stage of the process. This methodology, aligning somewhat with the TBLT approach, includes the teacher as facilitator, learners collaborating on tasks, a non-linguistic task goal (in this case IC-related) and the building of knowledge through interaction, all of which is potentially conducted in TEL contexts (Byram et al., 2002). Further research into these types of task may help understanding of any IC-related benefits perceived by learners and teachers regarding IC-focused tasks in TEL contexts.

In many higher education institutions, including the one in the present study, ESOL programmes are multicultural in population, thereby prompting the need to address more directly the issues of intercultural communication. However, questions about

effectively embedding IC theories within the curricula and about the methodological delivery of multicultural ESOL programmes can give rise to a number of challenges. In such programme environments, learners are working not only on developing language proficiency and intercultural knowledge regarding the host or target culture, but are also engaged in ongoing interactions with often fluid class populations, whereby learners may be encountering different cultures for the first time. Additionally, some learners may be unfamiliar with learner-centred teaching approaches (Green & Whitsed, 2015) such as TBLT and may have relatively low levels of competence with the technologies being used (Ozdamar-Keskin, Ozata, Banar, & Royle, 2015). Such challenges are well documented in the surrounding literature, along with the recognition that today's learners may face "a potentially bewildering range of academic literacies" (Zondiros, 2008, p. 3), "unrecognised complexities of practice" (Goodfellow, 2011, p. 5), which include what may recently have been deemed fairly routine academic tasks (Lillis & Scott, 2007). In short, learners in many contemporary ESOL programmes can find themselves in a multicultural environment where "an indeterminate number of variables come into play at the same time as commonalities decrease" (Matsuo, 2012, p. 349). As a result, there is growing recognition of the need for a pedagogical model that addresses such factors (Belisle, 2008). Whether TBLT in TEL contexts can provide an effective means of achieving this points to another gap in the literature that findings from this study may help to address.

There is also an increasing sense that ESOL programmes should reflect the types of interaction and contexts that learners will encounter outside the learning environment. Given the rise of globalisation and mobile work populations, the need to fit notions of interculturality into the multicultural and technological ESOL learning context may

become more pressing. In general terms, interculturality has been referred to as “the dynamic process by which people... use the resources and processes of cultures with which they are familiar but also those they may not typically be associated with in interactions with others” (Young & Sachdev, 2011, p. 81). Such definitions of interculturality point to clear parallels with the underlying principles of TBLT. In particular, this connection between TBLT and IC is especially related to the concept that, during task-related negotiations, learners should avail themselves of any relevant linguistic and non-linguistic resources at their disposal, rather than be constrained by a prescribed set of structures or lexical items. In other words, when learners have a higher degree of competence in interculturality, this may enable them to navigate more complex interactions in a greater number of culturally diverse settings.

However, the complex nature of IC also means that its definitions are somewhat varied. These definitions include the premise that the development of IC should enable learners to communicate and interact with people from other cultures in ways that are both appropriate and effective (Sinicrope et al., 2007). Having established that a clear understanding of culture forms the key element of IC, this gives rise to questions concerning the definition of culture itself. In the literature, culture has been described as “the ever-changing values, traditions, social and political relationships, and worldview created, shared, and transformed by a group of people” (Nieto, 1999, p. 48) and as “a highly complex, elusive, multi-layered notion that encompasses many different and overlapping areas and that inherently defies easy categorization and classification” (Furstenberg, 2010a, p. 329). Further complicating any definition of IC in terms of language education is the fact that learners may be preparing to enter a broad

range of professional sectors and that existing models of IC also cover a variety of social, educational and professional contexts (Sinicrope et al., 2007).

In terms of IC within the field of ELT, there has been a marked shift in the perceived objectives of second language education as a whole. For many years, the principal goal of second (or additional) language instruction was conceived to be the attainment of linguistic competence in the target language, a conception which held native speakers to be models of proficiency in the target language. Alongside the goal of language proficiency, ESOL programmes may often have included some factual information about the associated culture of the target language. However, there remained a tacit understanding that students would “remain anchored in their own values and cultures” (Byram, 1992, p. 11). Following this, the shift from an exclusive focus on linguistic proficiency towards a more holistic emphasis that includes elements of IC has given more prominence to the notion of an immersive cultural experience. This quality of immersion involves the aim of developing learners’ awareness of the cultural values that are intrinsically bound up with the target language (Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 2006). In terms of IC within TEL contexts, the concept of using an immersive experience in an online context has been explored as an effective means of promoting IC (Crossman & Bordia, 2011; Wang et al., 2013).

More closely related to the approach of TBLT, Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002) in a Council of Europe document make it clear that developing the skills of IC should be fundamental to any language learning approach and methodology.

Thus, developing the intercultural dimension in language teaching involves

recognising that the aims are: to give learners intercultural competence as well as linguistic competence; to prepare them for interaction with people of other cultures; to enable them to understand and accept people from other cultures as individuals with other distinctive perspectives, values and behaviours; and to help them to see that such interaction is an enriching experience. (Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002, p. 10)

If IC is now widely acknowledged as being a vital component of ELT, then the effectiveness of the TBLT approach in delivering this objective should be considered. Therefore, any findings relating to IC that emerge from the data in this study will be explored in terms of possible framework adaptations that will facilitate the development of intercultural communicative competence.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This chapter sets out the reasons for the eventual choice of phenomenography as being the most appropriate methodological approach for this study. A short definition of phenomenography is included, with particular focus on connections between the phenomenographic method and the principal objectives of this study.

### **3.1 Why phenomenography?**

Since its inception at the University of Goteburg in the 1970s, phenomenography has been closely aligned with studies involving education. As an approach, phenomenography takes a second-order perspective. This means that the focus of the study is the ways in which participants hold conceptions of a given object of experience that has been shared by the study subjects. This contrasts with a first-order perspective, whereby conceptions would primarily derive from the researcher's analysis of the object of experience rather than surfacing from analysis of the participants' descriptions (Khan, 2014; Marton, 1981; Sjöström & Dahlgren, 2002).

When considering the optimum research approach for this study, the following key reasons formed the basis of the argument in favour of phenomenography. Firstly, it is concerned with the understanding of conceptions as seen by participants who experience particular phenomena. As an approach to qualitative research, it was initially described by Marton as “research that aims at description, analysis, and understanding of experiences; that is, research which is directed towards experiential description” (Marton, 1981, p. 180). This focus on the understanding of experiences aligns with the

research aim in this study of investigating how participants experience a particular aspect of language education within a TEL context.

Secondly, this focus on conceptions also involves the assumption that there is no attempt “to describe knowledge in terms of right and wrong” (Svensson, 1997, p. 163). In other words, the focus on experiential description is undertaken with the emphasis on how individuals conceive of meaning relating to the phenomenon. This description aims to ignore any preconceived notions regarding the status of the experiential meaning in terms of objectivity demands (Svensson, 1997). Again, this aligns with the underlying aims of this study in that knowledge is viewed primarily as “meaning in a social and cultural context” (Svensson, 1997, p. 163). This view reinforces the aim of the study whereby the analysis of descriptions will seek commonalities within interpretations of an experience that has been shared by participants.

Looking at this point further, from its outset, phenomenography as an approach has not generally been concerned with the classification or comparison of groups, with explanations or predictions, or with making judgements of people in fair or unfair terms (Marton, 1981). For the purposes of this study, this means that correct answers are not being sought to any of the research questions, including how existing TBLT frameworks can be adapted for more effective use in TEL contexts or of how new and experienced teachers can be trained more effectively in the use of a TBLT approach in TEL environments.

Thirdly, in recent years, there has been an increasing movement towards a focus on conceptions of learning and teaching as the means by which teaching developments should be addressed (Åkerlind, 2008). This movement presents a contrast with an

emphasis on the development of teaching methods and skills, which although recognised as key elements in the process, have tended to be examined without thorough examination of foundational conceptions and beliefs underpinning them (Åkerlind 2003, 2004, 2008; Gibbs 1995; Kember, 1997; Trigwell & Prosser, 1996; Wood, 2000). In addition, these elements have been extended to include a far greater focus on learner conceptions rather than a focus on teacher conceptions, since student conceptions had tended either to be assumed or ignored entirely (Åkerlind 2004, 2008; Dall’Alba, 1991; Martin & Balla, 1991; Martin & Ramsden, 1992; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Wood, 2000). The potential benefits of these arguments have been supported by some studies indicating more favourable outcomes for student learning when a greater degree of “student-centred understanding” (Åkerlind, 2008) is present among higher education teachers (Kember & Gow, 1994; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999).

Fourthly, phenomenography often focusses purely on describing phenomena through the analysis of categories of description, after which there may be little further attempt to apply findings in any context or to make recommendations for change (Bowden, 2000). However, this study sets out to explore the possible need for adaptations of TBLT frameworks in online and blended contexts. Therefore, contained within the research question is the stated goal of looking beyond a purely phenomenographic description. In other words, the study has a clear intention of undertaking a phenomenographic study as a possible basis for considering the application of the findings in real-world contexts, which, in this case, constitutes the effective usage of TBLT frameworks in postsecondary online and blended settings. The developmental potential of phenomenography has been well documented. According to Bowden, phenomenography can be applied to effect changes in real-world contexts for

developmental purposes following the initial analysis of how people view a particular phenomenon (Bowden, 2000).

With reference to this study, TBLT as an approach places an emphasis on student-centred concepts, such as learner reliance on existing linguistic resources and negotiated interactions between learners, in order to achieve ‘real world’ objectives. Given this emphasis, it seems appropriate to inform analysis of TBLT methodologies in TEL contexts with the inclusion of learner conceptions as a key component in attempting to further knowledge of student-centred understanding among instructors. As stated previously, the second-order perspective of phenomenography is concerned with how participants view a phenomenon, whereas a first-order perspective would tend to focus on descriptions of what the phenomenon itself actually constitutes. From the second-order perspective, the ways in which the phenomenon is experienced and perceived become the focus of the study itself.

### **3.2 The research context**

The research took place in a large public sector postsecondary provincial college in Canada. The college has a number of campus locations in different urban centres, all of which have multicultural populations. The population of each campus has a significant number of international students and recent immigrants to Canada. The college has a well-established ESL programme, which has been in place for over thirty years. Since its inception as a language settlement programme that was initially mainly aimed at supporting immigrant newcomers to Canada, the programme has undergone several

transformations. Around a decade ago, it diverted from its status as a government-funded settlement programme to become a credit-bearing programme aimed predominantly at preparing international students and Canadian citizens (in the institution) that are non-native speakers of English, for postsecondary academic study. Since this change, the programme has shifted from a single campus location to a three-campus context across three major urban centres. This expansion has been accompanied by a large growth in the numbers of international students. This geographical spread and programme population increase have coincided with the global escalation in the use of technology in language education.

Regarding delivery methods, the programme has increasingly moved towards a greater inclusion of technological features and support structures. A decade ago, the programme was primarily situated in classrooms with little access to technology or the Internet. A few hours per week of guided study took place in computer laboratories, where students tended to focus on receptive skills, grammar practice and lexical activities by using dedicated software packages. Currently, the programme includes courses that are delivered either in classroom, blended or fully online formats. Depending on the course delivered, teachers require varying levels of technological expertise, although all teachers in the institution are required to meet the criteria for minimal LMS presence for each course taught. Logically, courses delivered in blended and online formats require a greater degree of online presence and preferably expertise.

In terms of programme format, there are five levels of English language ability. Each one consists of three or four language-based courses, most of which have an associated computer laboratory class or online component. The fifth and final level, English for

Academic Purposes (EAP), acts as a bridging level before students graduate from the ESL programme into a regular postsecondary programme in their chosen discipline. One of the EAP courses is a General Arts and Science elective course that has no taught language content and in which ESL students join with native speaker students with the objective of further preparing ESL students for academic life after their English programme.

With reference to teacher expertise, all ESL teachers in the institution are required to have provincial accreditation and several years of teaching experience. Recently, any newly hired teachers are now required to have a master's degree in an appropriate area such as Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) or Applied Linguistics. Once hired, teachers may be asked to provide instruction at five different levels of language proficiency and to deliver courses that may focus on any of the four language skills (i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing) and on any language system area (e.g. grammar, vocabulary and phonology/pronunciation).

A further area of teacher expertise relates to the institutional ESL curriculum, which is largely based on the CLB: a “descriptive scale of language ability” (CLB, p. 11) across twelve benchmarks ranging from basic to advanced, with the very highest levels indicating proficiency in high-stakes or professionally demanding contexts. The CLB performance descriptors are task-based, meaning that they mainly focus on the ability of the language user to complete communicative tasks that have real-world application. In other words, the descriptors of the CLB do not specifically target the usage of designated grammatical, lexical or phonological forms or features.

Given the underlying principles of the CLB, it can be argued that, from a teaching perspective, a CLB-based curriculum, such as the one in this institution, would align well with a TBLT approach. For example, the CLB descriptors of proficiency in the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are evaluated according to learner performance in “communication tasks learners will likely encounter in the real world” (CLB, 2012, p. 16). A further example concerns sociolinguistic knowledge, which underpins the concept of viewing linguistic ability in terms of how learners negotiate meaning in communicative transactions in order to complete objectives with real-world relevance (CLB, 2012).

Regarding teacher expertise in this research context, although the CLB document and the institutional ESL curriculum do not advocate or prescribe any particular language teaching approach or methodology, there are obvious affiliative links with the TBLT approach. These curricular links with TBLT mean that teachers with a strong foundational knowledge of TBLT and a high level of practical teaching experience using the TBLT approach may find the institutional curriculum and overall programme ethos more akin to their teaching philosophies.

Furthermore, the TBLT approach in traditional classroom settings is commonly associated with challenges, such as teacher adaptability, student participation and student uncertainty about TBLT objectives (Hatip, cited in Hişmanoğlu & Hişmanoğlu, 2011). When technology is involved, a further range of TBLT challenges has been identified in addition to the above. These include technological skills, IC (Reinders & White, 2010), issues with group dynamics (Kramsch & Thorne, 2002), and little

evidence that learners focus on metalinguistic features during synchronous computer-mediated communication (Collentine, 2009).

In short, this research context requires that teachers deliver a range of courses covering all language skills and systems at various proficiency levels within a task-based curricular framework and within classroom (but LMS-supported), blended and online teaching environments. As a result, teacher expertise in applying a TBLT approach within TEL contexts may hold some benefits for learners in this context.

Regarding the research context, it should also be emphasised that the methodological approach in this study is designed to investigate the broader aspects of TBLT within a TEL context rather than to focus on more granular aspects of teaching and learning. Although more granular features of TBLT implementation may arise in the data, the overall research objective remains at the level of TBLT frameworks rather than at the level of methodological procedures within them. Any recommendations for specific teaching and learning procedures within an adapted TBLT framework are beyond the scope of this study.

### **3.3 The object of study**

The primary research aim of this study is to consider possible adaptations of existing TBLT frameworks in ways that would make them more effective for use in TEL contexts in Canadian postsecondary ESL public sector education and elsewhere in the field of postsecondary ELT. The secondary research aims are to assess key benefits and

challenges of TBLT frameworks in this context, and to present recommendations for relevant training and ongoing support provision that may be useful for novice and experienced teachers.

As a result, this study sets out to analyse teacher and student conceptions of TBLT in a specific TEL context by means of collecting data from participants, all of whom have “experiences related to the phenomenon to be researched” (Krueger, 1988, p. 150). The phenomenon in this case is English language instruction within the framework of a task-based ESL curriculum, delivered in a TEL-supported environment by means of classroom (with available LMS support), blended or online courses.

The participants in this study, otherwise referred to as the subjects or experiencers of the phenomenon, all have the shared experience of at least six months of a TBLT curriculum at the same educational institution.

What constitutes the object of study itself should be made clear. In this study, the object of study is seen not as the phenomenon involved in the study, or the relationship between the researcher and this phenomenon, or the relationship between the researcher and the participants involved. Instead, it refers to the relationship between the participants and the phenomenon itself (Bowden, 2015).

Regarding sample numbers, a total number of eighteen participants were interviewed. This corresponds with recommendations by Trigwell (2000) and Dunkin (2000), both of whom posit that an ideal sample size for a phenomenographic study is generally between fifteen and twenty. The total of eighteen participants includes eight teachers

and ten students, so that the teaching and learning perspectives receive almost equal weighting in the data analysis of the shared phenomenon which is experienced by all participants.

### **3.4 Participant recruitment**

As a means of enabling the description of the phenomenon in question, or of the historical reality, this study employed the process of purposive sampling (Kumar, 2005). With this in mind, the study also followed the principle that one of the researcher's aims is to consider the sampling method that is more conducive to the gathering of the most useful and relevant data (Kumar, 2005).

Regarding ethical approval, I followed the approval procedures at Lancaster University and was granted approval by the University Research Ethics Committee. I also applied for approval to the Research and Ethics Board (REB) of the institution where this study is situated. Having conducted interviews for recent phenomenological studies at this institution, a relatively straightforward approval process was expected. However, there were some questions relating to the aspect of voluntary consent.

One question centred on whether teachers may feel pressurised into participating due to a perceived power imbalance regarding the issue of being rehired for future contracts. To mitigate any perceived imbalance of power, the application to the institutional REB clarified that no values would be attached to the findings of this study in terms of comparisons with other studies on second language learning or TBLT. Also, the

application emphasised that the programme coordinator role (i.e. the job role of the researcher in this study) does not encompass the hiring or rehiring of teachers. In addition, the timing of the participation requests coincided with the first half of an academic term just prior to the researcher's sabbatical year. Therefore, teachers were also fully aware that the researcher would not be present at all in the institution during the period of rehiring in the second half of the term. Finally, the application for approval also stressed that the voluntary nature of any research participation would be made explicit in invitations, as would the options for participation withdrawal and subsequent data destruction.

A second similar question focused on the nature of student voluntary participation. Specifically, the REB questioned the relationship between the timing of the invitation and possible sense of pressure to participate. Also, on the theme of voluntary participation, the REB asked whether the researcher may be teaching any of the student participants in future. Again, these concerns were addressed in general terms of emphasising the withdrawal options, data deletion and the absence of value attachment to data collected. Also, the timing of the participation meant the researcher would not be teaching any of the participants during the data collection period or in future due to a forthcoming sabbatical. Once these questions had been satisfactorily addressed, the institutional REB approved the research application.

At the institution, email invitations were sent to ESL teachers who had at least one year of teaching experience within the institution. Therefore, with reference to the previously mentioned aim of applying a purposive sampling approach (Kumar, 2005), a non-probability sample was used as a means of ensuring that a broad range of opinions and

perspectives were more likely to be gathered. However, the context and parameters also meant that the diversification within the sample bore direct relation to a shared typicality of experience within the institution (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2006, pp. 103-104). Limiting the sample to teachers with at least one year of teaching experience in the institution means that all participants had gained similar degrees of familiarity with various institutional aspects, such as the CLB-based curriculum, the LMS and its related minimal presence requirements, expectations of the student body, as a whole, and with the prevailing teaching and learning ethos of the ESL department.

Email invitations were also sent to students who had been studying in the ESL programme at the institution for at least six months. Students were also in the highest level of the ESL programme, which meant that the participants would be better able to express themselves with at least adequate language proficiency to communicate their opinions and conceptions. Students from three different campuses were contacted. This meant the participant group had been taught by a range of different teachers as they had progressed through the levels of the programme on the different campuses. Again, this helped to ensure that the quality of the data collected would be the best available for the purposes of this study (Kumar, 2005).

This method of approaching both student and teacher participants also meant that effort was made to set up all the interviews in a uniform and consistent manner in terms of an identical opening scenario (Bowden, 2005). This approach is consistent with the concept of the researcher's goal of remaining a detached and uninfluential presence during the data gathering process.

### **3.5 Semi-structured interviews**

For the purposes of gathering data, a qualitative semi-structured interview procedure was adopted for this study. A number of design and application factors formed the basis for this choice.

Firstly, in order to afford participants a space in which they could describe and explore their conceptions of TBLT in TEL environments, the format of a semi-structured interview seemed apposite. In qualitative studies, semi-structured interviews are a common means of gathering data, one reason being that qualitative methods have a tendency to move away from more structured methods of acquiring data towards methods that allow “respondents to project their own ways of defining the world” (Cohen et al., 2006, pp. 146-147). However, the space in which the semi-structured interview takes place can still maintain the required focus on the phenomenon under investigation (Bowden, 2005). At the same time, the flexibility of the semi-structured interview space allows both the respondents an exploratory space and a means of generating data that constitutes qualitatively different experiences. From these experiences, subsequent analysis of the “awareness of variation” (Prosser & Trigwell, 1997, p. 51) can take place. With this in mind, the researcher should also be aware of the need to control the flexibility of this designed research space in ways that can elicit possible variations in experience from the participants (Bruce, 1994).

Secondly, a key element of the design and effecting of a semi-structured interview framework includes the inclusion of more open questions as opposed to the generally more fixed format of a questionnaire or the more unrestricted nature of an informal

discussion. This use of more open questions, while providing a space that can elicit variations in experience, should also be approached diligently by the researcher. Specifically, the semi-structured format means that participants may at times express possible ambiguities or seemingly contradictory statements during the course of the interview. In light of this, the interviewer should be prepared from the outset of the interview to clarify such instances and to probe similar inconsistencies. When addressing the need for further clarification, the researcher should nevertheless be prepared to understand and accept that there may well be “objective contradictions” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 34) in how the participant is viewing the phenomenon under analysis. In other words, any seeking of clarification or probing of ambiguities should avoid giving the impression that the researcher is in any way undermining the credibility or robustness of the participant’s responses. By following this approach, the interviewer should ensure that the probing of any inconsistencies and suchlike is being executed in a way that is aware of ethical concerns and of the need to communicate in a sensitive manner.

On a broader phenomenographic level, during the interview, the interviewer should endeavour to perceive the phenomenon being described according to the viewpoint of the participant. Consequently, as the interview progresses, it is important that the researcher should remain aware of the ongoing need to probe for possibly contradictory statements (Bruce, 1994). Similarly, the interviewer should generally strive to bracket and set aside any preconceptions about the phenomenon under investigation (Åkerlind et al., 2005).

In addition, it has been argued that the semi-structured interview, with its more open-ended style compared to, for example, a more structured list of fixed item questions, can generate a space of greater informality. As a result, the less formal space may encourage the eliciting of more comprehensive views from the participant than might otherwise be expected (Cohen et al., 2006).

### **3.6 Data analysis**

Phenomenography can be seen as having an empirical approach and an inductive aspect (Åkerlind, 2002; Bowden, 2005). In this study, the data consist of interviews with teachers and students. The researcher will then analyse the data in order to arrive at a pool of meaning from which findings and possible developmental recommendations can be made.

As previously stated, the object of study involves the investigation of the relationship between the participants and the phenomenon itself. Analysis of the descriptions of the phenomenon shared by the participants constitutes the procedure by which this relationship is explored.

For this research methodology in general, there are a number of methods of data analysis with no universally accepted framework (González, 2010; Khan, 2014; Marton, 1986). This study broadly follows the seven-step procedure used by Dahlgren and Fallsberg (1991), subsequently described in more detail by Sjöström and Dahlgren (2002).

The seven stages can be described as follows:

- i) Familiarisation stage: This step involves reading the transcripts and becoming familiarised with the raw data. This includes reading through the transcripts several times. Correction of errors in the transcripts should also be completed at this stage. During this stage, the researcher should again aim to remain detached from the data and to avoid applying any preconceptions about ways in which the data might be interpreted.
  
- ii) Compilation stage: This step requires further reading of the transcripts in order to compile responses from participants in terms of similarities and differences in their answers to the key question. It links with variation theory in that it begins the process of ascertaining how the relationship between each participant and the phenomenon of study varies, despite their having largely experienced the same phenomenon. Again, it should be emphasised that phenomenography does not seek to make generalisations (Bowden, 2005) in the way that phenomenology might aim to do. Instead, from the participants' perception of their experience, the researcher aims to elicit the extent of the range in variation.

Furthermore, it is important to bear in mind that the number of participants who mention one aspect of the phenomenon does not need to correspond with the degree of importance ascribed to any particular category. More specifically, the aim of the researcher in phenomenographic terms is to analyse the continuum of variation in ways that particular features of a phenomenon are experienced. As such, the

statistical frequency of any specific category is unrelated to its degree of salience in terms of analysing the range of variation in experience and awareness. An example page of transcript analysis is provided in Appendix 1: Transcript analysis example page.

- iii) Condensation stage: This stage essentially seeks to identify the key elements of longer answers or descriptions of particular features given by the participants. This stage also involves the sifting through of transcripts in order to identify sections that appear irrelevant or superfluous to key points made in the participants' responses.
- iv) Preliminary grouping stage: In this stage, the researcher aims to ascribe similar specific responses or, in this case, key sections of the various transcripts into preliminary groups. Following this, the groups are carefully reviewed in order to identify any duplication of meaning in two or more separate groupings. In other words, in this stage the initial categories of description are formulated.
- v) Preliminary comparison of categories stage: This stage basically involves the review and revision of the initial category list in order to establish clear parameters for each category by going through a process of meaning comparison with other categories. In addition to this, transcripts should also be reviewed in order to determine whether the newly refined category list represents an accurate depiction of the participants' responses.

- vi) Naming the categories stage: In this stage, the researcher reviews the content of each category and assigns a name to each one to seek to capture and highlight its essential nature.
  
- vii) Contrastive comparison of categories stage: In this final stage, the researcher seeks to add a final component to the category list. This involves the identification of similarities and differences between the categories themselves. In this way, connecting themes running across the categories can be described. This expanding theme of awareness (Åkerlind, 2003), which creates a categorical representation of the ways in which the participants have described their experiences of the phenomenon and the logical relations between them (Marton & Pong, 2005), gives rise to the outcome space, in which the “qualitatively different ways in which people understand a particular phenomenon” (Marton & Pong, 2005, p. 335) and the hierarchical relationships between them are organised.

In terms of validity regarding the phenomenographic approach, this study aims to align with the following strategies, put forward by Cope (2004), which are designed to provide rigorous underpinning to any phenomenographic study:

- *The researcher’s background is acknowledged;*
- *The means by which an unbiased sample was chosen is reported;*
- *In cases where convenience samples are used the characteristics of the participants should be clearly stated, providing a background for any attempt at applying the results in other contexts;*

- *The design of interview questions is justified;*
- *The strategies taken to collect unbiased data be included;*
- *Strategies used to approach data analysis with an open mind rather than imposing an existing structure be acknowledged;*
- *The data analysis method be detailed;*
- *The researcher accounts for the processes used to control and check interpretations made throughout analysis;*
- *The results are presented in a manner which permits informed scrutiny;*
- *Categories of description should be fully described and adequately illustrated with quotes. (Cope, 2004, pp. 8-9)*

With reference to external validity, this study aims to facilitate generalisability by providing the reader with sufficient detail and evidence in order that informed decisions can be made regarding the extent to which this object of study can be deemed similar to that being considered by the reader (Mertens & McLaughlin, 2004).

With regard to upholding the reliability of this phenomenographic study, a number of steps were taken. Firstly, the interpretation of the data using the seven-step procedure detailed by Sjöström and Dahlgren (2002) helps to ensure that researcher subjectivity is managed and that the objective of maintaining control over the data interpretation method has been addressed (Cope, 2004).

Regarding the use of the literature review to support the data analysis in this study, it should be noted again that the literature review set out to provide a framework that can accommodate and inform the current study. The framework in this literature review

includes key elements such as an overview of TBLT's historical development, analysis of existing variations of approach and methodological frameworks, conceptions focussing on TBLT and TEL integration, as well as exploration of major benefits, challenges and issues identified in TBLT. At the same time, the literature review is not considered to be predictive in terms of which data are gathered or how data are analysed. In other words, data in this study were approached and analysed in ways that are consistent with those of a phenomenographic study. Therefore, although the literature review is used extensively, particularly in Chapter 5, when discussing the data, related implications and key recommendations, the data in this study were analysed without any preconceptions as to whether or not the data would relate directly to elements of the literature review in Chapter 2.

### **3.7 The outcome space**

The outcome space, which is the end result of an empirical procedure, has been described as “a hierarchically structured, multi-dimensional super-set of descriptions, where each subcomponent is a multi-faceted issue or aspect bounded by a finite range of values” (Alsop & Tompsett, 2006, p. 244).

Given that the outcome space results from empirical evidence, then its hierarchical structure should have clear origins in the data set (in this case, the semi-structured interviews with teachers and learners) from which it is derived (Alsop & Tompsett, 2006; Entwistle, 1997; Säljö, 1994); however, beyond forming a representation of the ways that the phenomenon is experienced in this specific context, the arguments are

also made that the categories in the outcome space are generalisable and relatively fixed where the phenomenon is well-defined (Marton, 1981). This leads to the contention that a given phenomenon has a limited number of categories of description, or what can be termed “collective intellect” (Marton, 1981).

The idea that an outcome space can represent all the possible categories of description to encapsulate a generalisable collective experience of a phenomenon has been challenged. In order to address the possible need to revise or change existing conceptions in some way, a number of means have been suggested. For example, Strike and Posner (1985) argue that conceptual change can take place where there is dissatisfaction with an old conception but understanding, plausibility and powerful appeal with a new one. This can be viewed against a more phenomenographic view, which may argue for what is seen as conceptual expansion (Åkerlind, 2008), in which previous conceptions are seen as incomplete but not necessarily superfluous or expendable.

Variation theory offers ways of addressing this need for possible expansion. Two examples of the means of facilitating this process are as follows:

- i) contrast, whereby the experience of one phenomenon can be compared with another, such as teaching with learning, in order to discern certain features of a phenomenon.
- ii) fusion, in which key aspects of a phenomenon are viewed as a whole to give a more complete overall representation (Åkerlind, 2008; Marton & Tsui, 2004).

Within each category of description, it should be emphasised that the aim is not to identify holistic overviews within the data set. Instead, each reading of the data seeks to locate references to degrees of variation within the category, regardless of their statistical frequency. In other words, any repeated references can be ignored as the degree of variation need only be captured once. Detailed and thorough re-readings of the data should ensure that all degrees of variation are identified in the outcome space (Marton & Booth, 1997). However, some concerns have been raised about this process, particularly in reference to the possible application, inadvertent or otherwise, of an external value system to the analysis and interpretation of items within the data set (Alsop & Tompsett, 2006). This relates to the broader issue of reflexivity (Ashmore, 1989), whereby a researcher may ignore or remain ignorant of any personal or social aspects that may affect the aim of an objective interpretation of data.

### **3.8 Summary**

This chapter has set out a clear rationale for the use of a phenomenographic approach in this study. It has also provided a detailed explanation of the Canadian research context and of the object of study itself. Following this, the chapter has presented the procedures involving the participant recruitment, the semi-structured interviews, the data analysis and the production of the outcome space in this study.

## Chapter 4: Findings

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings based on the semi-structured interviews, which focused on investigating the qualitatively different ways in which TBLT in technology enhanced contexts was experienced by the participants in the shared experience. The research questions to be addressed based on the findings are as follows:

#### Primary research question (PRQ)

*In what ways can TBLT frameworks be adapted for more effective use in online and blended contexts?*

#### Secondary research questions (SRQ1 and SRQ2)

*SRQ1: What do teachers and learners consider the main challenges and benefits of using a TBLT approach in online and blended contexts?*

*SRQ2: How can new and experienced teachers be trained and supported in using a TBLT approach in online and blended contexts?*

Following the explanation detailed in Chapter 2, specifically the definition of Marton and Booth (1997), the PRQ and SRQ1 (i.e. relating to challenges and benefits) will be addressed using a phenomenographic approach. Based on the findings, the outcome space is presented in the form of two tables. Following this, details of each of the categories of description will be explained. Within these explanations, supporting

quotations from the eighteen interview transcripts will be included. In order to portray the relationships across the categories of description, analysis will be applied to structural and referential elements. In terms of sequencing, the categories of description are presented in hierarchical form in order of ascending levels of complexity. SRQ2 (i.e. regarding teacher training and support) is investigated using a thematic analysis approach, and is addressed more fully in Chapter 5: Discussion and implications.

In order to maintain anonymity and confidentiality, data from the interview transcripts of teachers are referred to numerically as T1 (i.e. interview transcript with Teacher 1), T2, T3, etc. Data from the interview transcripts of students are similarly referred to as S1 (i.e. interview transcript with Student 1), S2, S3, etc.

## **4.2 Presentation of the outcome space**

This section presents the outcome space based on analysis of the data. In terms of phenomenography, the outcome space is considered as a “hierarchically structured, multi-dimensional super-set of descriptions” (Alsop & Tompsett, 2006, p. 244). In this study, the outcome space is presented in two tables: Table 5: Outcome space 1: Categories of description; and Table 6: Outcome space 2: Structural and referential aspects. Table 5 presents the six categories of description in hierarchical order of complexity with category six constituting the most complex category. Following the definition of Marton and Booth (1997), the categories of description arise from the qualitatively different ways in which participants experience the phenomenon.

Table 6 presents the overall outcome space, which includes both the structural and referential aspects. In this representation, the structural aspects are condensed into three main elements. These elements move from TBLT in TEL contexts being an approach to language learning that is further enabled by technology as a background concept (i.e. elements which facilitate design, delivery and participation rather than actual language acquisition), to one that is underpinned by a range of skills and processes relating mainly to the individual, through to one in which second language acquisition takes place in an interactive, collaborative and technologically-enhanced context.

In the overall outcome space, the three referential aspects further refine the shift from the background context, to the individual, to the role of interaction and collaboration in the group. In this way, the structural and referential aspects can be analysed in conjunction with each other in order to investigate more fully the dimensions of variation between the categories of description.

In this chapter, no further conclusions or recommendations are made in terms of adaptations to TBLT frameworks in online or blended contexts or with regard to recommendations for teacher training and professional development programmes. These factors are addressed in Chapter 5: Discussion and implications.

**Outcome space 1: Categories of description**

Category	Description
C1	Technology as a factor in the convenience of technology-mediated TBLT
C2	Technology as a factor in the enrichment of the educational experience in technology-mediated TBLT
C3	Technological skills level as a factor in technology-mediated TBLT
C4	Communicative needs and processes to support the task cycle as factors being influenced by the use of technology-mediated TBLT
C5	The nature of communication as a factor influenced by the use of technology-mediated TBLT
C6	The nature of feedback as a factor being influenced by the use of technology-mediated TBLT

*Table 5: Outcome space 1: Categories of description*

**Outcome space 2: Structural and referential aspects**

Structural aspects	Referential aspects		
	Context	Individual	Group
<b>Technology enabling</b>	C1, C2		
<b>Skills and processes required</b>		C3, C4	
<b>Technology-enhanced language development</b>			C4, C5, C6

*Table 6: Outcome space 2: Structural and referential aspects*

### **4.3 Categories of description of technology-mediated TBLT in online or blended contexts**

This section presents detailed findings relating to the six categories of description with reference to the increasingly complex hierarchical sequence and to the key differentiating elements between juxtaposed categories. Comments by participants are added throughout this chapter to support the overall discussion of results.

For ease of organisation, the analysis of each category of description is also divided into three stages, which broadly correspond to the three main stages typically found in traditional TBLT frameworks: the three stages of pre-task, on-task and language focus. Although participants may not make specific reference to these stages, they provide useful parameters for anchoring perceptions within well-recognised terminology, as “viewing task implementation in terms of the three phases of *pre*, *during*, and *post* clearly indicates where methodological choices are relevant in task-based learning” (Skehan, 1996, pp. 57).

At the same time, consideration is applied during the analysis to ensure that making any potential recommendations for adaptations to TBLT frameworks does not take as axiomatic the requirement to maintain the three-stage format. In other words, the three stages are instrumental in maintaining a guiding connection with existing frameworks of TBLT, although it is recognised that some aspects of the data may not seamlessly align with how the stages are perceived in more traditional classroom-based TBLT contexts. Where direct alignment with one of the three stages is unclear, this is noted in the analysis.

#### 4.3.1 Category one: Technology as a factor in the convenience of technology-mediated TBLT

In category one, technology-mediated TBLT in a blended context is experienced as a construct in which technology is a factor affecting convenience.

##### **Pre-task stage**

In terms of convenience, a number of aspects were experienced in the pre-task stages. With reference to research projects, flexibility of time means that students are able to conduct the required research individually at convenient times for each student in pre-task or language focus stages:

*S2: Yes, it's good because many students can arrange their time to research and finding the useful information and the resources by their own time.*

##### **On-task stage**

With regard to convenience, the work process among students is facilitated by the ease with which they can work independently and by which files can be electronically saved and shared in the context.

*S10: ...so we can work on the same documents at that, from the different distance and the documents will be automatically saved and shared among three or four persons...*

Likewise, the communicative flexibility of cellphones in terms of peer-to-peer communication is seen as a positive aspect:

*S4: As far as I'm concerned communicating with our students online is more convenient especially cellphone. We can talk to our classmates whenever we want.*

### **Language focus stage**

In terms of actions related to language focus, with particular reference to feedback, in this case, individual learners experience the phenomenon as being convenient when accessing grades or potentially other types of feedback.

*S7 But there are definitely some advantage using technology in the teaching or studying English language, for example, feedback. I think the student want to know their feedback of their test or procedure of their study, some school or some institution. I think it is more convenient to check their score or their result of their study.*

In terms of convenient actions and functions afforded by the context and experienced in online and blended TBLT, the convenience for teachers (and, consequently, for learners) of almost instant confirmation of error types when dealing with a language focus is seen as a clear benefit.

*T4: I anticipate these errors will come up. Sometimes I'm wrong, it's not those errors and I wouldn't know that so quickly, so automatically if I didn't see everything on the screen at the same time. They're working synchronously, I'm watching them work synchronously, and I can jump in when it's necessary or because it's all in one place*

#### 4.3.2 Category two: Technology as a factor in the enrichment of the educational experience in technology-mediated TBLT

In category two, participants experience technology-mediated TBLT in a blended context as a construct in which technology is a factor influencing the enrichment of the educational experience. Regarding differences from category one, category two extends the conceptualisation of TBLT in TEL environments beyond the facilitative convenience of technology to its conceptualisation as one in which the educational experience is perceived as enriched on the part of the individual.

##### **Pre-task stage**

Regarding the enrichment of the educational experience of category two, this category includes the perception that the online or blended context offers such a range of potential learning resources that access to digital resources should be encouraged rather than closed off. Although this view may be at odds with a more traditional deployment of the TBLT approach, whereby students work on tasks using only their own linguistic resources, the potential benefits to be gained from available resources are seen as too great to ignore.

*T2: I would also add a possibility for them to access anything they might feel might help them in achieving the task. I don't see a problem with that. It might not really be part of the approach but it's real life. You ask for help when you need help. You don't wait for the project to be over and then go back to ask for help.*

Given the flexibility and range of options afforded by the context, there is the perception that richer and more complex types of task are possible.

*T1: The time constraints aren't there in an online environment that you would have in a classroom setting and so then perhaps you could do a multi-layered task.*

### **On-task stage**

In terms of greater learning enrichment during task stages, the use of TBLT in TEL contexts also means that an individual learner may benefit from a greater range of choice when addressing task requirements. In other words, although task requirements may remain broadly similar for a group of learners, the means by which task requirements are met could vary according to learner preferences.

*T2: Also, when it comes to type of tasks, giving the students an option to choose, like a field that they are interested in, something that they would actually use in the future, might actually help them to be more engaged and to feel that it's really meaningful.*

*T4: Some students made fun diagrams on paper, some students used again various apps, I gave them a choice what they wanted to illustrate the similarities and differences.*

### **Language focus stage**

With reference to enrichment, in addition to the far greater range of choice available to learners when deciding how best to approach a task, there is also the perception that by allowing them to choose elements such as task type and optimum resources, there is a higher probability of engagement and motivation during phases of feedback and language focus.

*T2: Then any language problems are going to be dealt with with more enthusiasm and I think it's going to be more beneficial than having a teacher give a task, a specific task, a specific topic that they need to work with.*

#### **4.3.3 Category three: Technological skills level as a factor in technology-mediated TBLT**

In category three, technology-mediated TBLT in a blended or online environment is experienced as a construct in which a learner's level of technological skills pertaining to the task and context is a contributing factor to the effectiveness of the educational experience. This category differs from the preceding one in that the conceptualisation of the phenomenon is here seen less in terms of a contextual background, and more in

terms of specific technological skills required on the part of individual learners if they are to maximise their learning potential within the environment.

The experience of the phenomenon includes the perception that addressing a skills deficit regarding an individual's level of technological skills can have a positive impact on the learning experience, and that lacking the necessary technological skills can have a negative impact in terms of stress, demotivation and the overall learning process.

### **Pre-task stage**

In terms of technological skills, in order to achieve the necessary skills to perform tasks effectively in a technology-mediated TBLT context, there is a perception that customised learning on the part of individual learners may be necessary before the target language tasks are undertaken.

*S5: Some people, they don't know how to use the iChatting or communication program. If class can teach them about this then provide assignment, at the beginning it will be easier one and then thereafter get used of it. I think will be much easier.*

*T2: Depending on where they're coming from and what experience they have in their life and work, they might not be so accustomed to using technology even for some simple tasks in everyday life, like emailing, or PowerPoint presentation or something like that.*

Even if students have some familiarity with the types of technological skills required, it may be the case that the apps and other software that are typically used in their home countries are somewhat different. Learning how to navigate and use the necessary apps and software may also include a language component.

*S7: I think the students need to learn the way of using technology because each international student are familiar with their own application in their own country and if the application is made by their mother tongue.*

*S7: It's the same as other tools of learning English. I saw some people have some problem to use the [LMS] because the manual is about English, written by English.*

The perceptions in this category include an element of acceptance by individual learners in terms of the possible need to learn to use new software.

*S1: Okay. First, using online to learning English or any language is convenient but difficult to first setting up. For me when I start to use... first it took a long time how to use to figure out.*

Therefore, the learning how to use new software tends to be seen as an expected element that may be involved when starting any new educational course or programme.

*T8: I keep running into students who don't know how to do simple things like cut and paste. And that becomes a real challenge because, how can you possibly*

*be in an online learning environment or just a learning environment and not know those things?*

### **On-task stage**

Perceptions regarding levels of technological skills extend to ways in which this aspect has an impact on the effectiveness of how well an individual learner is able to contribute to a group in a TEL-based TBLT context. In terms of variation of experience, having a deficit of TEL skills is considered less of a problem if groups have, by accident or design, an individual learner who is skilled with relevant technological resources.

*T1: It depends on-- the group members might have different levels of knowledge of technology. If you're in a group where somebody is very tech savvy, you really have a big advantage for a presentation.*

At the same time, there is the conception that this might be seen as potentially giving an unfair advantage to a group with an individual learner already having the requisite or appropriate technological skills.

*T1: If you have somebody who's very good at editing and knows how to take the videos and do all that then you could have a really nice presentation and get better marks just because somebody in your group knew how to do that. That might be a challenge and something that the students might not feel is fair especially if they're randomly put into groups.*

As well as a perception of possible unfairness, situations where individual group members have differing levels of needs in terms of technological skills are seen as potentially detrimental to the effectiveness of TBLT in TEL contexts.

*S8: I think the only challenge for completing the language learning task is maybe some people don't have the right or the same knowledge from others with computer tasks. I think maybe this is the only challenge.<sup>1</sup>*

#### 4.3.4 Category four: Communicative needs and processes to support the task cycle as factors being influenced by the use of technology-mediated TBLT

In category four, the experience of TBLT in a TEL environment is viewed as one which shapes and influences the communicative needs and processes required in order for the TBLT approach and its related methodologies to be effective. In the previous category, the focus centred on technological skills needed by the individual learner. Category four differs from that in the perception that effective use of TBLT in TEL contexts demands supportive technological processes that address the needs of both the individual and the group.

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<sup>1</sup> Note that the absence here of a 'Language focus stage' for Category three is deliberate and reflects the data summary in Table 11: Summary of benefits and challenges.

## **Pre-task stage**

A key area involves communication that takes place in the pre-task stages. First of all, ensuring that all students view the task as achievable within the blended context is seen as a significant communicative need.

*T6: I think in an online environment that has to be explained, before a task is done you really have to go through it with them to show them that it's possible.*

Likewise, there is a perception that the need for a clear demonstration or model outcome may be more important in this type of context.

*T3: I do think it's important to have a sample and have instructions. I think it's also important to role play and model how you would go through doing that.*

A further element to the pre-task stage is the need to ensure that learners are aware of how and where to find resources which may be of use to them during the task cycle.

*T2: I would also add a possibility for them to access anything they might feel might help them in achieving the task.*

*T2: Having a teacher maybe suggest resources that he or she finds useful for the process would be great.*

The greater need for clarity in steps and instructions is further extended to a perceived need for learners to be aware of their role and responsibilities in the task stage. There is

also the perception that there may be a need for an approval step or contractual element to this process.

*T1: I get them to give me a plan. A very detailed plan of who's going to do what and their timeline. That has to be approved before they actually go and start the task or start the project or whatever they're doing.*

*T7: What I ask my students to do is put them into groups, and then I tell them that, "Before you go away from here you need to tell me, give me a list of who's going to do what." It's a, preparing a PowerPoint, b, making a survey, and I said, "You need to keep me updated".*

### **On-task stage**

There is also the perception that any provision of resources for use during the task cycle may conflict to some extent with the tenet that, within the on-task stage of TBLT, students should mainly draw upon their own linguistic resources, rather than have recourse to additional support mechanisms.

*T2: As teachers, we are not supposed to give them a set of grammatical structures, vocabulary or any language that we expect them to use. They are supposed to start with their activity, their task and then as a result we might deal with some problems that arise while the task is being completed.*

To facilitate effective progress through the on-task stage, there is a perception that ensuring learners remain on track to complete a task successfully may require additional planning or supervision.

*T1: The challenges for a blended environment might be just to make sure that the task is being followed the way that I had planned it.*

*T3: You really have to be reaching out to the students, making sure that they're on task because you don't have those clues again as in the classroom.*

There is a perception that creating a more formalised process of documentation in terms of task progress can help learners remain focussed and on task. This can take the form of self-reflection by students individually.

*T1: They might just log in and say, "This week my plan is to do this." Then the next week they would log in and say, "Well I tried to do this last week but I got up to here so this week my plan is to do that."*

In a blended environment, the option to conduct the monitoring process on a face-to-face basis is perceived as a useful approach to ensuring students remain on task.

*T7: So it was a schedule I made, like any of us would make a schedule, right so, that's one way and then I monitor them. So every time like I used to meet them once a week, so the second time I meet them I ask them how far has it gone, have you met your deadline? I think it's important to monitor.*

*T3: Lots of things... really starting with them, and their self-awareness like, "Do you think you're on task? Are you understanding things? What do you think you need to learn more?" Giving some probes and prompts to keep them in the direction that they need to go.*

There is also the perception that monitoring may need to be stricter than in a traditional classroom-based TBLT environment.

*T1: Online, I would have - I would make it really even stricter. They would have to check in with me.*

*T7: ...but think of an environment when I don't meet my students, and then of course again you have some kind of an Excel sheet ready where you put in your not done, not done, have done, on the way, you know, in progress, so that's all I've been monitoring.*

### **Language focus stage**

The need to create formalised ongoing feedback mechanisms (in this instance meaning ones that are primarily focussed on areas such as participation and task progress rather than on language issues) to which students and teachers have either frequent or continuous access is also perceived as an effective technique for the successful achievement of task objectives.

*T3: One thing I have that I've seen and done is have folks summarise what their participation in the activity was and have them summarise what the group did and make sure that it matches up. If you set up a group space well, in a discussion forum for example or wiki, you can be going in and looking at the revision history and then seeing who's participating, and again reach out to those folks who aren't maybe as engaged.*

The process of self-reflection can be opened up to involve other learners so that the reflective process involves advice from learners who have experienced similar issues.

*T1: Maybe other students could chime in and say, "You know I had that problem too, I overcame it in this way." Just sort of have a discussion about some of the things that they are doing.*

As well as self-reflection and related feedback from other learners, there is the belief that ongoing pair or group reflections closely monitored by the instructor are beneficial in achieving successful task outcomes. Allowing students to work through this reflective process with little teacher intervention is also perceived as a positive goal.

*T5: You could do just many consultations with them, in a pair or individually, if you sense that there's some kind of challenges in the group, or you know even better yet maybe it creates an opportunity for the pair or the group to discuss or talk about their contributions to the activity, maybe create some kind of questionnaire or evaluation checklist that they could complete and discuss as a*

*group, because that maybe removes the teacher and allows the students to address those sorts of things.*

In addition to the importance of these feedback processes, there is also the perception that including a group feedback component as part of the formally assessed elements of an assignment or course can be an effective means of facilitating this process.

*T1: At the end, I would have sort of a group feedback and have something where they would have to write about, how this whole thing went. Depending on the nature of the course and nature of the task, maybe have that group feedback as part of the marks.*

#### 4.3.5 Category five: The nature of communication as a factor influenced by the use of technology-mediated TBLT

In category five, participants experience technology-mediated TBLT in blended or online contexts as having a major influence on aspects of communicative styles and interactions over the course of the task cycle. This differs from the preceding category in that the focus shifts from being on the supportive processes and needs, to a focus on the nature and styles of the types of communication taking place among participants.

### **Pre-task stage**

In the pre-task stage, there is the perception that this type of context requires a greater emphasis on clear steps and instructions from the teacher in order to facilitate an effective task process.

*T2: I would expect the teacher to give, myself, or whoever else is doing it, to give a set of steps that the students need to follow in order to complete the task.*

### **On-task stage**

The impacts of technology-mediated TBLT on communication between participants during the task cycle are seen in the variation in their experience of social interaction within the context. This variation includes a perception that the experience of TBLT in TEL contexts can be detrimental to the amount of social interaction that takes place during the task cycle.

*T1: I find that a lot of times the social, the dynamics aren't there. The social interaction's not there. That I find a lot of times with online. They tend to be more about the task rather than the learning. The task - any kind of task-based curriculum would be tricky online just because of the lack of social contacts.*

At the same time, there is a perception that a particular aspect of social dynamics, in this case small talk between learners, can have a positive impact on the achievement of task outcomes.

*S1: I think small talk will facilitate the completion of task more smoothly, but I don't think without small talk, completely prohibits the completion of task because if all the members are go for the task completion, have a goal, then it doesn't matter.*

During stages of the task cycle where learners are engaged in negotiated meaning making, a number of impacts upon communicative styles and the decision-making process are perceived. For example, due to the group-based aspect of TBLT in traditional contexts, a degree of patience and tolerance on the part of group members towards peers is considered an important element in helping to ensure successful completion of target outcomes. However, in online contexts, the need for a tolerant and patient attitude towards peer group members is considered to be even greater.

*S3: You can be more mature to doing more group work because you have to tolerance people more. You have to be patient. That will also be good to - Yes, I think online will be a way of prefer more about this characteristic, what I just said because you will - some about tolerance, you may learn more about in a face-to-face conversation. But to be patient, actually, I prefer more online, right? You have to wait for people to respond and you have to sit down the phone or computer to wait people to respond. That is take long.*

This perception also implies that technology-mediated TEL contexts, as well as requiring higher levels of tolerance and patience, may also be instrumental in fostering these very attributes. At the same time, there is also the recognition that, at times, these traits might well be put to the test in a technology-mediated TEL context.

*S5: Also it takes more effort—no? We have to work hard to communicate on there. Because with speaking you can be fast and we can react very fast, but with typing and talking on Internet, sometimes it will be slower. If there's a very complicate assignment or study mission, then I think it's easier to stay in the group to talk in the same room rather than talk online.*

A variation of this experience is the notion that the demands of online communication may be such that an adverse impact on actual language learning is experienced.

*S7: Yes. In my case, it helped me to do group work in English situation, but it didn't help me to improve my English skills.*

Regarding the effects of technology-mediated TBLT on aspects of communication etiquette, a number of factors emerge from the data. One effect involves the wish to avoid inadvertently committing a social faux pas or risking offence otherwise. For example, in this environment, learners may be more concerned with issues surrounding acceptable forms of address to an extent that is significantly higher than in a face-to-face context or even in a classroom.

*S2: The first problem was how to address to the person. Students, I don't care. It was okay just call their first name, but to the teacher or professor that was my challenge. It was a good - it's good challenge too, and it's good practice for future. Because teacher know our level and they may be more generous than other native speakers.*

Along with the impetus to comply with expected standards of etiquette in communications with teachers, students may also accept the tendency for other students to postpone or curtail communications with little, if any, explanation.

*S3: But if we move this such thing online, that will slow down this process.*

*S3: Maybe people are lazy. They don't like to type. Normally in terms of talk about project online, people are not really active because they think you can finish later. Because people are not actually meeting each other. They don't have that force to get things done. People individually, which is think, "We can that later." All people think about that will be not get it done, right?*

*S4: Compared with face-to-face communication, on social media is less effective because we can't see each other, and if someone has a problem they don't want to communicate, or there are some distractions, things. They may disappear and no response anymore.*

Another aspect of language etiquette experienced in such contexts relates to how acceptable levels of formality may be dependent on factors, such as the medium, the participant and the type of communication.

For example, there is a belief that there is a certain standard of language formality to which students should aim to adhere. This perception may at times appear somewhat vague in terms of what is meant by concepts, such as formality, politeness and acceptable language within the context of technology-mediated TBLT.

*T6: I usually tell students that when you're writing online, I tell them that I know it's - you think it's informal, but I ask them to stay away from chat language. I tell them not to use short forms. I tell them to get down that tone and that style, but they still must write full sentences.*

*T2: Even though they are peers working on a project to complete the task, they're not supposed to use a very informal way of communicating, because it's still an academic setting, and they're completing the task for an academic purpose, as they would sometime in the future in the workplace. Some level of informality would be perfectly fine, but we definitely need to make them aware of where the line is.*

*T5: I think more of a problem is just expressing themselves clearly and really getting their opinion across, then it is about politeness.*

Regarding the nature of more socially-orientated online language, there is a perception that language usage taught in English language courses may not reflect online language usage by native speakers in regular higher education programmes outside the field of ELT.

*S6: If you want to write an email or want to write something online in the assignment, never use this short form. Never use one word and then we have to use the whole world and very long sentence and very complicated structure to prove our English skill is very good, but in the real-life, no one write in this way. When I into the program I think, "Oh my god, I cannot understand", so I have*

*to ask them, "What's this exact meaning?" Then they would teach me to what was exactly mean.*

In other words, participants in TEL contexts often perceive a clear distinction between the language requirements of academic assignments and the language demands of less formal communication within the broader academic or social context.

On a related note, although not specifically linked to levels of formality, there are also indications that the TEL context is well suited to act as a bridge between the communicative demands of the classroom and those of the outside world.

*T2: It reflects real life more than what's happening on the handout in a classroom, I would say. Whenever they enter the workforce or whatever they do in their free time, they probably are not going to come to a physical location to meet with their colleagues or friends to complete something. I believe that more and more things are being done online, so why not start with that in the ESL classrooms as well?*

Aside from levels of formality, there are other perceptions that the use of language within TEL contexts may be significantly different from that in traditional contexts. One such aspect concerns perceived differences between levels of directness or honesty in traditional classroom settings and in those of technology-mediated TBLT contexts. This bears some connection with the nature of feedback that is explored in category six (Section 4.3.6), but in this category it is focused more specifically on language usage. Here, there is a perception that students tend to be more open and direct in terms of

language usage in online contexts, particularly if comments are anonymised, or if peers are personally unknown to each other.

*T4: And they said that, "It feels better to comment on somebody else's work when they don't know who it is." They can be more honest when they offer their comments.*

*S5: But in online it's easier, because we don't see others people face. It's easier for us to express our opinion. I think that is a good way.*

*S9: If we, in our class, we know each other we are always nicely and give the feedback. I think it will be different online...more honest if we didn't meet before.*

Another aspect involves perceived differences between the nature of reaching consensus or compromise in traditional classroom settings compared to technology-mediated TBLT contexts. In the TBLT approach, the successful achievement of task objectives often rests on effective discussion and decision-making processes among student groups. Frequently, the decision-making involves steps, such as choosing among viable options, ranking activities and assessing issues according to set criteria, all of which may require the need for compromise applied with consideration for the views of others. In a classroom-based context, where student groups may be relative strangers and might comprise learners of varying ages, nationalities and backgrounds, such processes can demand significant interpersonal and intercultural communicative skills. In online contexts, however, there is a perception that this more anonymised context may facilitate the process of effective negotiation in order to achieve a

consensus through compromises which are more reflective of group opinions as a whole.

*S5: We tend to maintain the friendly, have peaceful in the group. We don't argue much. So, if we talk face-to-face sometimes will be less easier for us to express our real thinking. How we really think is difficult to express... online we don't see peoples' face so we don't really - we care less, what if they are angry or they are not happy. But if we see them, they're not happy or they're trying to argue more, then we'll say, "Okay, I can agree with you."*

*S5: Fortunately, is attending a group, but only the people who is the strongest mind, then everyone take his opinion as a result. Usually, if we are doing online, maybe we'll have another totally different result of that.*

*T8: Depending on the type of student or the student's educational background sometimes it's easier for them to give their opinions online when it's not face-to-face, because they feel more comfortable typing, or they just feel more comfortable being removed from situation. They don't feel comfortable actually being dynamic in a real-life situation, but being online I think sometimes gives them more ease with that.*

*T8: They really didn't like giving their opinions, they didn't want me to ask their opinions, and they didn't want to say anything unless they knew that everybody else felt the same way. And that made discussions really difficult, but when we did things online it was actually a lot easier.*

As well as perceptions relating to issues of formality, directness and compromise, there is also the belief that a technology-mediated environment gives rise to a new form of language and communication.

*S6: I think technology now not only a method, it is a new language. It is a language because one icon sometime and the different express their different tone, so it already become a new language for nowadays use. I think probably in our language teaching we need to know, because language is a life language, it won't be form in which form. I think it's a part of culture, it's a part of language. It's not only a skills or just a technology. Technology itself is a language.*

*S3: If I doing completely online, I will lose to communicate face-to-face communication. You will actually not interact with people, with some eye contact, a language. Some people, when you talk to people, they ways to correct you directly when you actually face-to-face communicating.*

*T6: In an online interaction, I somehow feel that it's fair, because it's like you're online with that person, and you're not having to deal with the body language, you're not having to deal with the expressions. Yes, you can go into the smiley faces and all the rest of it.*

In other words, as well as dealing with such constructs as task demands, language requirements, intercultural communication and technological considerations, the location of TBLT within TEL environments also invokes the perception that

participants are negotiating task achievement through the medium of new forms of language and through the application of this language in terms of function and meaning.

### **Language focus stage**

One aspect of variations of perception in this area is the degree to which learning takes place. In some instances, there are concerns that the demands of technology may at times supersede the requirements of the language learning process. Such cases imply the absence of any language-related feedback within the collaborative context.

*S7: I prefer not to involve the online or the technology way of teaching because I prefer the person way of the teaching because it's a study of language... they can't survive without technology. I think it's not about the process of learning English. You're just learning skills of technology.*

The potential for anonymous peer feedback is experienced with some variation regarding positivity. In terms of allowing learners to be more open and direct with feedback comments, there may be less concern about possibly causing friction or conflict.

*T4: I polled the students afterwards, I've asked them individually "How do you feel about having other students comment on your thesis statements and then on your essays?" and they said that, "It feels better to comment on somebody else's work when they don't know who it is." They can be more honest when they offer their comments and, perhaps, it's less - I'm not - antagonistic but if someone has*

*a bad relationship in the classroom with somebody else, they can still offer suggestions to each other and not have to work together.*

The changing nature of communication in technology-mediated TBLT contexts is perceived in certain areas of feedback, such as in cases where students upload materials to a more public forum (e.g. a discussion section of an LMS platform) for the purpose of collaboration or peer feedback. The public forum may lead to a higher sense of ownership and to a greater degree of importance attached to peer feedback. This may invoke higher levels of motivation in terms of task completion, but it can also involve more concerns about whether or not the feedback communicated is an accurate reflection of the reviewer's actual opinions.

*S9: I prefer face-to-face. Because when you write a sentence, I cannot see your face, and I cannot know your emotion. I don't know what in your heart to tell me about these things. I think, because word is just word, it cannot - cannot have difficulty to get the meaning of the word back to feeling.*

*Interviewer: Let me just check if I understand. You're saying, if you received feedback from another person, if you cannot see the face or hear the voice, then it's sometimes difficult to understand the emotion or the real meaning of what they're saying?*

*S9: Yes, about the feedback. Because you leave a comment is you're thinking about this thing, and I put in my opinion and another. Because if you give the*

*feedback for my video, I really want to know what you're thinking about. What you feel about my video.*

#### 4.3.6 Category six: The nature of feedback as a factor being influenced by the use of technology-mediated TBLT

In category six, the experience of technology-mediated TBLT in a blended or online environment is viewed as a construct which influences the nature of the methods and styles in the feedback process. Category six differs from category five, which primarily focusses on the nature of communication between participants, in that the focus moves to the nature of feedback in technology-mediated contexts. This represents the highest degree of complexity in the hierarchical structure of the category of descriptions, whereby analysis, correction and feedback regarding areas, such as language, task performance, group collaboration and recommendations, are affected by the technologically-mediated context.

##### **Pre-task stage**

Before the task, it is considered beneficial that students be provided with questionnaires, or similar, to complete on an ongoing basis during the task cycle. Following tasks, teachers can then collate feedback in order to target common learner needs more effectively.

*T2: It will probably involve some kind of questionnaire that the students would be given probably before starting the task, so that during the process they can write any notes of what was difficult and what they needed help with. Obviously, after the task, any themes that are common for the whole class would be addressed either in a traditional way or maybe through another activity that might help the students.*

As a way to mitigate student concerns about a diminished level of access to teacher feedback, providing students with details of a teacher's online availability is also considered useful.

*T8: I guess being available and ready to answer any concerns that they have, definitely being online you have to have some sort of parameters for availability.*

*T2: The teacher would probably be monitoring, being available for help either online or in person. Since we're talking about blended or online environments, it would make sense for the teacher to be available online as part of the learning group for any help that might be there.*

### **On-task stage**

Beyond concerns about personal loss of face on the part of students, a further consequence may be the avoidance of giving peer feedback to other learners out of consideration for their own potential loss of face in a more public forum.

*S10: I feel with technology, if there's mistakes, it is harder for me to correct that mistakes, but without technology, for example, if we're just chatting persons, sometimes we, we also make mistakes, but it's just done orally, right? You cannot correct it because you care about other people and you care how other people see you.*

However, with other methods of communication, such as texting or messaging in the course of task completion, there is the perception that errors may be considered unimportant or irrelevant in relation to the tangible task outcomes.

*S3: But online, if you chat with somebody or message with somebody, they may not care about your language or your grammar or the way you text. You're just getting the meaning of it and they will response, they will not actually correct or make you to learn English by chatting or messaging.*

Similarly, in online contexts, there is a perception that interrupting a messaging-based conversation in order to address errors by other contributors is less likely to occur.

*S4: Yes, like for example I say a sentence to you and then you found, you have a problem of grammar here, you cannot say, "You do something, you should say this." I think this is kind - oh yeah, so next time when I see some similar things, "Have you noticed the problem? Have you tried to avoid them?" Yes, because speaking, I think speaking is weak for me... but speaking, you have to find someone to speak to, and they can figure out what sort of problem you have.*

As a result, face-to-face may be considered preferable for communications involving feedback if a greater focus on accuracy-based feedback is required.

*S3: I think communicating with people in the actual world, face-to-face is very important that they will - most people wish or they friendly will correct you.*

*S2: I rather say face-to-face is good rather than the online. Yes, because online we have to type, like writing but face-to-face we can communicate and we can correct when the other classmate made mistakes they just - by saying something to the classmate.*

At the same time, there is also a perception that such changes to the methodology of handling feedback may lead to a number of impacts. When performing a task before the feedback process, the impacts are perceived as potentially involving a variation in positive or negative outcomes. On the more negative side, there is a concern about whether the desired feedback might actually take place.

*S3: If you ask some people somebody, they may not have time in that moment, they will delay that response, so that goes on and on.*

### **Language focus stage**

With regard to feedback in blended contexts, this is also perceived in terms of potentially beneficial challenges that include having to adjust expectations about the immediacy of available feedback.

*S6: Today, if we just to, face to our equipment, then there's no feedback immediately, so we need comfort by ourselves. At that time, yes. Much more challenge but more benefits, yes.*

These expectations include the idea that, in a TEL environment, students may require additional support mechanisms in order to complete tasks effectively.

*S7: I think, including me, most international students want to know their feedback immediately. If they started with the teacher in class, not the online, they could have a feedback immediately from their teachers and maybe the teachers can provide their student some tips, extra knowledge, if they use the - they don't use the online or technology way in the teaching English.*

A more positive variation on delayed feedback is the perception that slowing down or delaying the feedback process can allow more time for reflection and possibly more effective and considered feedback. This perception is seen as a positive factor when students revisit and review a task performance.

*T1: A lot of benefits because once the presentation's done and it's been uploaded and it's been seen by the teacher the student has a fresh eye looking at the presentation again. Probably there's been a lapse of time. That gives them a chance to be a little more objective about what they did.*

*T3: I'm actually very slow to process things so it's two days after a meeting is when I have my aha moment. The same thing for the students in a blended environment.*

With reference to both the teacher's increasingly facilitative role and perceived levels of access to teachers, there is the belief that students may actually have greater access to the teacher when in an online context. However, this also implies that there is something like a synchronous element to a blended environment or fixed synchronous times (possibly optional for students) in an online context.

*T4: They certainly have more access to me because I'm marking some of their stuff in Google Docs, so they might see me online at the same time that they're online. They might ask me a question and I can answer it while it's pertinent... I can focus on needs and class more by seeing where they're making mistakes.*

In addition, there are also beliefs regarding changes to methodological factors surrounding the nature of communication methods and styles relating to feedback when experiencing TBLT in a blended or online environment.

Regarding the task cycle, there is the perception that specific feedback mechanisms should be embedded within the task stages to facilitate an effective feedback process in a blended or online TEL context.

*T1: One of the things might be to build something into the task where they have to go back and look at their grammar and look at their pronunciation. If it is a video-taped presentation, one thing would be to do a self-check list at the end.*

*T2: Once the task is completed, something like a review or consolidation of whatever was happening and making sure that any problems that arise whether they are language related or not, they are dealt with in the next stage of the learning process.*

*T1: If there's something where we can watch it together on screen and we can discuss it then yes, I would definitely go over that and try to build that into my curriculum so that I have a tutorial at the end.*

There is the perception that technology can be used to monitor student needs during task elements. This may involve visible errors during task completion or evidence of problematic areas during peer feedback. As students may also witness these errors and needs, this can provide reassuring evidence to both learners and teachers of where needs should be addressed.

*T4: I wait for them first, so they type in their answers, they vote, or they make suggestions and I'll eliminate the ones that they, let's say these are the wrong and these answers are wrong, else I'll ask them to tell the class why do you think that these answers are wrong. I only correct them if the students were wrong with saying that answer's wrong. I also would step in and eliminate any answers that repeat.*

A further perception of the feedback process within TBLT in TEL contexts concerns its impact on the building of knowledge on the part of the teacher. Specifically, when following a TBLT approach, teachers often anticipate student errors or problems that may arise during the course of the task cycle. When the approach is followed in a TEL context, there is the perception that it can be easier for the teacher to ascertain quickly whether the anticipated errors were accurate predictions or whether alternative types of feedback are required.

*T4: I anticipate these errors will come up. Sometimes I'm wrong, it's not those errors and I wouldn't know that so quickly, so automatically if I didn't see everything on the screen at the same time. They're working synchronously, I'm watching them work synchronously, and I can jump in when it's necessary or because it's all in one place.*

The immediacy of this transparent feedback on the teacher's anticipation of student needs gives rise to the idea that the TEL context provides opportunities for teachers to create new knowledge based on evidence of student needs as revealed in the tangible task outcomes.

*T4: I think my eyes were opened. I've taught for 20 years and I thought to the second part of the - let's see, what I remember. The third conditional when using Socratic, I thought they would have more trouble developing the result clause - not the "if clause". But when they started - because that's what I remember correcting - when I was walking around the classroom and students were doing it on paper. But when I saw it on the screen, they weren't having problems with*

*the result clause. They were having problems with the condition. That tells me that I need to go back and refocus on some more modelling.*

Following the perception that teachers adopt a more facilitative role when using TBLT in TEL contexts, there is also the belief that learners adopt a more active role in giving feedback. There may be a perception that teacher feedback and marking is somewhat lessened as the peer feedback that is given by learners can be monitored more easily. In turn, this may enable the teacher to gain greater awareness of the relevance and applicability of the peer feedback taking place. As a result, a teacher's role and workload may be affected by this change.

*T4: I'm doing less correcting, I'm maybe agreeing more with student comments a lot. It's not surprising anymore to see students offering the same suggestions to other students that I might offer. Sometimes, I won't. It changes my role - I'm not as hands-on, I'm more often observer, and I step in when somebody needs me.*

With reference back to the shifting roles of the teacher and the learner detailed earlier in this category, these changes in role are also perceived to have impacts on the methodology of giving and receiving feedback in the task cycle. A key impact perceived is that the online environment may provide effective opportunities for students to provide peer feedback before any teacher feedback.

*T4: the students will have a chance to also anonymously comment, to make suggestions on thesis statements. From there I might jump in and offer my own*

*comments on comments or offer my own suggestions, but I wait till the students have a chance to do that.*

*T7: So that was one thing or I was talking about a tool that I use - VoiceThread for example that's again a collaborative approach. So my students make comments, and then other students comment on what students have said.*

*S8: When you are practising to with other students, classmates you also are able to teach them and teach and learn from them.*

This change to the methodology is seen as a way for learners to apply learning in practical communicative ways through a safe and possibly anonymous feedback method, which may foster consolidation and the building of knowledge.

*T4: The benefit is that I'm not the only one offering suggestions or comments, so the students are using what they've learned in class about what makes a good thesis statement, for example, to use that knowledge and share it.*

As well as perceptions of feedback which relate to the individual's perspective and to methodological impacts on TBLT in TEL contexts, there are also perceptions relating to feedback processes in group or more public forums.

When engaged in the task cycle in an online forum, there are variations in the experience from a student perspective. The collaborative nature of task completion means that in

online contexts, there is often a wider audience for any communications as well as the potential for broader public viewing.

This may raise the stakes for learners in terms of loss of face. Errors and mistakes that may focus correction or feedback on an individual within the group can be perceived as sources of discomfort or embarrassment.

*S10: I would say in China, it is hard for people to accept mistakes than in other countries. Especially for the person, him or herself when making mistakes, maybe his feels, maybe it's only my personal character feels so guilty.*

*S4: If I sent a sentence... and then I found there is a mistake in it, I don't want to change it again because it will - makes me very awkward.*

This concern about a negative impact of using TBLT in TEL blended or online environments in the realm of feedback may also be perceived within the student groups working on tasks. One such variation of experience involves collaborative writing tasks in TEL contexts, where learners may perceive that little learning is taking place for most members of a group since one student may do the majority of writing meaning that other students receive little or no feedback on their own work, thereby effectively removing them from the feedback-revision process.

*S3: Normally, people will pick one person to write it, once we've discussed it. But the rest of people who wrote it, they don't get to revise of their piece of work. They just gather together about ideas, not actually practicing the way we write... I think the benefit of work as group for writing is not that great.*

Within this experience is the perception that such concerns may be offset by modifying the process writing stages to ensure that, within TEL blended and online contexts, students are aware that their own work receives feedback from which they can make revisions in the course of the task cycle.

*T4: The first time, the group has to compose the whole essay together because they are learning about essays, and they're checking each other's work. The second time, they have to work together to write the introduction and the conclusion together, but the body of the essay has to be different.*

#### **4.4 Mapping of structural and referential aspects**

In outcome space 2, the six categories of description are condensed into three structural aspects: technology enabling; skills and processes; technology-enhanced language development. As noted previously, the categories of description are arranged in order of ascending levels of complexity. Therefore, the three structural aspects in this case can also be seen in terms of a hierarchically-structured sequence of complexity from the lowest (1) to the highest (3). They also indicate the shift in the focal point which is at the forefront of each aspect.

The three referential aspects, context, individual and group, constitute the dimensions of variation, and are viewed as moving from a more passive and background conception (context), through to a more foregrounded individual and active conception

(individual), to a more fully foregrounded and interactive conception (group) involving collaborative learning and communication.

### Referential aspect: Context

Structural aspects	Referential aspects		
	Context	Individual	Group
Technology enabling	C1, C2		

Table 7: Referential aspect: Context

The first referential aspect, labelled *context*, relates mainly to the two categories of description, C1 and C2, found in the first structural aspect (technology enabling). In C1, this is conceived of in terms of technology being a convenience factor in a technology-mediated TBLT context. In C2, the phenomenon is seen as going beyond this to one that facilitates an enrichment of the overall educational experience. In this way, although the phenomenon is conceived of as a background element, it involves having more of an impact on enriching the experience with regard to specific individual needs.

### Referential aspect: Individual

Structural aspects	Referential aspects		
	Context	Individual	Group
Skills and processes required		C3, C4	

Table 8: Referential aspect: Individual

The second referential aspect, labelled *individual*, primarily aligns with categories of description, C3 and C4. In C3 the phenomenon of TEL-based TBLT is perceived in terms of how the individual's digital technology skills level impacts the learning experience. C4 differs in that it relates to the communicative needs and supportive processes required to enable effective use of the TBLT approach in an online or blended context. C4 is located both within the individual and the group referential aspect, where the needs and processes include perceptions that relate more to collaborative and interactive factors beyond the individual level.

### Referential aspect: Group

Structural aspects	Referential aspects		
	Context	Individual	Group
<b>Technology-enhanced language development</b>			<b>C4, C5, C6</b>

Table 9: Referential aspect: Group

The third of the referential aspects, that pertaining to *group*, aligns with C4, C5 and C6, which together form structural aspect three, wherein the phenomenon is perceived as one involving technology-enhanced language development based on interaction and collaboration involving a group-based context. In C4, as noted in the preceding paragraph, there are elements that relate to the individual level and to the group level, with the latter elements including factors such as feedback and reflective processes in group contexts. In C5, the phenomenon is experienced as one in which both the nature and styles of communication are influenced by the TEL-based TBLT approach. C5 focusses on group interaction and has a greater level of complexity, whereas C4 focusses on the actual substance of interactions between participants rather than on the facilitative processes. In C6, participants conceive of the phenomenon as one in which the styles and methods of feedback are influenced by the technology-mediated TBLT context. With C6, the qualitatively different element relates to its higher degree of complexity involving such disparate factors as language analysis, loss of face, diagnostic needs assessment and the shifting roles of teacher and learner.

## 4.5 Findings across structural and referential aspects

This section presents more detailed findings, based on extracts from the participants' interview scripts, which illustrate the dimensions of variation in the referential aspect seen across the categories of description, which are condensed to form the structural aspect.

### Context

With reference to the role of the context, the variation in perceived experience includes viewing the LMS as a positive factor for convenient communication by students:

*S8: ...it was very effective. I think most of us could communicate very well and we didn't have any problem also, no Internets dysfunctions, everything was perfect.*

Similarly, the influence of the context on flexible time and space is perceived as a way of avoiding a sense of being inhibited by the time and space demands of other learners or the teacher.

*T6: That really helps, the moment you have that flexibility of the person working on their own time and not being inhibited by you or by anybody else.*

Further to the collaborative element mentioned in the role of context, the convenience of using technology extends into facilitating the collaborative work process as ideas and knowledge are exchanged and developed.

*S10: Then we can share our source, different ideas, opinions and modified from different decisions. I really enjoying it, it's very convenient, easy.*

In this dimension of variation, the synchronous and asynchronous options afforded by the context are perceived as a foundation for the provision of tasks with a greater depth or range of learning experience.

*T3: Online or blended, I think maybe I'll just start with tasks in general, I think the benefits - it sounds clichéd but when you look at any other literature when you do applied experiential activities, the learning is much richer. When you look at the brain-based research as well, you're doing two processes.*

These affordances are perceived largely in positive terms, with benefits being seen in various aspects of the phenomenon, including choices available to learners and teachers, the task experience itself, as well as the range of cognitive functions demanded by the processes involved.

From a contextual angle, access to the Internet in blended and online contexts by students for the purposes of task completion is viewed as a means of making tasks more in-depth.

*T1: Another benefit would be that students have access to the internet. They can use things on the internet so the task can be, maybe more in depth than say just in a classroom environment with nothing.*

As regards key task support mechanisms in the context, there is a perception that supporting documentation is generally required throughout the task cycle. This is likely to include clear steps and possibly task outcome exemplars.

*T2: [It is necessary to give] very clear and direct guidelines so that the students are focusing on that instead of trying to solve some other problems that might arise.*

This dimension of variation also perceives that the nature of the context has an effect on the role of the teacher in online and blended contexts, whereby the teacher role is viewed as shifting towards more of a facilitative role and becoming less of a continuously monitoring presence.

*T1: Well, for sure the teacher takes on more of a role of a facilitator if it's online, just because of not being there in person. Especially if they run into problems, you're not there, it's not immediate feedback, it's not immediate help. The teacher does take on more of a role as a facilitator. The teacher in terms of methodology it might require tweaking.*

*T4: It changes my role - I'm not as hands-on, I'm more often observer and I step in when somebody needs me.*

*T3: you are really the guide on the side - and I sound clichéd again, the guide on the side and it's not as draining. If you're standing at the room talking at people it can be quite tiresome by the end. In a blended learning environment there's the opportunity to post instructions... then also to debrief on that activity.*

With regard to the giving of feedback, there is a perception that when delivering corrective feedback to specific students, the context may influence teachers to feel that the relative anonymity provided by online contexts can benefit students, since the teacher may feel able to administer corrective feedback in a more direct manner.

*T4: Or if I think it's beneficial, offer them at that moment and everything's anonymous, so offering comments, some students will acknowledge at their sentence. It's different when I come to one station say, "Your - this answer's wrong" and I'm addressing that specific person.*

## **Individual**

Regarding the dimension of variation at the level of the individual, the variation in experiences includes a sense of time flexibility from both teaching and learning perspectives. This relates to both temporal and geographical flexibility, as well as learning pace.

*T2: to work at their own pace, at their own time from any location they might feel is useful for them.*

*T6: And, we're not dictating when they're doing it, so we give them the flexibility of the time and the space.*

This dimension of variation also includes a perception that addressing a lack of skills in individual students can have a positive impact on the learning environment, but there is also a perception that lacking the necessary technological skills can have a negative impact on individual students in terms of stress, demotivation and the learning process.

This variation also relates to the perception that in order for convenience to be achieved and then effectively exploited, familiarity with the technology is needed. Otherwise, further learning might be required.

*T7: When I answer this question, I'm working under the assumption that they are pretty comfortable, pretty good at using the tools.*

However, the experience also includes the perception that individual learners may feel slightly anxious or even stressed in the learning context due to a skills deficit.

*T5: but then the online learning too, it might be challenging for some students too, who lack the technical skills.*

*T4: A challenge might be that not everyone is as fluent online, as everyone else, but well they're not as comfortable working in the digital environment as everyone else.*

*T5: then familiarity with technology, and that can be quite frustrating, stressful for some learners using the technology.*

This dimension of variation also includes the perception of technological skill levels as a challenge which may extend so far as to take over the learning needs to the detriment of language learning itself.

*S7: You can't survive without technology. I think it's not about the process of learning English. You're just learning skills of technology.*

## **Group**

With regard to the role of the group, the ability of a group of students to have flexible choices concerning synchronous or asynchronous collaboration is considered a key benefit.

*T7: Now the good thing about online collaboration is, I think, they can work asynchronously as well as synchronously and that I think is a very good thing about online.*

Part of the documentation process required by the context may often involve the establishment of learner roles and responsibilities within the group at the outset of the task.

*T1: Sometimes that helps to make sure everybody knows what they have to do and what-- when they have to be finished.*

As student groups move forward in the task cycle, there is a perceived need for both formalised feedback processes and points of critical reflection also to be included where appropriate.

*T3: You have to be prepared but again I want to put the effort in and do you stop or continue surveys or just even check in with the students do your needs assessment diagnostic if it's working or not working.*

In terms of communicative styles within groups, there is a perception that, in online TEL contexts, students who may usually be somewhat reticent and taciturn in groupwork situated in more traditional classroom-based contexts might be less self-conscious and be more forthcoming in an online environment.

*T6: It really would work for students who are quiet in the classroom. Sometimes an on-line interaction gets the quiet ones to speak up.*

*T8: Depending on the type of student or the student's educational background sometimes it's easier for them to give their opinions on-line when it's not face-to-face because they feel more comfortable typing or they just feel more comfortable being removed from situation.... They don't feel comfortable actually being dynamic in a real-life situation, but being on-line I think sometimes gives them more ease with that.*

*S3: Some people might be shy, might be not good at talking. They just don't want to give advice to people.*

## **4.6 Summary**

This chapter has presented findings from the study relating to the primary research question and to SRQs 1 and 2. Following the presentation and explanation of the two tables representing the outcome space, detailed findings relating to the categories of description have been given. Next, the structural and referential aspects of the overall outcome space were mapped across each other. The next chapter discusses the findings in terms of addressing the three research questions of this study.

## Chapter 5: Discussion and implications

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings of the study in two main sections (Section 5.2 and Section 5.3). Section 5.2 addresses the primary research question and the first of the secondary research questions:

*In what ways can TBLT frameworks be adapted for more effective use in online and blended contexts?*

*What do teachers and learners consider the main challenges and benefits of using a TBLT approach in online and blended contexts?*

This section (5.2) looks at both structural and referential aspects of the outcome space in order to consider possible areas of adaptation for TEL contexts in current TBLT frameworks. It also considers possible challenges and benefits perceived by participants using a TBLT approach in TEL contexts.

Section 5.3 considers SRQ 2:

*How can new and experienced teachers be trained and supported in using a TBLT approach in online and blended contexts?*

## 5.2 TBLT framework adaptations

In Chapter 2, a number of existing TBLT methodological frameworks have been discussed and some aspects have then been considered with regard to their applicability or alignment with TBLT implementation in TEL contexts.

In the following three sub-sections (5.2.1, 5.2.2 and 5.2.3), possible adaptations to TBLT frameworks in online or blended contexts are discussed using the three-stage format for guidance. Regarding this, it is acknowledged that the linearity of a traditional classroom based context may become far more flexible in blended and online contexts. However, despite this flexibility, it is arguable that the constructs of pre-task, on-task and language focus stages remain discernible, if far more fluid, elements in online and blended contexts.

In each of the proceeding three sections, possible adaptations to the relevant stage are further broken down, where applicable, according to the six categories of description which are given abbreviated forms, and are numbered according to their name and rank in the outcome space e.g. “Convenience” corresponds to C1 (technology as a factor in the convenience of technology-mediated TBLT) and “Enrichment” to C2 (technology as a factor in the enrichment of the educational experience in technology-mediated TBLT), etc. This system forms an accessible and effective link to the findings.

## 5.2.1 Adaptations to the pre-task stage

### 1. Convenience

This section presents a number of aspects that relate to, and can be considered for adaptation in pre-task stages. In a traditional classroom environment, it has been noted that this would typically involve exploratory topic work, possible lexical guidance, task instructions and optional modelling samples. These would largely be controlled directly by the teacher in terms of directions made before the task or less directly, in terms of which suggestions and proposals offered by students are incorporated by the teacher into the pre-task stages (e.g. whether lexical items elicited from learners are highlighted on the whiteboard).

In a blended context, the findings suggest that a clear aspect of pre-task stages is the convenience offered by TEL contexts in such areas as flexibility of task preparation, self-pacing, ease of communication and range of resource options. With these potentially beneficial factors in mind, they should also be considered in the light of key TBLT principles.

As noted previously, during the task stage, TBLT traditionally emphasises that learners use their linguistic proficiency in a socially constructed pursuit of meaning making with other learners (Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 1998a, 1998b). This basic tenet of TBLT is further highlighted as a key element in a technology-mediated environment, as exemplified in one of the five definitional aspects of González-Lloret and Ortega (2014): “Meaning as primary focus: Any target language objective should largely be hidden or implicit during the task stages” (p. 10). On top of this, there is the assertion that, in addition to

drawing on linguistic resources, learners in the task stage should also incorporate “their non-linguistic and notably their digital skills and resources” (p. 10).

These new tenets relating to TEL-based TBLT during the task stages, when considered in view of perceptions relating to convenience during the pre-task stage, highlight potential risks afforded by TEL contexts to the basic theoretical underpinnings of TBLT. Specifically, the extent of freedom to prepare for tasks in terms of a learner’s individual pace and preferences may have positive elements (Mutambik, Lee, & Foley, 2018), though due consideration should also be applied by teachers, educational designers and other stakeholders to the risk of veering away from this key principle of TBLT. In other words, the flexibility and resources afforded by the TEL context may detract from a key principle of TBLT if the requirements of the pre-task stage given to learners result in, for example, a greater focus on accuracy and over attention during the planning stage to the detriment of meaningful, spontaneous and negotiated interactions during the proceeding on-task stages.

Therefore, whilst the benefits of a TEL context for pre-task stages in terms of factors, such as flexibility of time, access and resources, should be recognised, the potential risks of a detrimental effect on the authenticity of interactions during the task stages should also be acknowledged.

## **2. Enrichment**

Similarly, the conception of enrichment during the pre-task stages has similar potential benefits with concomitant caveats in the way noted above regarding convenience. Key

concerns arising from the findings similarly relate to the basic tenet of TBLT regarding learners' available linguistic resources. The obvious difference is that although there is a recognition that tapping into learners' digital skills during the task stage may be beneficial and may add to real-life authenticity, the negotiated interaction of linguistic skills during this stage clearly relates to underpinning theories of language learning. However, the incorporation of digital skills and resources during the task stages of TBLT is less clearly defined in terms of impacts on learning, and in particular on language learning.

### **3. Technological skills**

The findings include several conceptions relating to the impact of a learner's level of technological skills in technology-mediated TBLT. In the pre-task stages, these conceptions include questions about any assumption by teachers of learners' technological competence, about expectations by learners of the need to acquire technological skills and about the need to include individually-tailored learning options relating to software and technology in general.

The potential for frustration on the part of learners or teachers is evident here. While there are clear arguments for the inclusion of technology-based elements to all stages of the TBLT cycle, there is also the need to avoid learner stress and frustration due to a deficit of technological skills. One approach to alleviating this stress is to minimise technological requirements in the pre-task stage to basic ones, such as watching a YouTube video and writing a paragraph in Microsoft Word, as well as including basic instructions for connecting to the online group task stage. Although this may minimise

to an extent the stress levels of most learners, it may also be seen as missing the opportunity to maximise learning potential and to fall short of achieving real-life authenticity, where learners would likely be able to avail themselves of a far greater range of potentially useful software resources.

Such considerations of technological range and learning potential that teachers could be exploiting for teaching and learning purposes relate closely to the technology, pedagogy and content knowledge framework (TPCK or TPACK) of Mishra and Koehler (2006, 2008). In task design, teachers should have the ability “to flexibly navigate the spaces delimited by content, pedagogy and technology [in order to] effect maximally successful, differentiated, contextually sensitive learning” (Harris, Mishra, & Koehler, 2009, p. 402).

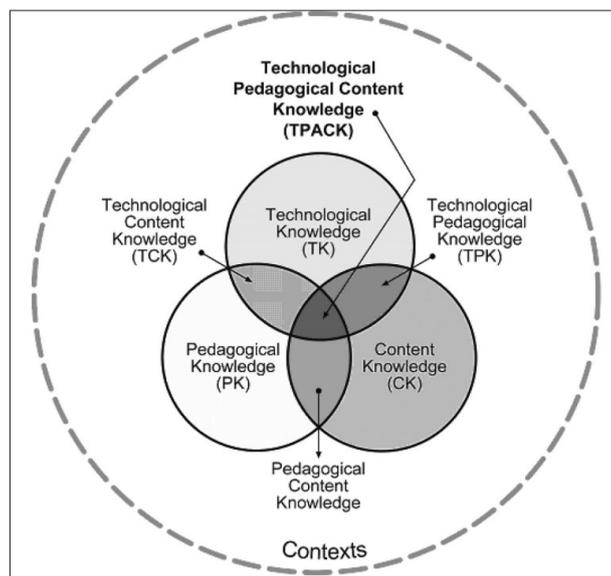


Figure 1: The TPCK framework and its knowledge components (Mishra & Koehler, 2008)

With reference to TBLT frameworks in TEL contexts, these conceptions relating to the TPACK framework indicate that teachers, when planning the implementation of tasks,

should look for ways that allow learners to benefit from effective integration of the TPACK spaces. This means considering ways in which learners can effectively draw upon their technological skills, and perhaps those of their peers or group members, in order to prepare in the pre-task stages for the successful achievement of task outcomes through linguistically meaningful interactions in the upcoming task stages.

#### **4. Communicative processes**

Established frameworks of TBLT designed for classroom-based delivery include references to the importance of clarity when delivering task requirements and instructions during the pre-task stages. For TEL contexts, this requirement is emphasised to a considerable degree in the findings, with participants stressing the need for clearly articulated steps and instructions, as well as a systematic process for checking that learners have understood these and are following them accordingly.

Beyond this, there is also the perception that, for group tasks, it is often important to have a clear system for the identification of roles and responsibilities in a group. Their selection for certain tasks, such as group presentations and research-based digital documentaries, may link to the factors noted in the previous section on technological skill levels, whereby responsibilities within a group are decided, at least in part, on the basis of the existing or target skills of individual group members.

This selection process may also be undertaken largely by groups themselves with little teacher intervention. This can encourage more interaction among learners during the pre-task stage, which would provide useful opportunities for low-stakes communicative

practice, for practice in functional language such as negotiating a compromise, and for building social presence in an online or blended forum.

A final point on this aspect is that the identification of roles and responsibilities among learners themselves may not only reflect many real-life situations involving projects and planning, but might also reflect the notion that teachers implementing TBLT in TEL contexts tend to see their own role as moving far more towards a facilitative and monitoring role, in which learners take more central positions, including the assigning of roles and responsibilities where appropriate.

## **5. The nature of communication**

Perceived changes to the nature of communication experienced by participants concerning the delivery of TBLT in TEL contexts during the pre-task stage relate mainly to the need for special attention to be paid to clarity and accuracy when setting up tasks.

Upon initial consideration, this point may appear to be relatively straightforward for teachers to address. However, it should also be noted that, in traditional classroom-based contexts, the setting up of tasks often takes place in markedly different ways to those of online contexts. The teacher training of language teachers typically includes classroom management techniques, some of which will focus on giving and checking instructions. Such techniques may include checking instructions by eliciting them back from the learners and writing them on the board, or by posing a series of yes/no questions (e.g. “Are you going to work in pairs?”) in order to ascertain quickly the status

of learner understanding of the task ahead. In other words, many teachers are used to being able to set tasks up and check understanding face-to-face in real time. Although clarity is naturally important here, there are also opportunities to paraphrase and elaborate on task requirements. In online contexts, such opportunities are likely to be available less, which again underlines the need for clear and easily followed instructions and parameters. Additionally, the need for clarity, brevity and precision in online instructions also suggests that teachers may require specific initial teacher training or subsequent professional development on the subject of writing online instructions. In other words, the type of writing demanded of teachers by the context bears some resemblance to a genre such as technical writing, a discipline with which many trained and experienced teachers may lack familiarity.

## **6. Nature of feedback**

In the pre-task stage of TBLT in TEL contexts, as in traditional classroom-based settings, there is likely to be far less need, if any, for feedback than in subsequent stages. This is reflected in the findings, where participants make little reference to feedback mechanisms for the pre-task stage.

However, there is the perception that the early distribution and explanation of feedback tools and mechanisms may be better conducted during the pre-task stage, so that learners have a clear road-map of the task cycle ahead. This could also help to offset any concerns that some learners may have about the methodology of TBLT itself, such as those relating to how the less centralised role of the teacher is unfamiliar to some learners, thereby causing possible uncertainty and anxiety about where feedback will

be provided. A further benefit is that detailed information about the forthcoming feedback can facilitate mutual trust and “shared expectations of the purposes” (McArthur, Huxham, Hounsell, & Warsop, 2011, p. 34) regarding the feedback process.

## 5.2.2 Adaptations to the on-task stage

### 1. Convenience

As noted previously, there is a perception that the flexibility of time and space are key elements of the convenience afforded by the online context for TBLT. In terms of referential aspects relating to the on-task stage, the key one perceived by participants relates to the ease and convenience of document sharing and collaboration. With regard to TBLT frameworks, ensuring that learners are aware of the options and basic functional capabilities when collaborating with other learners on documents or online platforms may help to ensure successful achievement of task requirements.

As will be noted in later sections, this ease of distribution and collaboration has significant impacts on key areas, such as error identification, feedback mechanisms and reflective activities.

### 2. Enrichment

With reference to technology as a factor in the enrichment of the education experience, key perceptions from the findings centre on how elements of teacher and learner choice

regarding task media, task parameters and task methodologies could further enrich the experience. In terms of enrichment during the on-task stages, a number of aspects identified by participants bear relation to possible adaptations of the TBLT framework in TEL contexts. Although care should be taken not to conflate greater choice with greater enrichment, there are factors here that should be taken into consideration.

Firstly, it should be emphasised that although TBLT may have always afforded teachers a great deal of choice when planning tasks for learners in traditional settings, the sheer range of available task resources for learners in online contexts is relatively new. This range of options is one contributory factor behind the lack of a comprehensive TBLT framework for TEL contexts, or, as noted in the literature review, “an organic and mutually informative whole” (González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014, p. 10).

During the on-task stage of the task cycle, learners in a traditional classroom setting would typically complete the task while availing themselves of their existing linguistic resources. The task may be completed individually, in pairs or in groups. In the age of classrooms before Internet access, tasks could justifiably be considered as near-approximations of real-life tasks and activities. Therefore, there was strong justification for denying learners access to supplementary resources as this tended to reflect many communicative interactions outside the classroom. Now that the virtually seamless connectivity of social, academic and professional domains is possible via smartphones and other portable devices, the argument that learners should solely rely on their own linguistic resources in order to complete tasks *as they would in the real world* carries far less weight. Therefore, there are strong reasons for emphasising that, unless there are compelling reasons for doing otherwise, students should have similar levels of

access to technology and online resources as they would in the real world outside their learning context. Otherwise, one of the principal tenets of TBLT, that of using tasks that appear authentic and relevant to real world situations, is very much negated. Based on this, there are grounds for advocating that any TBLT framework for TEL contexts should both allow and encourage learners to avail themselves of any online resources that might assist in successful completion of the task.

This advocacy builds somewhat on learner centredness, one of the basic task tenets of González-Lloret and Ortega (2014):

The task should focus on learner needs and expectations in a way that requires learners to tap into their linguistic, non-linguistic and notably their digital skills and resources. The incorporation of digital skills as a pre-requisite of all task design represents a significant departure from many previous analyses and studies of TBLT in TEL contexts. (p. 10)

With specific reference to digital skills being a recommended pre-requisite of task design, this should be extended to state more explicitly that learners should not be limited by the extent of their current linguistic, non-linguistic and digital resources, but should be well aware that the task allows for access to any available resources, including those that may currently not be part of their repertoire of skills.

In this way, the capacity for the enrichment of student learning through TBLT in TEL contexts may be significantly extended through this adaptation of one of the basic tenets that underpins existing TBLT frameworks. At the same time, as well as the capacity for

enrichment being increased, a basic tenet of TBLT would be brought into closer alignment with the nature of real world tasks.

As stated above, this is not to say that full access to all digital and online resources should be a pre-requisite of all tasks. There may well be situations where teachers deny, reduce or discourage access to these resources while learners are completing a task or parts thereof. Also, this is not to argue against aspects of second language acquisition, whereby negotiated interactions solely reliant on learners' existing linguistic resources are considered greatly beneficial. The key point here relates to the perceived authenticity of tasks by learners as they consider whether their education bears close resemblance to the types of digitally-supported linguistic tasks which they are likely to perform in their social, academic and professional lives.

As well as the perceived enrichment of the student learning experience owing to the potential benefits arising from greater access to online and digital resources, there is also the perception that allowing learners a greater element of choice of medium for task completion can also promote enrichment. Specifically, if learners are given the opportunity to select the medium by which they will present their work, there is the perception that a greater degree of motivation and engagement may often result. This perception aligns with the previous point regarding access to online resources in terms of student choice and learner-centredness.

This perception also relates to two of Long's methodological principles (MPs) (Long, 2009): i) MP8 Respect learner syllabuses and developmental processes; and ii) MP10 Individualize instruction. This perception also has the additional element that learners

have more responsibility for navigating the range of choices and for selecting options that meet their skill levels or their learning needs. With regard to TBLT and the criteria for tasks, this perception relates to one of the four listed by Ellis (2009), whereby in terms of language teaching, a task must “require that learners rely on their own resources (linguistic and non-linguistic)” (p. 223). With regard to adaptations to TBLT frameworks for TEL contexts, this raises similar issues as to whether students should have full access to online and digital resources during the task stages for linguistic purposes. There are strong arguments for allowing greater student choice of digital resources through which to meet task requirements. Giving students this degree of choice can foster a number of benefits that may be classified under the broader umbrella of enrichment. Such benefits may include a greater sense of responsibility for their own learning, a deeper investment in the work being done, and the perception that the task process is both within their skill levels and may also align with their perceived learning needs and goals, while once again maintaining the sense that the task being performed closely resembles real-life tasks and activities beyond the educational context.

The perception of TBLT in TEL contexts as being a potentially enriching factor in the experience of the language learner also suggests that such adaptations as put forward above may also offset some of the concerns about learner motivation levels regarding TBLT in online and blended contexts that were noted in the literature review, such as levels of rapport and peer engagement (Lai et al., 2011). Allowing learners higher levels of selection control can promote independent learning and motivation levels (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011).

### **3. Technological skills**

As noted with reference to the pre-task stages, the findings revealed a number of perceptions relating to how a student's technological skill levels can impact the experience of TBLT in TEL contexts. Similar challenges were perceived during the on-task stages in terms of a possible skills deficit on the part of some learners.

The principal challenge with regard to a skills deficit centres on possible ways in which a group might be affected. If one or more group members do not have the necessary skills to participate effectively in working towards task completion, this is seen as a potentially detrimental factor in the achievement of successful task outcomes, and in obtaining high grades.

This challenge raises a number of issues. Firstly, the notion that learners may have similar levels of technological skills in certain contexts is unlikely. This likelihood increases when students are in a higher education context with multicultural student enrolment. While students may often expect to be in language classes where everyone is of a similar level (at least in terms of performance against admissions criteria or on language placement tests), there is far less likelihood that students will have similar skill levels across a range of software applications and digital resources. Therefore, while there may be arguments for encouraging learners to address tasks using any linguistic, non-linguistic and digital resources that they perceive useful, consideration should also be given to ways in which the potential for a challenging and negative experience can be mitigated. One important method is task design.

Where technological skills are concerned, task design should largely include the premise that learners may have greatly differing skill levels. Rather than a challenge, this can be seen as a positive element of the task in a number of ways. Firstly, as already noted, the establishment of roles and responsibilities is a way to hone negotiating skills and to practise ways of reaching acceptable compromises in a context of intercultural communication. Also, the differing skill levels offer learners the opportunity to hone theirs either as technological trainers or as learners asking questions and clarifying information relevant to perceived needs. These roles, in most cases, may well be incidental to the key task outcomes, and could therefore be considered enrichment factors as well. Secondly, the previous section discussed the potential benefits of adapting TBLT frameworks for TEL contexts by allowing students far greater access to linguistic and digital resources. This adaptation aligns with the notion that students engaged in group-based tasks are likely to have far different skill sets in both technological and non-technological areas. Therefore, this greater access allows for individual learners in groups to consider a broad range of options in terms of how their particular skills can be of benefit to the group's successful achievement of the task. As communication methods evolve, such as in terms of the greater use of video, images and captions, all of which may require particular skills at the intersection of linguistic, aural and visual communication, the need for group-based projects where members have a range of individual skills, again bears resemblance to an increasing number of professional tasks that take place beyond the formal learning context.

Another perception relating to technological skill levels and TBLT in TEL contexts concerns issues of fairness in assessment. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to consider how adaptations to TBLT frameworks would have impacts upon assessment criteria,

other than to add that group-based assignments can often be designed in ways that mitigate the chances of obtaining a poor grade due to the weaker skills or contributions of other group members. For example, only part of an assignment might be based on group performance, whereas other sections can be based on individual work (e.g. either specific contributions to the group-based project or separate individual components, such as a reflection, a presentation section, or a question and answer session).

With regard to specific adaptations to the TBLT framework for TEL contexts, this section primarily relates to principles that underpin the framework. These include elements such as the basic tenet of tasks relating to learner-centredness as defined by González-Lloret and Ortega (2014), which was discussed in the literature review. In this tenet, it is recommended that learners “tap into their linguistic, non-linguistic and notably their digital skills and resources” (pp. 5-6). This also relates to at least two of the MPs of Long (2009), most notably MP9 Promote cooperative or collaborative learning and MP10 Individualise instruction (Long, 2009).

These can be amended to emphasise that within a pair and group-based tasks, learners will often undertake different roles and responsibilities, frequently based on existing skills or needs, within the context of a group task in order to contribute more effectively to the task as a whole.

#### **4. Communication processes**

In the pre-task stages, it has been noted that findings indicated that participants perceive a particular need for clarity and accuracy in task instructions, as well as a perceived

need for documentation that outlines the task roles and responsibilities of group members.

Similar perceptions are found to continue during the task stages. In a purely online format, there is the perception that teachers may need to monitor closely and be prepared to intervene when difficulties with task progress occur. Such perceptions may partly be due to the fact that teachers are no longer able to monitor groups unobtrusively from points within the classroom. In most online cases, teachers may not have access to visual clues that would otherwise indicate if any students were experiencing challenges with any elements of the task. In an online context, such clues may be more challenging to discern if a student simply remains silent and abstains from communication for a time. As a likely result of such misgivings, teachers may feel the need to reach out more to students during tasks that are taking place online.

There may be risks here that teachers intervene in the task process when there is little necessity, and that such interventions may interfere with students' learning processes as they attempt to negotiate meaning during the task stages. Frequent interventions by the teacher during the on-task stage might also present students with the signal that they lack some control over the task, as the teacher is liable to step in when there is no obvious need for intervention. If such interventions occur, it could be argued that this undermines one of the key principles of the TBLT approach, namely the conception that learners should rely on their own resources (Ellis, 2009). In the previous section, possible adaptations to TBLT frameworks included the recommendation that students should have far greater access to online digital resources during the on-task stage. However, it is also argued that the digital skills being used and developed when seeking

and making use of such resources are relevant and valid skills that will help foster learning and learner independence.

Therefore, in order to address the concerns behind this perception, while at the same time avoiding the need for unnecessary or superfluous teacher interventions, it is recommended that two elements be considered as minor adaptations to the monitoring process in the TBLT framework in TEL contexts. Firstly, students should be aware of a mechanism, online or otherwise, whereby they can raise questions with the teacher if these relate primarily to progression through the task requirements (i.e. linguistic questions would generally be addressed at other times such as during scheduled feedback stages). Secondly, an ongoing form of shared documentation, as noted by participants in the findings, which provides learners and teachers with clear indications about task progress and contributions from group members, may be a further useful element to be included in the delivery of TBLT-based courses in online contexts.

## **5. Nature of communication**

In terms of the effects of technology-mediated TBLT on the nature of communication between participants during the task stages, the findings of this study indicated a number of significant perceptions with possible implications for adaptations to TBLT frameworks in TEL contexts.

Firstly, there is the perception that there is a frequent lack of social dynamics and social interaction. This aligns with some research in this area, whereby the need for building

social bonds is seen as an important but challenging area of TEL to foster (Baralt, Gurzynski-Weiss, & Kim, 2016; Gleason, 2013; Stickler & Shi, 2015).

At the same time, there is the perception that the practice of language interaction with others in a virtual space can be effective preparation for contexts beyond that of learning. For example, the TEL context is seen as an effective bridge between the educational institution and the professional world, where collaborative work and projects increasingly take place online. In the collaborative online workspace, personal attributes such as tolerance and patience can be especially valuable assets when dealing with projects involving groups of people across multiple platforms and perhaps time zones and cultural contexts. As a means of fostering these attributes, TBLT in TEL contexts is considered to be an approach which may naturally lend itself to the nurturing of these soft skills. Although this perception may not warrant recommendations for adaptations to TBLT frameworks for TEL contexts, such claims could be emphasised more prominently within basic definitional tenets of TBLT in TEL contexts.

Similarly, participants experienced a further aspect of communication relating to soft skills in TEL contexts when using a TBLT approach. With reference to more traditional TBLT classroom-based contexts, participants recognise that these contexts offer a space in which students can engage in task completion strategies that may often involve the need for effective discussion-making processes such as reaching a compromise. However, there is also a recognition that the classroom setting may not always be ideal for such strategies, as, for example, when the groups comprise relative strangers of various ages and backgrounds. In such cases, reaching a compromise can require considerable proficiency in interpersonal and intercultural communication skills. However, in TEL

contexts, there is a perception that a more anonymised environment can allow voices to be heard that may otherwise tend to remain silent or be somewhat ignored in a classroom setting. Again, this perception may not imply that changes to the TBLT methodological framework should be made, but it raises the question of making additional claims to the definitional aspects of technology-mediated TBLT.

Such expansions to the definitional aspects are also supported by related innovations and recommendations in the literature. For example, when considering the expansion of TBLT to include a particular emphasis on IC, it has been found that there is the potential to consider and realise “technologically-mediated tasks as vehicles for intercultural exploration” (East, 2012, p. 69). In other words, this highlights the potential for TBLT to be an approach within which soft skills can arguably be developed alongside linguistic and digital skills. Also, the potential and effectiveness of embedding soft skills within a range of, if not all, higher education courses, has become an increasingly recognised goal in the last decade or so (Schulz, 2008). Within this broad higher education objective, there has been a recognition that TBLT may constitute an ideal vehicle for the embedding of soft skills.

In light of the above perceptions and considerations, the fifth definitional aspect of González-Lloret and Ortega (2014), focusing on reflective learning and including specific reference to the provision of “higher order cognitive skills” (p. 6) could be expanded to include the benefits of including opportunities for the development of soft skills, such as tolerance of change, patience with other cultural norms and reaching a compromise.

In terms of language usage being influenced by the TEL context, participants identified a number of areas, which included specific concerns for etiquette and levels of formality. Firstly, there is a perception that forms of address should be carefully followed in online contexts. Although this may appear to be a relatively minor concern, it should be noted that such concerns may inhibit learners from participating effectively in online contexts. Therefore, although such concerns may appear minor, and therefore may not warrant any adaptation to frameworks, they clearly need to be addressed and managed in order to ensure that the TBLT framework promotes a supportive learning environment. Therefore, it is recommended that any teacher training course that includes TBLT in TEL contexts in its curriculum should include outcomes relating to netiquette guidelines including forms of address. In practical terms at the level of educational institutions, teachers could be required, or at least encouraged, to include such guidelines in, for example, introductory course notes for students, or via a welcome video that outlines course details.

As well as perceptions relating to online etiquette, participants also experienced concerns about acceptable levels of language formality, which often appear somewhat vague, flexible and open to interpretation. For example, there is a perception that teachers may often err on the side of formality in online contexts by requesting that students, for example, avoid contractions or other aspects of language common in texting and messaging. At the same time, there is the perception that students who are native speakers in TEL contexts will frequently revert to communicating in what might be considered less formal online language usage, such as short forms and emoticons. The blurring of lines between what is considered formal and informal language in online learning contexts is well documented in the literature. Alongside this is the recognition

that online communication has given rise to what may be considered new forms of literacy. This is a broad and complex area of research, which is largely beyond the scope of this study.

Such changes to language usage and to acceptable levels of language formality may not indicate the need for adaptations to TBLT frameworks. However, these changes do suggest that task design in TEL contexts can facilitate discussion and raise awareness about acceptable levels of formality and language usage across a wide spectrum of possible scenarios. Given the broad definition of what constitutes a task, plus the range of communicative options that students might engage in when working towards the achievement of task objectives, TBLT in TEL contexts offers many opportunities to facilitate student language production at a range of formality levels, as well as clear opportunities for language input and analysis across the continuum of formality levels. With this in mind, a recommendation for relevant initial teacher training courses and ongoing professional development is to ensure that teachers using a TBLT approach in technology mediated contexts are aware of ways to address, analyse and exploit formality issues in TEL-based language usage.

## **6. Nature of feedback**

During the on-task stage, participants experienced a number of perceptions relating to aspects regarding the nature of feedback in TBLT in TEL contexts. In terms of peer feedback, there is the perception that students may be more concerned about both giving and receiving feedback, primarily out of concern for a loss of face on the part of either the giver or receiver of feedback. This aligns with some research in this area, whereby,

for example, learners in video-based communicative tasks show greater concern for loss of face than for actual completion of the task to the likely detriment of effective negotiated meaning making in this stage of the task cycle (Van der Zwaard & Bannink, 2014).

However, this perception also appears somewhat dependent on the medium of communication in the digital context. For example, if learners are engaged in communication via an online chat facility, there is the perception that drawing attention to errors in a chat-based context would, to an extent, be a breach of online etiquette. In other words, there is an expectation that errors are likely to occur when typing at speed, either through haste or actual linguistic mistake. Therefore, unless the meaning is unclear, learners have a tendency not to correct or highlight the language issue. In some ways, this type of communication that is uninterrupted by a linguistic focus has clear links to the basic underlying philosophy of communicative interaction during the task stage of TBLT. Specifically, this links with the previously noted tenet that the task stage of TBLT places a high degree of emphasis on the primacy of socially-constructed meaning making (Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 1998a, 1998b) rather than on any linguistic focus.

However, such changes taking place to the nature of feedback should be considered further. In traditional TBLT classroom delivery, negotiated meaning, including forms of feedback, such as clarification requests, misunderstanding corrections, and necessary restatements, tend to take place naturally in the course of spoken communications. Such forms of interaction are viewed as key learning factors in the underlying TBLT philosophy and are seen as one of the principal benefits of TBLT in that the approach

seeks to improve learner fluency without neglecting attention to accuracy (Ellis, 2009). Therefore, when planning task design that likely involves synchronous communication, due consideration should be given to the forms of communication that take place, as these choices may have impacts upon both the nature of feedback itself and the learning process in negotiated interactions.

With this in mind, although the need for digital skills within TBLT may be clear, there is also a strong argument for the continuing inclusion of elements of synchronous real-time communication within learner groups where possible within the given technological and geographical parameters. Otherwise, the wholesale incorporation of tasks that build technology into the task cycle may, despite relevance to real-world contexts and promotion of digital skills development, inadvertently be somewhat detrimental to the language learning process.

Therefore, a further recommendation for adaptations to TBLT frameworks is to build on González-Lloret and Ortega's (2014) fifth recommended tenet, which states that tasks should involve "clear and direct engagement with authentic experiences and language" (pp. 5-6). This further recommendation would be to ensure that, where possible, the task stage should include real-time oral communication between pairs or groups of learners. Careful attention should also be paid to the type of preparation that learners might complete before this element of the task cycle. Also, the risk of overly-prepared scripts by learners again runs the risk of mitigating the potential benefits of synchronous oral communication. Otherwise, the task design of TBLT in TEL contexts may fail to include the opportunity for learners to develop oral skills in synchronous contexts.

### 5.2.3 Adaptations to the language focus stage

#### 1. Convenience

With regard to perceptions relating to how technology-mediated TBLT has an impact on factors relating to convenience, participants experienced two principal factors. Firstly, there is the perception that TEL contexts offer a more convenient means for learners to access feedback on work or assignments. Another aspect of participants' experience also relates to a convenient means of obtaining feedback, but in this case it primarily relates to the ease with which learner errors and needs can be identified in the TEL context. This contrasts with a classroom-based TBLT environment, wherein teachers may usually have a less comprehensive overview of student errors and challenges being revealed over the course of the task cycle. This may be due to several factors such as teachers being able only to monitor one group at a time and only one group being able to report back to the whole class at once. By contrast, the TEL context may enable teachers to have a far less restrictive view of student language usage, thereby allowing them to identify common problems far more readily and, therefore, to target linguistic areas which meet the needs of a greater number of learners.

These perceptions may not necessarily lead to specific recommendations for adaptations to TBLT frameworks. However, they do indicate possible recommendations for initial teacher training programmes and ongoing professional development regarding effective methods of peer-to-peer and teacher-student feedback.

## **2. Enrichment**

In terms of enrichment during the on-task stage, discussion of the perception that learners may benefit from a greater range of individualised access and choice led to recommendations for adaptations to TBLT frameworks in terms of access to digital resources during on-task stages. In line with this, for the language focus stage, participants hold the belief that having this broader access and range of options for learners may lead to greater engagement and motivation during follow-up stages where relevant language issues are addressed. In other words, there is a perception that the enrichment benefits of more personalised and available learner-centred options during earlier stages can have a concomitant effect on subsequent language focus stages.

In itself, this perception of an enrichment benefit in the language focus stage due to greater access and choice in previous stages may not lead to further adaptations to TBLT frameworks or related tenets. However, it does lend further weight to the argument that frameworks should be adapted to include the principle that learners should, unless there are compelling and specific reasons against it, be encouraged to avail themselves of any digital or online resources that may assist them in the successful completion of task objectives. As well as this, there are also grounds here for making suggestions to curriculum designers and other stakeholders in the creation and implementation of initial teacher training programmes and professional development courses. A key suggestion would be to ensure that both novice and experienced teachers who use a TBLT approach in TEL contexts are aware of the potential benefits of tasks that allow teachers to monitor and analyse effectively the collective output of a class for the purposes of addressing key language needs exemplified in this comprehensive output.

Two additional benefits relating to enrichment of the learning process arise from this evidence and subsequent targeting of learner needs. Firstly, it helps mitigate a common concern that, in a more traditional classroom-based TBLT lesson, it may be challenging to identify quickly the shared needs of a group of learners. Secondly, in addition to providing teachers with evidence of learner needs, it may help to reassure learners that the TBLT approach is effective in identifying and addressing their language needs and that the teacher is not making arbitrary or pre-determined choices about the target elements in language focus stages.

#### **4. Communicative processes<sup>2</sup>**

Participants experienced two main factors relating to how technology-mediated TBLT influenced communicative needs and processes which support the task cycle: the need for formalised feedback mechanisms and the benefits of reflective group processes. Both of these aspects have also been discussed in the earlier section in relation to the on-task stage.

With reference to the language focus stages of the TBLT cycle, the ongoing formalised feedback mechanism is seen primarily as a means of monitoring learner participation with a view to following up where students appear less engaged in the process.

As regards the benefits of reflective group processes in the language focus stages, three principal benefits are perceived. Firstly, making the reflective process more open and public at times can facilitate the sharing of advice and guidance from learners with

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<sup>2</sup> Note that the absence of item 3 is deliberate and reflects the lack of data referring to recommended adaptations to the 'language focus stage' due to C3: Technological skills.

related concerns or questions. Secondly, the sharing of reflections within groups can facilitate further opportunities for discussion and negotiated interactions between learners, which, while possibly still monitored by teachers, can promote more learner-centredness and further independent assessment of needs and further steps towards the achievement of task outcomes. This aligns with the conception that group assessment work “can facilitate learning to reflect and can deepen and broaden the quality of reflection” (Moon, 2013, p. 173). Finally, there is the perception that making elements of the reflective process part of any related task assessment could facilitate the process of attaining potential benefits. Including the reflective process as part of the assessment may align with broad acknowledgement that reflection can promote student-centred learning. However, it should also be noted that reflection is commonly perceived as problematic to teach and assess (Ryan & Ryan, 2013), and is an area of inquiry that is beyond the scope of this study.

With these perceived benefits in mind, and recognising the potential complexity of including reflective elements as part of any assessment process, recommended adaptations to TBLT frameworks would reiterate those made in the on-task section. Specifically, the monitoring components of the TBLT framework may be improved further by the inclusion of a mechanism through which students can raise language focus points with peers or teachers. Additionally, the inclusion of ongoing documentation with indications of progress and reflections from group members could be beneficial in both the promotion of learner-centred education and in facilitating task completion and language focus stages.

## **5. The nature of communication**

With reference to the nature of communication in the language focus stage, participants perceived that the TEL context may allow for more open and forthright feedback, due to the lowered potential for friction and conflict. Following on from this is the perception that a more public forum may increase the importance assigned to comments and suggestions. As a consequence, this can lead to higher motivation levels during the task itself. In terms of framework adaptations, this underscores the recommendation that close attention should be paid to the need for effective feedback strategies in the language focus stage. These strategies should include ways of facilitating supportive and constructive peer-to-peer feedback and teacher-student feedback based on relevant documented material produced by learners.

## **6. Nature of feedback**

Regarding the language focus stages, participants experienced a number of perceptions concerning the nature of feedback as a factor influenced by the use of a TBLT approach in TEL contexts. These were: a higher chance of less immediate feedback; a greater opportunity for access to the teacher at certain junctures in the feedback process; and the possible benefits of delaying some aspects of feedback.

The first of these concerns the perception that in a blended context, feedback from the teacher may be less immediate than in a traditional classroom setting. This aligns with the conception that students may therefore be more reliant on using their own resources to address challenges. In other words, applying the TBLT approach in TEL contexts

may mean that students can no longer rely on immediate feedback at certain stages of the task cycle.

At the same time, a seemingly contradictory perception was experienced to the effect that students may actually have greater access to a teacher as a resource during the language focus stages in an online context. This stems largely from situations where, for example, a teacher may be carrying out marking or feedback in a Google Doc, thereby allowing the student to witness the feedback process and to pose relevant questions as needed.

A further related perception is that the delay in feedback that may frequently be occasioned by TEL contexts can also bring beneficial aspects to the feedback process. These benefits from delayed feedback are partly derived from the recorded or documented material that is retained from student interactions during the task cycle. The greater permanency of this material affords teachers and learners the opportunity to revisit student work multiple times beyond the initial feedback stage.

These three perceptions, involving less immediate feedback, a greater access to the teacher at times and benefits of delaying feedback, raise a number of issues relating to the TBLT framework in TEL contexts.

In traditional educational contexts using TBLT frameworks, the language focus stage may often include an analysis component and a practice section. These may typically involve more explicit focus on form guided by the teacher, before practice activities with varying degrees of restrictiveness and spontaneity. In traditional contexts, the

presence of the teacher and the prospect of immediate feedback following a task can be reassuring for students, who may be less concerned about the potential benefits of delayed feedback. Given these aspects of traditional frameworks and the above three perceptions regarding benefits and challenges to the feedback process in TEL contexts, two main recommendations are put forward here.

The first recommendation is that explicit provision be made within the framework for different types of feedback, including types led predominantly either by learners or by teachers. This provision should also refer explicitly to options for immediate or delayed feedback. The second can be linked with the earlier suggestion concerning the need for clear and detailed documentation linked to both task requirements and student roles and responsibilities, which should outline key feedback junctures and the format these feedback stages or activities will take.

Regarding the nature of feedback in TEL contexts in relation to the two above recommendations, a further related recommendation concerns initial teacher training programmes and professional development courses. When TBLT in TEL contexts is addressed in curricular content, it is recommended that the benefits and potential challenges of specific feedback mechanisms are covered and explored in the course materials to ensure that both novice and experienced practitioners are aware of these aspects of feedback in such contexts.

Reinforcing the perceptions identified in the conception of convenience in the language focus stage, another key perception of participants concerns how TEL contexts can often provide an effective and easily-accessible means of confirming whether the anticipated learner errors or linguistic challenges predicted by the teacher were borne

out during the task cycle. Such confirmations or otherwise can then be addressed in immediate or delayed feedback. Beyond this, any differences between anticipated and actual errors or linguistic difficulties can be used to inform future planning on the part of teachers and other stakeholders. Again, as suggested in the language focus convenience section, this perception may not inform the need for a specific adaptation of the TBLT framework for TEL contexts. However, it does align with at least two of the MPs of Long (2009): MP6 Focus on form and MP7 Provide negative feedback.

With specific reference to MP6, it is worth noting that the visual reinforcement of evidence means that teachers have a range of options as to whether feedback is approached implicitly or explicitly. Also, regarding MP7, it is worth noting that the pedagogical principle of providing negative feedback may be more easily approached when there is clear evidence of need on behalf of several learners in a group and when the evidence may be anonymised in some way, or at least subsumed within the output of groups rather than being easily identified with individual learners. In this way, the TEL context may facilitate the saving of face, even when errors are displayed on a relatively public forum.

Leading on from this is the perception of a shift in the roles carried out by learners and by teachers. Given the myriad ways in which collaborative student interactions can be recorded and documented online, this opens up substantial options for ways in which learners can provide peer feedback before any feedback or correction from teachers. Once again, the shift towards a more facilitative role by teachers is evidenced here, whereby students could see initial feedback stages as an opportunity for them to reflect on both their own contributions as well as on those of their peers before receiving

teacher feedback. Again, this aligns with particular MPs (Long, 2009). In this case, as well as MP6 and MP7, as noted above, this shift aligns closely with MP9, which emphasises the need to promote collaborative or cooperative learning. By adding specific references to optional feedback mechanisms to these MPs, the underpinning principles for implementation of TBLT frameworks can be aligned more closely with the affordances that are created in TEL contexts.

#### **5.4 Recommendations for teacher training programmes and professional development**

With regard to recommendations for initial teacher training programmes in ELT and ongoing professional development, findings from the data in this study indicate four key recommendations that can be applied to SRQ2:

*How can new and experienced teachers be trained and supported in using a TBLT approach in online and blended contexts?*

1. For both initial teacher training qualifications in the field of ELT and ongoing professional development, there is a clear need to ensure that the theory and practice aspects of curricula and of professional development content address the effective integration of TEL into the implementation of TBLT in blended and online contexts (as well as traditional classroom teaching). This recommendation adds further emphasis to the literature, where researchers have noted the myriad digital literacies with which teachers should be familiar (Pegrum, 2009; Thomas & Reinders, 2010), but this

recommendation extends to calling for effective TEL integration to be included in the curricula of initial and further ELT qualifications.

2. The findings indicate that there is a specific need for clarity, brevity and precision in online documentation and communication regarding factors, such as task parameters, task objectives, guidance feedback and reflection. On most ELT teacher training programmes, effective communication strategies are typically covered under classroom management elements of curricula. However, these strategies are often restricted to verbal techniques, such as giving instructions, checking understanding and concept-checking questions. However, these strategies typically fail to include written instructions and information for online contexts. In some ways, this genre of writing bears resemblance to a discipline such as technical writing, where conciseness, chronological sequence and absence of ambiguity are paramount. As ELT practitioners will very likely be required to communicate with increasing regularity in a range of digital forums, there is a pressing need for teachers to receive training in effective online written communications in addition to established classroom communicative techniques.

3. There is a perception that TBLT in blended and online contexts offers learners the opportunity to communicate in a broad range of situations using a wide spectrum of communicative media. This opens up the chance to facilitate receptive and productive language skills relating to commonly-accepted levels of formality in many contexts and genres. Therefore, a key recommendation for initial certification programmes and ongoing professional development is the inclusion of teacher training that addresses

ways in which students can analyse and produce language at a range of formality levels that are contextually appropriate.

4. A further recommendation for teacher training and professional development concerns the anticipation of learner challenges and obtaining relevant confirmation. Teacher training courses typically include content which relates to predicting the types of difficulty that students may encounter during a lesson or task. Findings from this study reveal that online and blended TBLT contexts enable teachers (and learners) to access a far more comprehensive depiction of learner strengths and challenges through the use of technology. This may allow teachers to obtain confirmation or otherwise of anticipated challenges and to tailor their feedback accordingly far more quickly. At the same time, students can be reassured that the feedback given to the class is apposite and relevant to their needs. Therefore, there are clear grounds for incorporating training in this area of TBLT, particularly since the need to identify student errors and challenges at speed during the task process can be a source of stress both for novice teachers or experienced teachers unfamiliar with the TBLT approach.

## **5.5. Summary**

Based on the findings in this study and the related implications, this chapter has put forward a range of recommended adaptations to TBLT frameworks for more effective use in online and blended contexts. These recommendations are summarised in Table 10.

**Recommended adaptations of TBLT frameworks for online and blended contexts**

<b>Pre-task stage</b>	<b>On-task stage</b>	<b>Language focus stage</b>
Learner choice	Unrestricted access to digital resources wherever appropriate	Strategies for evidence-based feedback
Unrestricted access to digital resources	Choice of task media	Mechanisms for supportive and constructive feedback

Customised TEL support/ training	Peer training options	Reflective components
Group task documentation	Group assessment	Task documentation focus
Task map	Learner roles and responsibilities	
	Access to teacher	
	Group task documentation	

	Embedding soft skills	
	Inclusion of synchronous spoken communication	
	Monitoring strategies	

*Table 10: Recommended adaptations of TBLT frameworks for online and blended contexts*

The findings and discussions have also revealed a number of benefits and challenges associated with the phenomenon of using a TBLT approach in TEL contexts. These benefits and challenges are summarised in Table 11.

**Summary of benefits and challenges**

<b>Category of description</b>	<b>Benefits</b>			<b>Challenges</b>		
	<b>Pre-task</b>	<b>On-task</b>	<b>Language focus</b>	<b>Pre-task</b>	<b>On-task</b>	<b>Language focus</b>
Category one: Technology as a r in the convenience of ology-mediated TBLT	-Flexible research	-Location flexibility -Flexibility of communi- cation -File sharing	-Flexible access to grades and feedback -Error confirmation			

			-Sharing and modifying of ideas			
Category two: Technology as a factor in the enrichment of the learning experience in technology-mediated TBLT	-Range of planning resources	-Learner choice options -Range of resources -Multi- layering	-Engagement with feedback			
Category three: Technological level as a factor in technology-mediated TBLT	-Range of technical skills	-Range of technical skills in		- Technologica	-Unfair advantage	

		group		1 skills deficit  -L2 software navigation  -Assumption of competence	-Range of needs	
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<p>Category four: Communicative tasks and processes to support task cycle as factors being influenced by the use of technology-mediated TBLT</p>	<p>-Establishing task roles and duties</p>		<p>-Documented task progress -Reflection options</p>	<p>-Effective exemplars -Task planning</p>	<p>-Staying on track -Guiding documentation -Effective monitoring</p>	
<p>Category five: The nature of communication as a factor</p>		<p>-Fostering of soft skills</p>	<p>-Lower conflict risk</p>	<p>-</p>	<p>-Lack of</p>	<p>-Technology</p>

<p>enced by the use of ology-mediated TBLT</p>		<p>-Greater openness -More representative consensus - Familiarisatio n with digital literacies</p>		<p>Documentatio n clarity</p>	<p>social dynamics -Tolerance and patience -Impact on language learning -Risk of causing</p>	<p>superseding language -Feedback sincerity concern</p>
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					offence	
					-Distractions	
					-Uncertain	
					formality	
					levels	

<p>Category six: The nature of feedback as a factor being influenced by the use of technology-mediated TBLT</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Preparatory feedback mechanisms</li> <li>-Teacher availability</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Promotion of learner independence</li> <li>-More considered feedback</li> <li>-Relevance of feedback</li> <li>-Evidence of need for feedback</li> <li>-New knowledge opportunities</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Loss of face</li> <li>-Less peer correction in messaging</li> <li>-Feedback delay</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Lack of immediate feedback</li> <li>-Tailoring individual feedback in group tasks</li> </ul>
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			-More student- centred peer feedback			
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*summary of benefits and challenges*

include greater inclusion of TEL integration into lesson and curricula planning, teaching of online classroom management strategies and communications, a greater focus on digital literacies, and the theory and practice of online error identification, correction and feedback methods.

## **6.1 Introduction**

This concluding chapter begins by presenting a summary of the key contributions to new knowledge that are made by this study. Building on these contributions, it then outlines a number of implications for practice relating to the level of the individual teacher, to the level of institution and to the level of the broader ELT context. Finally, this chapter acknowledges a number of limitations in this study, before making several recommendations for future research based on findings and questions arising from this thesis.

## **6.2 New knowledge contributions**

The findings from this study reveal a number of new knowledge contributions relating to adaptations of TBLT frameworks in online and blended contexts. Section 5.2 details recommended and possible adaptations to TBLT frameworks and to definitional aspects of TBLT. Section 6.2 condenses the more salient of these adaptations into seven main areas.

Before detailing these seven main areas, the knowledge contribution of the study's phenomenographic method to the literature should be noted. In order to investigate

framework adaptations, relevant benefits and challenges, as well as implications for training and support. In terms of how the phenomenographic method is applied to the investigation of TBLT in a TEL context within higher education, this study appears unique of its kind to date. This key aspect of the study, therefore, makes an original contribution to the literature focusing on the objective of an integrative framework of TBLT and TEL.

In general terms, many of the studies involving TBLT in TEL contexts focus on situations in which learners have little experience of a TBLT approach. This means that such studies may have limitations due to uncertainty about factors, such as the task cycle, roles of teachers and students and the learning objectives. Furthermore, in many studies involving TBLT in technology-mediated contexts, students (and often teachers) are unfamiliar with the software or digital technologies being used. In order to avoid such issues that may have been limitations in previous studies, this present study included parameters for participant recruitment that ensured participant familiarity with a task-based curriculum, with task-based teaching methodologies and with the LMS and embedded software. Therefore, the selection of participants meant that common limitations found in a large number of studies were largely absent in the present study. Given that many of the participants had also experienced TBLT in a range of previous contexts, this may have contributed to a richer degree of data. This avoidance of common limitations that were present in many previous studies of TBLT in TEL contexts adds greater significance to the original knowledge contributions that this

1. In terms of contributions to key underpinning factors of TBLT, the study indicates grounds for adapting the five definitional aspects of the TBLT approach set forth by González-Lloret and Ortega (2014). Specifically, the reference to “require learners to tap into... notably their digital skills and resources” (p. 5) should be adapted. The reason for this is that simply tapping into digital skills fails to capture the opportunity for learners to take part in the peer teaching of digital skills during the course of the task cycle. While the peer teaching of digital skills may be secondary to the primary task objective, the chance for learners to address either their digital skills or their trainer skills should be highlighted as a potentially major component of the task design.

2. A significant contribution of this study to new knowledge can be related not only to the five definitional aspects (González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014), but also to an aspect of TBLT that has been largely inherent to the approach since its inception. The majority of TBLT frameworks emphasise the centrality of real-world relevance to the types of task in the approach. However, this emphasis aligns with the expectation that, during the task stage, learners should be engaged primarily in small-group interactive tasks (Ellis, 2003; Long, 1985, 2014; Willis, 1996), where they rely solely on their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources (Ellis, 2009). This study strongly indicates that participants broadly consider this alignment to be no longer justifiable in terms of what the TBLT approach claims to represent. Participants tend to see unrestricted access to digital resources and information *during* the on-task process as a more generally

involves a considerable shift in the theoretical approach to TBLT, in methodological choices, as well as in areas such as materials design, teacher training and professional development.

Whilst this adaptation during the on-task process is generally advocated, it should be noted that unrestricted access to digital resources is not considered to be a requirement of all tasks or all elements of a task. There will likely remain many instances where access to digital resources remains incompatible with tasks that aim to replicate real-world objectives (e.g. many interview situations). Similarly, questions remain about the possibly detrimental effects of unrestricted access on areas such as fluency and negotiated interactions. Questions also remain regarding the use of technology during task-based assessments.

3. Findings in this study suggest that technology-mediated TBLT offers considerable scope for the enrichment of learning. Specifically, the affordances extended by TBLT in online and blended TEL contexts indicate that enrichment of the education experience may include aspects such as greater opportunities for the learning of new technological skills, for far greater learner choice regarding task media and subject matter, and for the learner-centred constructive alignment of task elements with learning outcomes and with long-term academic or professional objectives. In terms of new knowledge contributions, these findings add specific elements to the general TBLT MPs of Long (2009) with regard to respecting learner syllabuses and developmental

reference again to the definitional aspects of González-Lloret and Ortega (2014), the concept of goal orientation states that “[t]he overall task design should focus on language in an experiential context. This involves i) a communicative objective that demands some form of information transfer among learners” (pp. 5-6).

Adding to this, findings in this study indicate grounds for extending such definitions to include the use of technology in the experiential context for the majority of tasks. Furthermore, the opportunities for learners within their groups to adopt roles and responsibilities that align with their technological abilities or target skills should be emphasised here. As the range of technological software continues to expand, there is greater impetus for TBLT to reflect this range of choices and to facilitate learners in the peer learning and teaching of digital skills while working collaboratively towards task outcomes that reflect real-world objectives.

5. The findings and subsequent discussion in this study reveal new knowledge contributions regarding the nature of feedback in technology-mediated TBLT contexts. These include the conception that the non-correction of peer errors during chat-based communications aligns well with the long-established TBLT tenet regarding the primacy of meaning-making over accuracy of form during the on-task stage. By way of extension, this leads to the further knowledge contribution that task design in technology-mediated TBLT contexts should ensure that peer communications are not overly prepared or scripted and should facilitate interactions where negotiated meaning

perceived as contexts where objectives such as reaching a representative compromise can be challenging, particularly in multicultural settings. However, there is a perception that online and blended TBLT contexts can provide an educational environment and framework in which soft skills such as reaching a compromise and being tolerant of change can be effectively embedded. This knowledge contribution adds to the González-Lloret and Ortega's TBLT definitional aspect (2014) that addresses higher cognitive skills

7. Several findings point to needs regarding documentation to support the effective delivery of the task cycle. In terms of new contributions to knowledge, these can be summarised as a perception that TBLT in blended or online contexts requires supporting documentation which, as well as giving clear and detailed task information, includes, where appropriate, reference to scheduled feedback points, types of feedback, a process for the identification of student roles and responsibilities, as well as reflective elements for individuals and groups.

### **6.3 Implications for practice**

The findings and subsequent discussion in this study lead to a number of key implications for practice. Although there are overlapping elements, these implications can be ascribed to the levels of the individual teacher, the institution and the broader

At the level of the individual teacher, there are several main implications in terms of TBLT practice in TEL in online and blended contexts. These include the need for familiarisation with online classroom management techniques and strategies and the need for clear and accurate documentation that both details the task and guides learners towards objectives. A further implication is that individual teachers should be aware of ways the TBLT framework in TEL contexts can enrich the educational experience for learners in areas, such as student choice, peer teaching, technological skills, access to digital resources and employability-related soft skills. Further key implications for the individual teacher involve ways in which correction and feedback can be addressed more effectively, aspects regarding collaboration and group reflective practices, and factors relating to communicative style and register within digital literacy genres when used in a technology-mediated TBLT framework.

### **Institutional level**

At the level of the educational institution, a primary implication relates to ways in which teachers and learners can be supported in terms of addressing the recommendations for teaching practice as detailed in the preceding paragraph. These ways may include factors, such as curriculum design, LMS course templates and supporting software, professional development and student information sessions. A further implication is the need for institutions to provide guidance on effective documentation which supports the task cycle, reflective practice and assessment process. Beyond this, there are

as cross-curricular initiatives and institutional strategic plans.

### **English language teaching context**

At the level of the broader ELT context, implications arising from the findings and discussion in this study could be applied in a number of ways. These include adaptations to professional development, to teacher training courses and to language descriptor frameworks. In short, the study presents implications for changes to the ways in which the potential benefits, challenges and established frameworks of TBLT have been conceptualised so far.

### **6.4 Limitations of this study**

This section acknowledges a number of limitations in this study. However, given the constraints of time and context regarding this study, further mitigating these limitations would have been challenging. At the same time, the limitations are not considered to have unduly affected the level of data richness or to constitute significant grounds against the claims to new knowledge contributions.

It has been noted that TBLT is a flexible approach to language teaching with a number of established frameworks. Therefore, any study of the TBLT approach involving

space is considered an accurate depiction of the qualitatively different experiences of this, and of similar, phenomena.

It could be argued that the gathering of data from participants within a specific Canadian institute of higher education may constitute a limitation of this study. However, it should be emphasised that this possible limitation is strongly countered by the argument that participants were not limited in the interviews to discussion relating only to their experience within this institution. In other words, the open-ended nature of the initial interview question and follow-up questions was designed to encourage participants to make references to their entire teaching or learning experience of TBLT within TEL contexts both in Canada and globally. This adds weight to possible claims of external validity when judgements are being made regarding the extent of similarities between this study and the context under consideration by the reader.

There may also be a limitation factor in the selection of the student participants. Criteria for the selection of students included their having spent at least six months in the programme. This meant that there were fewer students with lower levels of English proficiency, and that the experience of any learners having just a short period of time in a technology-mediated TBLT context was largely unrepresented. However, as noted previously, many of TBLT studies have involved participant learners and teachers with little or no prior experience of the approach. Therefore, on the grounds that the six-month condition meant that learners had all been taught by a range of teachers within

## **6.5 Recommendations for further research**

The findings and subsequent discussion in this thesis lead to several recommendations for future study.

Firstly, given the likelihood of increasing use of digital technology during communicative elements of the on-task stage, as well as during the pre-task and language focus stages, it is recommended that research be undertaken into the impact of unrestricted access to digital resources on areas, such as fluency, noticing, peer correction and negotiated meaning.

In addition, this study indicates a number of findings about the nature of feedback and communication at various points in the TBLT framework. In order to gain greater insight into the implications of these findings regarding second language acquisition, it is recommended that more targeted studies be undertaken into these elements.

It is also recognised that different educational contexts may present differing benefits and challenges. This study investigates technology-mediated TBLT in a large, North American higher education institution with a multicultural population of learners and teachers. Similar types of study in a broad range of contexts involving, for example,

Similarly, the limitations associated with selecting only participants who are familiar with TBLT in TEL contexts could be addressed in future related studies by comparing data from participants who are either familiar or unfamiliar with TBLT in TEL contexts. Such studies may benefit from a narrower focus on specific tasks in a TBLT/TEL framework in order to ascertain how a lack of approach familiarity may impact the teaching and learning process.

## **6.6 Overall reflections**

TBLT has evolved over the last thirty years or so. As an approach to language learning which accommodates flexible use of methodology, aligns with language descriptor frameworks, incorporates elements such as soft skills and reflective practices, and can provide clear links to communicative needs and practices in social, academic and professional domains, TBLT, or something very akin to it, looks set to remain a widely-used option for some time.

As the use of technology in educational contexts has grown, the need to adapt TBLT frameworks for online and blended contexts has become increasingly pressing. This phenomenographic study has sought to bring greater understanding to the framework adaptations required, the attendant benefits and challenges and to the necessary changes

teacher training modifications and future research endeavours.

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T4: I wait for them first, so they type in their answers, they vote, or they make suggestions and I'll eliminate the ones that they, let's say these are the wrong and these answers are wrong, else I'll ask them to tell the class why do you think that these answers are wrong. I only correct them if the students were wrong with saying that answer's wrong. I also would step in and eliminate any answers that repeat, that are the same and then --.

C6 -LF

**Researcher:** So looking at all that some of it's at home some of it's in class, technologies used both in class and home. How much has changed in the online element to what you just do in a normal classroom?

T4: Well, I tried to make sure that even though there are course books, for example about reading, but I knew this class would be interested in this reading when I came across it in New York Times, but they did it, they did it. What was your question again?

C2 PT?

**Researcher:** What's different about the way you deliver--?

T4: The authentic material aspect that I can make it specific for this group of students, it's much easier when I can source materials online. They don't have to be level specific, they can just - the students were willing to read something that was above their reading level because it was interesting and I wouldn't have found it in a course book or reading the newspaper. That's changed right, so how is it different or changed, the fact that --

C1

C2 or

**Researcher:** Is the level of support any different if it's online?

T4: My level of support for them?

**Researcher:** Yes, but also from the student's perspective, would they believe they had more or less support?

T4: They certainly have more access to me because I'm marking some of their stuff in Google Docs, so they might see me online at the same time that they're online. They might ask me a question and I can answer it while it's pertinent. That doesn't happen unless we're together physically through writing on paper or in a lab. I can focus on - I don't want to say error correction, but I can focus on needs in the class more by seeing where they're making mistakes. We might have on paper a grammar exercise that we do and I can walk around and see everyone's paper. But when they're all listed at the same time or happening live on the screen, and everyone can see it, some of them are changing their answers say, "Oh, maybe I shouldn't be using that beginning for a conditional. Maybe I should be beginning another way because most of the students are doing it that way." Sometimes it doesn't work in their benefit, sometimes they're all wrong.

C1

C6 -LF

C1

C6 -LF

For me also I can see I might think, when I'm teaching conditionals, I see. I anticipate these errors will come up. Sometimes I'm wrong, it's not those errors and I wouldn't know that so quickly, so automatically, if I didn't see everything on the screen at the same time. They're working synchronously, I'm watching them work synchronously, and I can jump in when it's necessary or because it's all in one place. I can take notes and then offer those suggestions afterwards. Or if I think it's beneficial, offer them at that moment and everything's anonymous, so offering comments, some students will

C1 LF

C6 LF