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Further to Tinker Sachs (2007), this paper reports on the development of task-based learning and teaching (TBLT) within a cooperative learning (CL) and teacher action research context. The three-year longitudinal project involved 12 teachers and their students from 3 government primary schools in Hong Kong. When innovative ways of teacher professional development in language teaching are fostered, a great deal of teacher and learner risk-taking is necessary for teaching and learning success. This paper reports on the risk-taking behaviours of teachers and students as they engaged in TBLT and CL. Data were drawn from teacher and learner interviews, questionnaires, lesson feedback and transcriptions. The results indicated that with an action research framework in a TBLT and CL classroom environment, both teachers and students increased their use of the target language. Teacher risk-taking involved development of learner-centred teaching routines and the creation of tasks for language development. Similarly, learners exhibited a need for more learner-centred activities in English to extend their conversational repertoire. Recommendations are offered for promoting the conditions in which both teachers and learners can engage in the kinds of risk-taking that underpin successful task-based teaching and learning.

Introduction

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) and cooperative learning (CL) are similar in several ways: they both provide frameworks for instruction such as pre-task, while-task and post-task stages in TBLT (e.g., Prabhu, 1987; Nunan, 1989; Skehan, 1998; Tinker Sachs, Candlin, Rose & Shum, 2003; Willis & Willis, 2007) and structured grouping of learners in CL (e.g., Cohen, 1972; Slavin, 1985; Kagan, 1992; Jacobs, Siowck

Lee & Ball, 1997); they both promote student interaction through group and pair work; and they both encourage learners to take control of their learning, including taking risks in target language communication. To facilitate willingness to take risks on the part of teachers and learners we need to identify the conditions that encourage this risk-taking behaviour. This is the central question that will be addressed in this paper. Typically, risk-taking is discussed in the literature with regard to learners. Seldom do we hear about risk-taking on the part of teachers and the contextual and cultural factors that influence their risk-taking behaviour. These are particularly pertinent issues in the teacher-centred cultural contexts discussed in this paper.

Sociocultural approaches to language learning view the human mind as a "dialectal unity of biological and cultural processes" (Lantolf & Poehner, 2008, p. 6) and seek to understand how this unity functions to achieve particular goals. Seen from this perspective, the attainment of the goal of learning another language is steeped in organic, dialectic and semiotic processes and requires mediating tools and artifacts which shape developing ways of thinking, behaving and interacting (Vygotsky, 1981). Similarly, an understanding of how teachers and learners function in cooperative task-based language lessons needs to build upon an understanding of both inter- and intra-active mediating processes. Inter-active processes occur between two or more interlocutors; intra-active mental and emotional processes occur within a speaker. The next section of this paper will examine the interactive processes of language learning from the perspective of risk-taking, a culturally mediated factor in language acquisition.

Risk-taking in Language Teaching and Learning

Risk-taking is one of the characteristics associated with good language learners (Wong Fillmore, 1991; Gass & Selinker, 2001; Nicolson, Adams, Furnborough, Adinolfi & Truman, 2005). Nicolson et al. (2005) define risk-taking in language learning as "being prepared to have a go at saying or writing something even if you are not exactly sure how to do it, without worrying that you might get it wrong" (p. 56). In TBLT, learners' self-esteem and perception of their competence and fluency will impact on their capacity to perform the activity and willingness to take risks in language learning (Kohonen, 2006). In tasks which require learners to engage in interaction, varying degrees of risk-taking may be

involved. Ellis (2003) notes that "maintaining a conversation is often effortful for learners because they lack both the linguistic resources to understand what is said to them and to make themselves understood" (p. 69). The level of risk-taking involved can be particularly high for elementary or young language learners depending on the set-up of the task and the overall communicative purpose and goal.

In cooperative learning, teachers need to be sensitive to the affective factors that inhibit or encourage risk-taking behaviour. These factors include anxiety about using L2, anxiety of not knowing what to do, awkwardness, restricted identity and freedom as well as general lack of confidence and uncertainty about their own competence (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003, p. 15). As Ellis (2003) contends, particularly with regard to role-taking dimension in the cooperative learning aspect of the task design, the learners need to be cognizant of "their communicative partners in order to achieve intersubjectivity" (p. 77). This means several abilities are at play here:

(1) the ability to recognise the importance of the other person's perspective;
(2) The ability to make inferences about the other person's perspective;
(3) The ability to take these inferences into account when encoding a message;
(4) The ability to attend to the feedback from the other speaker and to monitor output accordingly. (Ellis, 2003, p. 77)

For teachers, there are several layers of risk-taking in moving from a teacher-centred to student-centred approach. The first risk is teaching in ways that are not commensurate with their colleagues when a text-book driven way of teaching predominates. Associated with this is the challenge of maintaining coverage of the textbook and of ensuring learners are prepared for the end of semester exams. Another layer of risk-taking in many EFL contexts has to do with the communicative competence of teachers themselves, since many of the teachers are learners of the target language themselves and may not have achieved a level of communicative competence that allows them to manipulate the language easily. Cultural factors could also be sources of stress and anxiety as teachers strive to counter the ways they have been taught and educated to make space for new interaction patterns in the classroom.

Autonomous learning is a goal to promote learner independence so that learners can ultimately take charge of their own learning. When learners are provided with opportunities to go in many directions in their learning through risk-taking opportunities such independence and creativity can be promoted. Van Lier (2008) uses a sociocultural lens when he describes agency as "not simply an individual trait or activity but a contextually enacted way of being in the world" (p. 163) which "does not take place in a void or empty wilderness" (p. 164) but which is related to "issues of volition, intentionality, initiative, intrinsic motivation and autonomy" (p. 171). For Van Lier (2008), agency involves the following attributes:

- Initiative or self-regulation by the learner or group;
- Interdependence in that it mediates and is mediated by the sociocultural context; and
- Awareness of the responsibility for one's own actions including affect on others (p. 172).

Chan (2002) and Chan, Spratt and Humphreys (2002) suggest that the complexity of the cultural constraints on learner autonomy in the Asian context needs to be acknowledged (p. 13). Similarly, Pennycook (1997) cautions us not to take the "moral high ground" (p. 39) but to critique the essence of autonomy through multiple lens and cultural alternatives.

Background and Motivation for the Study

In June 2007 more than 100 Hong Kong pre-primary through secondary teachers attending different in-service workshops conducted by the author were asked to write descriptions of their learners on pieces of blank paper. The majority of the teachers wrote the word *passive* to describe their learners suggesting that organising certain types of interactive activities would be challenging given that their learners were *quiet* and by association *reticent*. Pierson (1996) has also written about passivity in Hong Kong learners. However, passivity as a construct needs to be deconstructed. Was the definition of "passive" by the teachers being interpreted in comparison to Western learners who are supposed to be less passive? Van Lier (2008) cautions the use of binary constructs such as "passive" and "active" because there could be many interpretations or degrees of being active and passive (p. 171).

Learners' ways of behaving in the classroom are culturally constructed. If teachers believe their learners are "passive," does this mean that they are less prone to provide students with opportunities to take risks as in open-ended oral conversations in the L2 classroom? To address this question, this paper investigated whether teachers who had been through a task-based, cooperative learning, action research project would subsequently afford learners more opportunities to engage in risking taking oral language experiences and what those opportunities would look like when examined critically from both the teacher and learner perspectives. In examining the risk-taking factor in this paper, I shall draw upon multiple data sets gathered over a three-year period in a task-based cooperative learning teacher action research project conducted in Hong Kong primary schools from June 2000–July 2003. Aspects of this project results have been reported in Tinker Sachs (2007), but this paper will draw on to date, unreported data.

Context and Participants

The Hong Kong government took a number of measures in the early and mid 2000s to further teachers' English language competence by sending teachers to off-shore programmes in English speaking countries and through increasing the number of Native English teachers (NETs). From the early nineties, education officials through their curriculum development initiatives have developed task-based teaching approaches especially in the teaching of English (Clark, Scarino & Brownell, 1994; Candlin, 2001; Tinker Sachs, 1993; Tinker Sachs, Kong, Lo & Lee, 1994). One such initiative, the Target Oriented Curriculum (TOC) involved task-based learning and on learning through social interaction (Littlewood, 1992/1993). However, the extent to which TBLT has been incorporated in teachers' pedagogical repertoire is debatable (e.g., Siu, 1999; Adamson & Morris, 2000; Carless, 2002, 2003). Similarly, group work was actively promoted by Education authorities during the eighties with the introduction of communicative language teaching and has been firmly supported in teacher education programmes. However, local education authorities have not promoted cooperative learning as much as task-based teaching or communicative language teaching (Tinker Sachs, 2004). Top-down curricula development at the administrative level does not necessarily make an impact at the classroom level (e.g., Fullan, 1991). Teachers in Hong Kong have been bombarded with an intensive

onslaught of curricula development during the nineties (e.g., TTRA, TOC) with teachers being the passive recipients of this knowledge at intensive three-day workshops (Tinker Sachs, Kong, Lo & Lee, 1994). However, with the exception of a few researchers (e.g., Mahon & Tinker Sachs, 1996; Tinker Sachs & Mahon, 2006) very little effort has been directed at in-school, longitudinal work on developing teachers' uptake of various teaching approaches. As Brindley (1994) noted in discussing the implications of task-based curriculum assessment (TCA), "TCA is demanding not only in terms of time but also of teacher [skill,] and a considerable investment in teacher development is necessary if teachers and learners are to obtain the maximum benefit from its use" (p. 87).

The Hong Kong government funded the cooperative learning research project reported in this paper for three years to support primary teacher development in-school and across-school contexts to improve ESL/EFL teaching and learning. This project was designed as a teacher action research project investigating cooperative learning and TBLT in the EFL classroom. Teachers unanimously elected to research the increase in the use of English in their classrooms on the part of learners and teachers in action research projects (Tinker Sachs, 2007). Their action research reports were published in Tinker Sachs (2003) as well as shared at local and international conferences. I believe that teacher professional development projects by university researchers need to be grounded in approaches that encourage teacher ownership and application for the development of their craft, professional knowledge and skills so that when the project ends and the researcher pulls out, powerful and residual effects of the project work remain intact for longer term impact (Tinker Sachs et al., 2000).

Participants for this project were volunteers who came from government sponsored working and middle class schools. English department teams were invited to participate through letters which were sent from the project team to school administrators. Project-funded workshops were held in schools and at the university to familiarise teachers with the teaching approaches. Data collection procedures included teacher interviews and questionnaires, students' learning styles questionnaire, students' focused-group interviews, teacher and student lesson feedback, and lesson videotaping, observation, feedback and analyses. The project involved 12 teachers and students from 3 primary schools. The research team comprised the principal investigator, the author of this paper and

two full time research assistants and several student helpers who were studying to become teachers of ESL/EFL.

Results and Discussion

1. Preliminary Data: The Views of Teachers and Learners at the Beginning of the Study

In the first teacher interview at the beginning of the project, teachers were asked the following questions on students' learning and their teaching: (1) how satisfied are you with the ways your pupils are learning English; and (2) how satisfied are you with the ways you are teaching English at present? Teachers' answers to these related questions provided insights into their teaching context and how effective they felt their teaching was at the onset of our work together. Representative comments included:

- They are not confident in speaking though they are able to do so;
- The students' language proficiencies are different;
- They keep silent during the lessons and they cannot answer my questions despite the guidelines I give them;
- Those new immigrants from Mainland China may not be encouraged by their parents to learn English.

In general, teachers felt burdened by the demands of a packed syllabus and examinations which were derived from grade level textbooks. Their students' language proficiency was quite varied in some classes, and teachers felt especially challenged by the presence of immigrant students from mainland China who might not have had exposure to English. When teachers were questioned about their ways of teaching and how children should be taught English, their comments reflected concerns ranging from medium of instruction, government-backed initiatives, the need for more instructional activities and the realities of the social context of English language learning in Hong Kong. Teachers felt that there was room for improvement in their teacher-centred styles of teaching and expressed a need for more activity-centred teaching approaches. Below are some representative comments:

- I am not satisfied with it as I seldom provide students activities.
- I think the students need to learn English by using Chinese as the medium of instruction.

- I just follow the syllabus because of the school policy.
- There should be an environment which encourages them to speak English.
- They can learn English through interaction.

2. Teachers' Experiences of TBLT in Years 2 and 3 of the Study

In the project, teachers were given much support in the design, development and teaching of tasks; in-school workshops on both task development and task-based teaching procedures and in co-teaching sessions were conducted. Several workshops were also held to develop cooperative learning strategies. During the first year and first few months of the project, the tasks were developed by the project team and sent to teachers in time for them to modify them as needed. All tasks were based on the teaching units in the students' textbooks. To accommodate various skills levels in the classes, the tasks were also developed for three levels of work—simple to more complex. In the second half of year 2 and in year 3, teachers were required to develop their own tasks. Interviews with teachers in years 2 and 3 of the project revealed the insights and challenges they faced in adopting TBLT. Several factors impacted on their design and delivery of tasks including (1) familiarity with designing teaching activities in a context where the textbook dominates and its content is strictly adhered to in the syllabus, and (2) time to plan and discuss with grade level colleagues.

The research team worked with a rigid definition of tasks adopted from the Hong Kong Department of Education curricula materials in which Clark, Scarino and Brownell (1994) describe good learning tasks as having the following characteristics: judicious use of existing subject knowledge and challenging for learners; active construction of knowledge; focus on the integration of strands of knowledge rather than isolated components; interaction with others, texts or other forms of representation; and reflection (Clark, Scarino & Brownell, 1994, p. 40). Tasks are seen as distinctly different from "exercises" which are means of "focusing on items of knowledge and individual skills for pedagogical purposes" (Clark & Scarino, 1992, p. 483). Research has shown that primary teachers in Hong Kong utilise more exercise-like activities than task-like activities in their teaching (Tong, Adamson & Che, 2000). More current descriptions of tasks also recognise similar characteristics including meaning-focused activities and using authentic texts (Ellis,

2003; Nunan, 2004). The following excerpt from an interviewee gives some insights into how the team worked to develop teachers' familiarity with task design.

> We four (teachers) designed together, and when the Research Assistant came she designed a task, which is like playing chess for us with the lesson plan and teaching aids (棋盤). Last time when Gertrude came each of us taught for half of the lesson, and she had also prepared the tasks. Now our panel chair doesn't think of the tasks for us, only we 4 teachers discuss the tasks together. Sometimes I will think of the tasks myself, because my class' level is higher and they can do more tasks and activities than the other classes. I think at least we will design the tasks once a month, and totally we have designed the tasks and activities for about 10 times. I am satisfied with the situation (that we discussed for about 10 lessons last year). (T6 Interview 2)

From setting up teachers' task design and development, we now turn to some of the struggles and risks that teachers faced in designing the tasks in the final year and a half of the project as revealed in comments made in interviews during this period. Teachers needed to construct their tasks in their project groups, and these lessons were videotaped and transcribed by our project team. Feedback, along with the lesson transcriptions, was then given to teachers for their action research projects. Some school teams then sat together to discuss their videotaped lessons and lesson transcription. Most teachers spoke of difficulties in designing tasks and ensuring they met the criteria for a task in terms of interest, purposefulness and task appropriateness in meeting the proficiency levels of the students. For others, limitations arose from the demands of the school syllabus and homework requirements. The excerpt that follows was taken from interview data at the end of year 3 and captures the general challenges teachers had with task development:

> I have difficulties in preparing all the lesson plans, you know. I am not so creative, so I need to, when I need to think about all the … tasks, it's quite difficult, I have to think about their interest, whether they, they're interesting, so arouse the students' interest, motivate them to do that and something like this. And usually the limitation is the time, the time that I used for preparing the lessons, and also the time I need to complete the school syllabus and our jobs and something like this. Especially when the exams coming, and I found that, oh, I still have that many, much I haven't … taught, then I'll be, you know, quite impatient about myself. (T12 Interview 3)

3. Learners' Experience of Risk-taking in TBLT

How the task is set up also greatly impacts the level of risk involved. Even though tasks were based on the work they had done in their textbook units, considerable demands were placed on learners' attention as they juggle the linguistic, discourse and communicative demands of task performance. If the task is an open task in which the discourse is expected to follow a free-flowing conversational pattern, task demands become even more difficult to navigate. In such circumstances, learners may resort to using of L1, very simplified language use or silence. As demonstrated in Tinker Sachs (2007), students in this project often used simplified language, and this was reinforced by their teachers' tendency to design closed and semi-closed tasks and similarly to modify more challenging tasks which were designed for them by the project team.

The excerpts from students' transcriptions (see Extracts 1 and 2) illustrate these characteristics. The fifth grade students in these excerpts came from different classes in the same school. The students and their teachers had been in the project for two years. Teacher A had developed a task that helped learners to carry out a survey on transportation in Hong Kong. A visitor had come to Hong Kong and needed to learn about the various ways to get around, and the learners had to tell each other and record the types of transportation they liked and the reasons why. At the end, the teacher compiled the responses of the entire class and shared the results. This task was typical of a "closed" task which allowed for the recycling of the language covered in class in a tightly structured format. As such, the level of risk-taking was relatively low. The students were usually able to do this type of task very well as evidenced by the group's discussion. Teacher B, on the other hand, allowed her students a lot more freedom and risk-taking by the design of a task which required the students to decorate their new flat. All the students had to respond to the question, "what will you put in your new home," and then they needed to draw the picture. This task was representative of our more "open" task and required a great deal more negotiation of meaning for communication to take place. Here Ellis' (2003) four intersubjective abilities discussed earlier are called into play and move along Van Lier's 1996 interaction continuum from transmission, IRF (initiation, response, feedback), questioning, transaction, to transformation.

Extract 1: Teacher A, Favourite Type of Transportation Survey (Group E Discussion)

S1: What transport do you like to take and why?
S2: I like traveling … by … bus because … it is cheap.
S2: Which … means … of travel do you like to take? And why?
S1: I like … traveling by ferry because it is cheap.
S3: Mean for … tra pot. for … Which *miss* of transport do you like to takes and why?
S4: I likes traveling by taxi because it is comfortable.
S4: Which means of transport do you like to take and why?
S3: I likes traveling by … taxi because it is comfortable.
S1: I likes traveling by bus because …
S2: Tommy like traveling by bus it because it … is cheap.
S3: Leung Mei Ling like.. traveling by … ferry because it is … comfortable.
S4: Tommy should take the peak tram to go to park … er … peak.
S1: Dr. Tinker should take the peak tram to go to peak.
S3: She … should take the *taxi* to go to the Tsim Sha Tsui.

Extract 2: Teacher B, Decorating a New Home (Group A Discussion)

S1: 呢個好似呢幅係牆，呢個係地板，點解會凌空？(this one is like, this is the wall, this is the floor and why is it in the air)
S3: 喂 (wei), computer 呢？ (where is computer), computer.
S?: it is a …
S4: 我係咁㗎 (I am like this)
S3: 喂 (wei), 冇人畫電腦嘅？電腦呀？電腦呀？(no one draws computer, computer computer)
S2: 你講咩呀？ (what are you talking about?)
S?: 電腦呀？ (computer)
S1: 咩嚟㗎？ (what is it?)
S2: 呢d呢，係3個擺法 (there are three ways to put them)
S?: *** (unclear)
S2: 都話亞霍畫㗎啦！(I have said that Ah Fok should draw the picture)
S?: 唔好呀，我唔嚐 (no, I don't like)
S?: *** (unclear)

S2: 我慢慢嚟好冇？(let's us do it slowly, ok?) 我哋，等我哋畫完先好冇？(let's, let's finish it first, ok?)
S?: 喂電腦呀，電腦呀 (computer, computer)
S?: 電腦都未得 (we have not finished drawing computer)
S?: 講咗電腦未呀? (Have we talked about computer?)
S?: 講咗啦 (we have already talked about it)
S1: TV game
S?: 照鏡 (a mirror for the demon)
S?: *** (unclear)
S?: 畫緊, 畫緊像 (drawing, drawing)
S?: Cheap ah 呀, 你要 (you have to be cheap)
S?: 冇交電費呀你 (you haven't paid the electricity bill)
S?: *** 佢冇交電費呀 (he hasn't paid the electricity bill)
S?: 冇交電費 (he hasn't paid the electricity bill)
S3: ***
S1: 喂, 呢便你睇唔到張凳 (for this side, you can't see the chair, the chair)
S2: 不如你畫啦, 我都話我唔識畫㗎啦 (maybe you draw, I have told you that I don't know how to draw)
S2: 唉, 做乜你成日, 成日撺住部機嗟? (why, why do you hold the tape-recorder all the times?)
S1: ***我梗係撺住啦, 唔撺住 (of course, I need to hold it. if I don't hold it..)
S1: windows, 呢度 (here)
S2: 好呀 (yes)
S4: cupboard, cupboard. 高 (upper) D. 高 (upper) *** 好細咋 (it's very small)
S1: cupboard, cupboard, cupboard lah.
S?: ***
S4: cupboard here
S1: cupboard ah.
S2: toilet here

As can be seen in Extracts 1 and 2 above, students found it difficult to navigate this terrain, and for the most part, risk-taking in L2 was limited. For both tasks, in the pre-task stage, the teachers reviewed the vocabulary from the textbook units and also the possible sentence format. For example, Teacher A asked, "OK. Which means of transportation do you like and why?" Teacher B elicited responses with, "If you

want to put the sofa here, for example, what can you say?" After practise with vocabulary and word format, the teachers allowed the students to work in groups and attempt the tasks. At the conclusion of both tasks, in the post-task stage, the teachers required the learners to report to the whole class.

4. Student Feedback on Task-based and Cooperative Learning

In the next section we turn to interviews with the students to infer the viability of task-based cooperative learning to foster increased use of English. These data came from student feedback which was collected after having one year of cooperative learning lessons in the second year of our project. The student feedback form was a simplified version of the pre-questionnaire which was done a year earlier. Here we focus specifically on their feedback on the tasks that were done. In all, 512 primary students from the three primary schools were surveyed, and most of the students were between the ages of 10–13. Nearly half of them were male and half were female. Following is a summary of the main findings from the survey:

- Over 70% of the students *agreed* and *strongly agreed* that they learnt a lot from the tasks in the lesson. Their reasons were they could learn much knowledge and English.
- A similar percentage of students *agreed* and *strongly agreed* that they learnt a lot when working with their classmates.
- Nearly 70% of the students *agreed* and *strongly agreed* that they understood how to do the task, and 78% *agreed* and *strongly agreed* that the teacher gave them clear instructions.
- 70% of the students *agreed* and *strongly agreed* that the task/activity they did was easy because the teacher taught it before, and they understood how to do it.
- 71% of the students *agreed* and *strongly agreed* that they would like to do this kind of activity next time because it was fun and very interesting.
- 67% of the students *agreed* and *strongly agreed* that their English can be improved by doing tasks. The main reasons were that they spoke more English and learnt more English.
- Only 51% of students *agreed* and *strongly agreed* that they talked a lot in English when they were working on the task.

- 78% of students *agreed* and *strongly agreed* that each member of the group took part in the activity/ task.
- 60% of the students *strongly agreed* and *agreed* that they liked English; the main reasons were that it is interesting, they can communicate with foreigners and they can learn more things.
- In terms of overall use of English in the class, over 66% of the students used English more than 50% of the time, 30.9% of the students used English more than 75% of the time, and 5.9% of the students used English all the time.

Overall, these results show that the students enjoyed working in cooperative groups where each person participated and had opportunities to speak in English. The students also felt that the majority spoke more English in task-based work, and this was related to the task being interesting and fun as well as the students' being comfortable and knowing what to do.

The students in this project were also given questionnaires about their learning styles (adapted from Oxford, 1990; Reid, 1987) at the end of the first and final years of the project. The results from year 1 showed increases in the students' preference for pair and group work as well as for engaging in tasks in language learning. Independent sample *t* tests were used to compare the results of the first and final year questionnaires. Only those students who were in the project for three years were included in the *t* test. Significant differences were found in the statements given in Table 1.

Table 1. Significant results from pre- and post-questionnaires on learning styles

Questions N = Pre: 421; Post: 430	Significant difference (<.05)	Pre-test mean	Post-test mean	Change
A3 (ii) Interested in the culture	0.000	0.2143	0.3372	More stds say "yes"
A3 (iii) Required to learn the language	0.000	0.2238	0.3488	More stds say "yes"
A3 (v) need it for future study	0.000	0.7310	0.7907	More stds say "yes"
E3 I speak more English in a group	0.002	2.9438	2.6784	More stds "agree"
E7 I like to find out the ways to do the task by myself	0.000	2.4234	2.7718	More stds "disagree"

From the lesson feedback and learning styles questionnaires the efficacy of TBLT and cooperative learning can be discerned. Students welcomed group work and tasks and the opportunities they provided for taking risks in language learning. However, exposure to TBLT over a longer time is needed in order to sufficiently develop their communicative competencies in English to allow for independent communication in the language. As with any educational change, the process of applying TBLT requires a long term commitment to see major changes in pupils' language use. Leung, Harris and Rampton (2004) use derivatives of "messy" to describe how task-based data do not "elegantly and neatly fit in with the theoretical construct of task-based language use" (p. 262). From samples of their own data derived from sixth-grade language learners in London, England, we read the struggles of acquiring English in a second language context. In a foreign language context with predominantly teacher-centred approaches, the challenges would be even greater for both teachers and learners. Crossing the divide requires the scaffolding offered by more capable and experienced peers, teachers, teacher developers and researchers. Lu (2001, p. 249) reminds us that "the development of a nation's culture and pedagogy requires strong, indigenous roots blended with exotic ones," so one should not expect a significant change in teachers and students' classroom repertoire or quality of interaction unless commitment of the type offered in this project is given over several years.

5. Action Research as a Paradigm for Supporting Teachers' Risk-taking

To understand teachers' efforts to support learners' risk-taking in language learning, action research is a valuable paradigm. In this project, each teacher investigated the extent to which they and their learners' English use increased over the duration of the three years. Our research assistants videotaped and transcribed teachers' lessons, gathered feedback from teachers and learners and then from the compiled data, analysed teachers and learners' use of English and Cantonese. The results were then given to teachers for their individual reflection and group meetings. Teachers later wrote up these results (Tinker Sachs, 2003) and gave presentations at local and international conferences. From teachers' observations of their lessons and from reading their lesson transcriptions, teachers could see for themselves the progress they

had made toward accomplishing their goal. The interview with one of our research assistants and Teacher 5 shows how this teacher shifted in language use:

I: So were there any changes?

T: Well, I think I … use English, the percentage I use English and Cantonese, you know, I am going in the opposite way, you know. At the very beginning, I used really 100% of Cantonese, and then I used less and less. Even though toward the end, you know, I still use about 60% of Cantonese, 60, 70, but it's better than, you know, 100%.

I: So at the decrease in percentage of using Cantonese, how did you do that?

T: I used Cantonese, I first, you know, before when I used Cantonese, some students will say "no" to me, okay. I used English, they, they will say "no," they, they refused to listen, and they, they will not answer. But when I used CL technique, especially when someone taped, you know. They will first to, they dare not ask me to, to shift back to all Cantonese, one thing. In order to do well, those who can listen, those who can understand a little bit, they will tell the others. And also, they guess, they … I guess the first word, and you guess the second word, and the third group, the group member will guess the third word. And then they put all the things together. And finally when they've found that they can still work out what I want to, they're happy, thinking that, oh, they're not so … they're not totally ignorant about the language. (T14 Interview 3)

A range of teacher responses to trying-out, developing and using tasks over a three-year period to improve the use of English in the foreign language classroom demonstrates some of the struggles and processes that were experienced. While the TBLT literature sometimes portrays task-based instruction as a formulaic approach to teaching, there is so much more that is needed to unlock the approach into a flowing discourse of possibility. Overall, learners took guarded and hesitant risks, but they appreciated this way of learning. Teachers learned to use tasks and offered their learners more opportunities to take risks by the end of the project. Teachers also learned to develop their own tasks albeit with some lack of confidence in their own efficacy. However, they could see their own growth and their increased use of English as well as that of their students. Evidence from students' feedback and from lesson transcriptions across the three years attest to this (Tinker Sachs, 2007).

From the investigation of teachers' and learner's uptake of TBLT and CL several conditions for the promotion of risk-taking can be gleaned. For teachers to flourish as educators and thrive in the classroom, the following recommendations are offered:

- Strong and persistent efforts by government agencies and schools to promote and support teacher communicative competencies;
- Strong and persistent efforts on the part of researchers, school administrators as well as teacher leaders and developers to promote a culture and community of sharing and action research groups and teacher discussion/study groups (e.g., Tinker Sachs, 2002; Tinker Sachs & Ho, 2007); and finally,
- Strong and persistent efforts to promote time in school to foster teacher skills and efficacy in curriculum development.

The promotion of risk-taking in learners is closely aligned with the risk-taking capabilities of their teachers which is most likely associated with teacher language and curricula development competencies as well as opportunities. Teacher risk-taking can be encouraged through such means as action research and teacher study groups and through commitment to curriculum development and with increased opportunities by school administrators to put their skills into practice. Learners also need to be given the opportunities by teachers to engage in a variety of risk-taking activities over the long term in their classrooms. Learners' oral language risk-taking can be developed and increased through:

- Using open-ended task design activities;
- Integrating creative group activities;
- Talking with international speakers of English inside/outside of the classroom; and
- Engaging in alternative discourse formats in the classroom beyond initiation-response-feedback.

Concluding Remarks

Tasks promote social interaction between learners and between learners and teachers, and this interaction can facilitate language acquisition (Leung, Harris & Rampton, 2004). However, the extent to which teachers are able to adopt TBLT is constrained by cultural factors (Lu,

2001), school policies and practices (Chan, 2002), education authorities support systems (Carless, 2003) as well as individual teachers and their students' preferences and competencies based on their own learning and teaching histories and experiences. Risks are involved, and it is the extent to which those risks are cushioned and scaffolded that determines whether teachers and learners make the leap across the divide from traditional language teaching methods to TBLT. The challenges of implementing TBLT mean that in practice it is likely to look different from how researchers and theorists may describe it (Oxford, 2006). In this paper, I have used teachers' and students' data from a three-year longitudinal project to describe the process of adopting TBLT. I have argued that there is risk involved in taking up unfamiliar ways of teaching and learning such as TBLT. Learner-centred approaches (Nunan, 1988), in general, are particularly challenging in historically teacher-centred cultural contexts. The risks taken by teachers and students in this research project yielded positive results in the end, but there is still much further to go in developing students' capability in open tasks and in supporting teachers in feeling comfortable with the development of such learning contexts (Tinker Sachs, 2007).

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