

“We’re Not Allowed to Do Grammar!” – A Perspective on Grammatical Knowledge in the Task-Based Classroom

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In Canada, the federally funded Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program follows a task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach using the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB). Aligned with other communicative language approaches, TBLT de-emphasizes systematic instruction of the morpho-syntactic elements of language. Although TBLT does not exclude focus on form from the teaching cycle, the emphasis on tasks may leave instructors with the sense that there is no place for explicit grammar instruction within TBLT. Service-providing organizations (SPOs) also play a role in the interpretation of TBLT and may be limited in the training opportunities they can give instructors to meaningfully integrate grammar instruction into their classrooms. Furthermore, the 2012 CLB document that guides instruction and assessment in LINC also provides only limited support to instructors in selecting appropriate grammatical items for their level. Reporting from a sizable LINC program, this article argues that SPOs and the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks need to update the view of task-based teaching to be in line with current developments in TBLT and to provide clarity on which grammatical items are appropriate for each level. A Grammatical Knowledge Graphic is introduced as a possible resource for instructors.

Au Canada, le programme des Cours de langue pour les immigrants au Canada (CLIC), financé par le gouvernement fédéral, suit une approche d’enseignement des langues basée sur les tâches (ELBT) en utilisant les Niveaux de compétence linguistique canadiens (NCLC). En cohérence avec d’autres approches communicatives en enseignement des langues, l’ELBT met moins l’accent sur l’enseignement systématique des éléments morphosyntaxiques de la langue. Bien que l’ELBT n’exclue pas l’enseignement de la forme du cycle d’enseignement, l’importance accordée aux tâches peut donner aux enseignants l’impression qu’il n’y a pas de place pour un enseignement explicite de la grammaire dans le cadre de l’ELBT. Les organismes de prestation de services (OPS) jouent également un rôle dans l’interprétation de l’ELBT et peuvent être limités dans les possibilités de formation qu’ils peuvent offrir aux enseignants pour intégrer de manière significative l’enseignement de la grammaire dans leurs salles de classe. En outre, le document des NCLC de 2012 qui guide l’enseignement et l’évaluation dans les CLIC n’offre qu’un soutien limité aux enseignants quant au choix des éléments grammaticaux appropriés au niveau enseigné. Cet article,

qui porte sur un programme de CLIC de taille assez importante, soutient que les OPS et le Centre des niveaux de compétence linguistique canadiens doivent mettre à jour la vision de l'enseignement basé sur les tâches afin de refléter les développements récents en matière d'ELBT et de clarifier les éléments grammaticaux appropriés à chaque niveau. Un graphique de connaissances grammaticales est présenté comme une ressource possible pour les enseignants.

Keywords: grammar, LINC, focus on form, form-focused instruction, task-based

An average Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) classroom comprises 10 to 30 adult students coming from as many countries or language backgrounds, with varying levels of ability in each of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English. From coast to coast, free LINC classes follow the Canadian Language Benchmarks document (CCLB, 2012a) as their guiding framework, which is founded upon a task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach. Tasks are defined by Ellis (e.g., 2009) as communicative events that have a real purpose for communication, reach a goal apart from practicing the language, require learners to employ whatever language they have acquired to interact, and focus primarily on meaning; they are the fulcrums around which LINC classrooms are supposed to revolve. Progression through CLB levels requires, among other holistic evidence, that the learner show competence at their level in eight to ten artefacts in each language skill (CCLB, 2019), where each artefact is linked to a task. This requires instructors to gather at least 24 pieces of evidence from each learner in what may be as short as a 13-week term. Of course, LINC programs vary widely and may have some flexibility in terms of how many artefacts are to be gathered from a single task and how long instructors are given to collect evidence. However, the intensity of rushing toward tasks for assessment remains consistent across programs (Abdulhamid & Fox, 2020). Tasks then become not just the goal but the entirety of instruction. LINC instructors present language tasks, practice language tasks, and assess language tasks. Meanwhile, the building of language skills underlying successful transfer of learning from one task to another may be disregarded to compensate for the number of tasks learners are required to accomplish. Focus-on-form elements of instruction include decoding, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, discourse, and others, any of which may be given limited treatment within the task-based classroom. However, in my experience it appears that grammar is given less attention than other elements, possibly because of its association with now-outdated forms of language instruction. In addition, the nature of grammar teaching requires a full exploration of the form, meaning, and use of a given structure, which may be too time-consuming in the rush to complete assessments.

LINC instructors, guided by their service-providing organizations (SPOs), make critical decisions about the practical implementation of TBLT in their classrooms. In a small sample of informal interviews of LINC instructors of CLB 2–4 classes, all instructors reported having “a mental syllabus” of grammar items that they wanted to cover within their level. However, the source of the grammar items, their appropriacy for the level, and whether the instructor had adequate time to address any of them varied greatly between individuals. There was a general intuition that explicit grammar instruction should be included, but several instructors separated it from their task-based instruction and many commented that they had too little time to cover what they wished. Most instructors developed their grammar syllabus based either on their intuition or on their teaching experience or personal awareness of the linguistic complexity of a given structure. They reported addressing common errors as well as teaching grammar that they believed their students were ready to learn. Surprisingly, some instructors reported that when TBLT was introduced, it was emphasized that explicit grammar instruction could not be included, nor

should grammar use be assessed. This belief continues into the present, as one instructor recently expressed, “We’re not allowed to do grammar! ... Are we?”

What has led to this neglect of grammar in the LINC classroom? What role does grammar play in TBLT, and how can we align our LINC instruction to the original intention of the proponents of a task-based approach? I argue that it is due to the varied treatment of grammar instruction in TBLT theory, the limited training of instructors and dissemination of information by SPOs, and the inadequate treatment of grammar in the CLB document that integrated, systematic, and comprehensive grammar instruction is missing from many LINC classrooms. Most proponents of TBLT include explicit grammar instruction as an essential component of language teaching and learning (Ellis, 2014), and although the CLB document purposefully does not emphasize the instruction of explicit language structures, key grammatical concepts can be inferred from each CLB level. I propose a graphic (Figure 1) highlighting grammatical forms aligned to each CLB level that SPOs can use to support instructors in implementing meaningful, integrated grammar instruction in their task-based lessons.

Task-Based Language Teaching Theory and Focus on Form

The concept of *focus on form* was proposed by Long (1991) to refer to the instructional time devoted to the structures of language in the context of meaningful communication; it can encompass decoding, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, text structure, and more. Many of these other linguistic forms are treated in a similar manner to grammar in the LINC classroom; however, our attention here is on grammar instruction, so I will be using *focus on form* to refer specifically to integrated grammar teaching.

The role of grammar instruction in TBLT is an issue that is often misunderstood, according to Ellis (2009). Although earlier discussions of communicative language teaching distinguished between a *strong* and a *weak* interpretation depending on whether grammar was explicitly taught (see discussion in Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004), this is not the case with any of the different task-based models that have been proposed. These models do differ, however, with respect to the implementation of the task sequence (see Ellis, 2014, for an overview), situating *focus on form* at the pre-task, within-task, or post-task phase.

The pre-task phase is recommended in the model by Nunan (2004), in which a *focus on lexis* and grammar occurs prior to the communicative task in a series of steps. These steps move from a contextualized presentation of new language to controlled listening and production practice that finally leads up to a pedagogical task, which is based on a real-world task. Focusing on form during the main task phase is advocated by Long (1991), which necessarily takes the form of corrective feedback. Finally, the post-task phase is the slot for *focus on form* proposed by Willis (1996). Language focus in her influential model proceeds after a task has been completed, reviewed, and reported on. She sees it as a “natural progression from the holistic to the specific.... Language focus allows a closer study of some of the specific features naturally occurring in the language used during the task cycle” (p. 40). Willis suggests that learners need the opportunity to review the structures required by the preceding task and that they can investigate and identify language features to consolidate their learning. The language focus needs to be at the learner’s level and deeply integrated in the task they have already attempted.

Unlike Nunan, Long, or Willis, Ellis (e.g., 2014) considers *focus on form* to be appropriate in any of the three phases of a task-based lesson. Furthermore, Ellis draws attention to the benefits of using so-called *focused tasks*. These are communicative tasks that provide ample opportunities to use a predictable structure. For example, if learners are role-playing a job interview, they are likely to use the past tense and possibly the present perfect meaningfully and repeatedly. Unfocused tasks do not involve the use of any particular grammatical structure. Through the use of *focused tasks*, a *focus on form* can be more deeply integrated into a task-based lesson.

We see from these varying perspectives that TBLT theory does not provide SPOs or instructors with a single approach to the sequencing of grammar instruction, and there still remains the question of how to implement integrated focus on form. In addition, teachers must analyze and select the particular grammar items appropriate for their level. Clearer guidance on the implementation of grammar instruction and explicit examples of which grammatical items are appropriate within CLB levels would benefit instructors and lead to greater consistency across LINC classrooms.

SPOs as Interpreters of TBLT

Each LINC program is overseen by an SPO that works in conjunction with the federal funder, Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada. SPOs hire and train instructors to implement language instruction according to the CLB document. When the CCLB releases new documents, professional learning sessions, or instruction/assessment guidelines, it is the SPO's responsibility to communicate and provide policy to enable instructors to adhere to them. Although task-based teaching has been promoted since the first version of the CLB document in 1996 (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 1996), there is a continued message from SPOs highlighting its newness, its uniqueness from previous approaches, and its essentiality in the LINC classroom. This can be seen in the CCLB and the resources available on Tutela, the online professional community (see Gomez & Landry, 2020), as well as in the activities of local chapters of ESL professionals, which continue to provide professional development and learning sessions on the basics of TBLT. As recently as 2020, webinars and learning sessions have been produced to support instructors in implementing TBLT (Gomez & Landry, 2020). Perhaps this substantial emphasis is required for TBLT because it is not used in the K–12 education system in Canada, or because it is paired with the demanding requirements of Portfolio Based Language Assessment (PBLA) used in LINC. Another reason could be that some instructors resisted the TBLT approach when it was introduced in opposition to a more traditional presentation-practice-production model. Whatever the reason, TBLT continues to be supported and emphasized by SPOs as the definitive answer to how to teach in a LINC classroom.

Furthermore, as SPOs hire and equip instructors for LINC, they must distill the entirety of TBLT into sometimes very limited training opportunities. It is not surprising, then, that SPOs choose to dwell most heavily on real world tasks that can be assessed and placed in learner portfolios as artefacts. Grammar instruction may be briefly mentioned but without explanation of the critical importance that TBLT experts place on the sequence of when and how it ought to occur. It is also unlikely that time is given to explore which grammatical items are appropriate for different levels. If grammar is addressed, some SPOs may prefer only unfocused tasks and may train instructors to exclude grammar use from language assessment. In this case, instructors are encouraged to incorporate grammar items as memorized chunks (CCLB, 2012b, p. 46) within the narrow context of a specific task and assess production based on a holistic measure of task completion: Did the learner accomplish the real-world goal no matter what language they used? Other SPOs may include grammar as a separate and isolated segment of language instruction rather than explore the different possible ways to focus on form within task-based lessons. In either case, the way TBLT is interpreted and disseminated to instructors by SPOs can diminish the vital role grammar instruction can have when embedded within communicative language tasks.

Grammar in the Canadian Language Benchmarks Document

The Canadian Language Benchmarks document outlines extensive, competency-based language standards for adult immigrants (CCLB, 2012a). Current LINC instructors use the 2012 edition to determine learners' language ability and communicative competence within a national framework that is used for the placement, teaching, and assessment of learners. The CLB document explicitly states, "Although no

instructional method is specified in the implementation of the CLB, instructional practices should focus on preparing learners to carry out contextualized ‘real world’ communicative tasks consistent with the CLB” (CCLB, 2012a, p. v). This flexibility in methodology may leave SPOs and instructors grasping at an incomplete pedagogical approach. The CLB descriptors are founded upon Bachman’s theory of language ability (Bachman, 1990, as cited in CCLB, 2012b). Bachman includes grammatical knowledge as one of four fundamental components of language ability, but for instructors reading the CLB document, explicit reference to a list of grammatical items can be found only in a small section on a single page of “Knowledge and Strategies” inserted at the beginning of each stage of ability (Stage I: CLB 1–4, Stage II: CLB 5–8, Stage III: CLB 9–12). The Grammatical Knowledge section highlights three to five bullet points of possible structures and syntax samples, not all of which relate to grammar instruction but include several other aspects of focus on form such as vocabulary and pronunciation. This list does not indicate which forms are appropriate for each of the four levels within the stage, and it is considered non-exhaustive.

Other mentions of grammar instruction are present in the Profile of Ability for each level; however, they are very broad statements that must be interpreted by individual instructors, for example, in CLB 2 Writing: “Some initial ability to use simple structures” (CCLB, 2012a, p. 110) or in CLB 3 Writing: “Developing control of simple structures” (CCLB, 2012a, p. 110). The CLB document does not expand on what “very little control,” “some initial ability,” “developing,” or “adequate control” means, nor does it clarify what structures may be appropriate for learners at a given level. This sparse treatment of grammar is highlighted by contrast with another internationally recognized framework for language standards, the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001). The CEFR is highly specific and contains extensive vocabulary and grammar profiles for each level. For example, the most basic CEFR level, A1, contains 109 discrete grammatical descriptors such as “Can form interrogative clauses with ‘be’” or “Can form plurals by adding ‘-s’ to common countable nouns” (O’Keeffe & Mark, 2017). While that number of descriptors may be too specific to be useful in a LINC classroom, the concept of providing key grammatical markers for a given level is well founded and notably missing from the CLB document.

If instructors are particularly curious or determined, they may resource the CLB Support Kit (CCLB, 2012b) document to find further information. The CLB Support Kit provides an expanded treatment of grammar instruction, devoting an entire chapter to explaining its role according to CLB standards. It emphasizes that targeted grammar instruction can help learners improve in language ability but concedes that instructors may not be clear on how to implement it in the classroom (CCLB, 2012b, p. 43). It states that there is a time for both isolated and integrated grammar instruction based on learner needs, and it stresses how challenging it is to predict what grammatical concepts might be required for a given task. It goes on to explain that the CLB document refrains from selecting grammatical concepts for each level due to its communicative competence approach, which allows for a task to be achieved by any number of grammatical forms. The suggestion given for selecting appropriate grammatical items is to analyze the task and identify the most commonly used forms a native speaker might use. Then, with the instructor’s knowledge of the learners’ abilities and individual needs, the instructor must decide if the form of the structure should be taught, or if it is best to teach it as a formulaic chunk (p. 46). However, as we have seen, LINC classes may have up to 30 learners and be under significant pressure to complete their required assessments within the given instructional time. The challenge of determining which forms are appropriate for a large class with diverse learner needs and a lack of adequate time to address the form, meaning, and use of a structure may encourage instructors to forgo explicit grammar instruction, or perhaps to treat most items as formulaic chunks that can be memorized as vocabulary. In addition, some SPOs may not be providing the guidance or training time for instructors to develop their skills in this area by exploring the provided options outlined in the document. In its conclusion, the CLB Support Kit emphasizes that grammar instruction must be connected to meaningful communication, and the multiple options it provides for doing so are all viable in the language classroom (p. 53). While this flexibility may be

encouraging for instructors who prefer varying approaches, it can also be unhelpful for those looking for more clarity or guidance for specific application in their classrooms.

Bringing Grammar Back: Realignment to Theory and Guidance for Instructors

The diverging worlds of TBLT theory, SPO support, and the CLB documents need to be brought into better alignment to provide clear and practical pedagogical guidelines for LINC instructors. The reality of the LINC classroom is situated at the convergence of second language acquisition theory, language teaching methodology, and the at-times conflicting messages communicated by the various LINC program stakeholders. However, LINC instructors are adaptable, creative, and skilled teachers who can implement complex approaches, given time and training. I believe that LINC instructors would benefit from clearer guidance on how to focus on meaningful language use while promoting accurate form. If we can provide adequate examples of appropriate task-based teaching cycles that include focus on form, we will be supporting teachers in their inclination toward incorporating grammar in their classrooms. In addition, SPOs need to ensure they are aligned with one another in support of accurate implementation of empirically tested approaches and need to be funded to provide more training for instructors. The CCLB needs to provide more exemplars of integrating focus on form into task-based teaching for all LINC levels and direct guidance on which grammatical items are appropriate for each level. Instructors need encouragement to teach grammar and training on how to integrate it into meaningful tasks within their limited time frame while addressing their diverse learner needs. They also need support in selecting what grammar concepts are integral to a given task and appropriate for learners at their level. Ultimately, it is learners who will benefit from explicit grammar instruction that builds their awareness of how form, meaning, and use are interwoven to allow them to communicate effectively (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999).

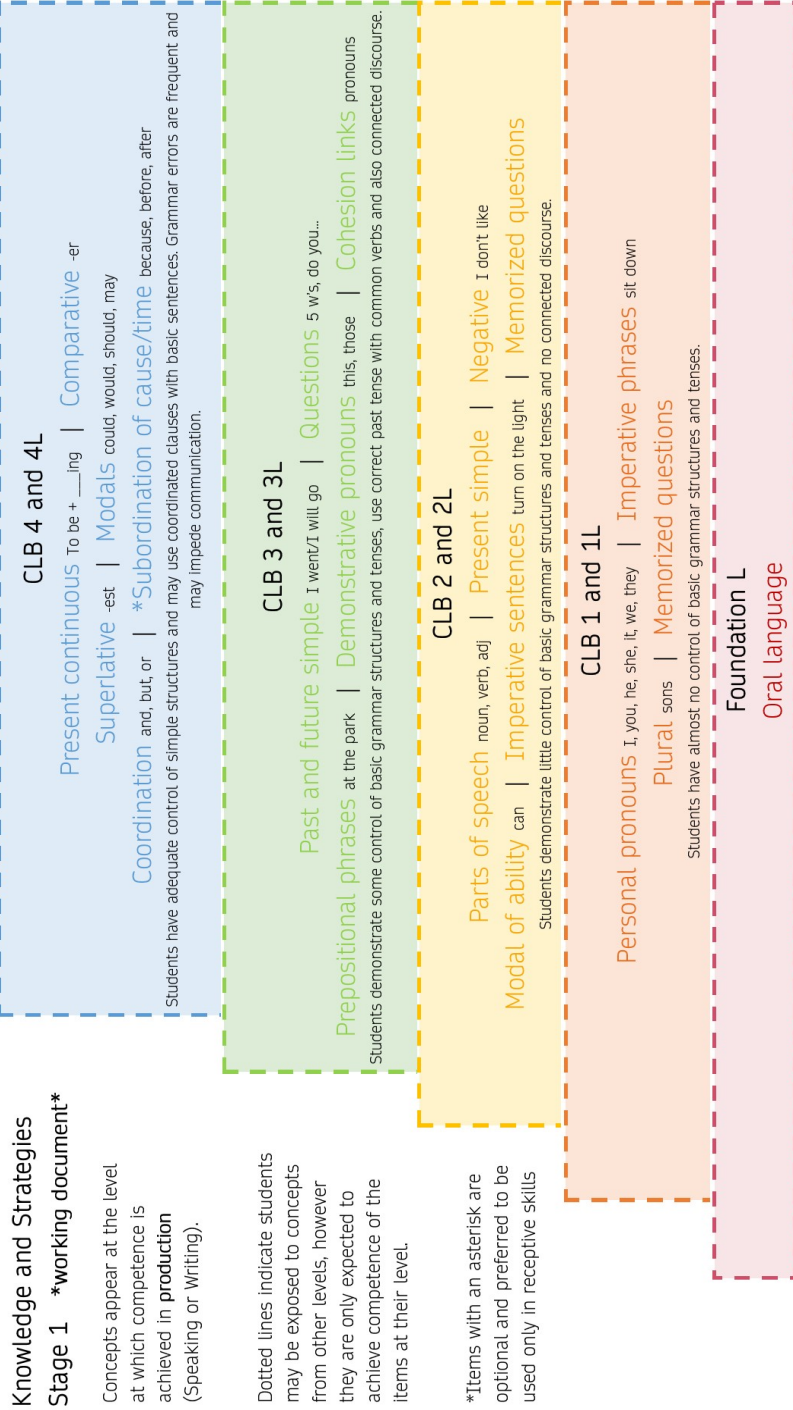
In an effort to encourage instructors to include meaningful, integrated grammar instruction in LINC, a grammatical knowledge graphic (Figure 1) was produced collaboratively for a local SPO, with me as the lead. Rather than a prescriptive syllabus of required concepts to be taught at each level, the graphic emphasizes the grammar elements that are implicit within the types of tasks learners can attempt at a given CLB level. Starting with pre-beginning literacy learners at the foundation level, the graphic shows grammatical concepts building in a stepwise manner to the end of CLB 7. Stage III was excluded, as it is rare for a LINC program to offer courses at a level above CLB 8. It is intended for use in both the literacy (less than nine years of education in the first language) and mainstream programs. The graphic attempts to bridge the gap between isolated grammar syllabi and task-based learning, emphasizing the critical importance of embedded, meaningful grammar instruction. It aims to support instructors in identifying what language structures would be appropriate to investigate as part of attempting a meaningful task without being exhaustive or constraining to the diversity typically present in LINC classes.

Due to LINC being mandated to use the CLB document as its guiding framework, it was decided to source the grammatical concepts from the Knowledge and Strategies pages, individual Indicators of Ability for the competencies, and the Profiles of Ability of each level. Instructors can thus feel confident that including a grammatical expectation on an assessment for a given task would still be aligned with the mandated standardized framework for LINC. To supplement the sparse information in the CLB document, the ESL for Adult Literacy Learners (ALL)'s Continuum of Literacy Skills (CCLB, 2016) was consulted. ESL for ALL is the CLB sister-document for students who have not achieved full literacy in their first language. It includes an extensive continuum of reading and writing skills required by literacy learners for language acquisition. The sixth strand of the continuum, Understanding/Using Word Order and Sentence Patterns to Produce Text, was particularly helpful in identifying which skills underlie certain grammatical knowledge elements and how these skills develop over time. A systematic grammar textbook, *Grammar*

Figure 1

Grammatical Knowledge Graphic for CLB Levels

Grammatical Knowledge



Referred to Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2012, (CLB Document), Ontario LINC Curriculum Guidelines (2002), and Adult ESL Curriculum Guidelines (2003). Created August 2022 and modified September 2022.

Step by Step 1 (Fragiadakis & Rosenfield, 2010), was also consulted to identify any key concepts that were lacking representation in the CLB documents. The grammatical terms used were considered to be the ones most familiar to LINC instructors.

Although it may appear that the graphic is prescriptive in nature, it was created with the intention of providing guidance without being restrictive. Each CLB level is outlined in dotted lines, suggesting that concepts may appropriately extend between levels. The graphic represents what learners are expected to achieve in the productive skills, as learners may show readiness for higher-level concepts when working in their receptive skills. While using the graphic, instructors of Stage I are encouraged to recall that learners' communication may be impeded by inaccurate use of language structures which does not prevent them from adequately achieving tasks at their level (Hajer et al., 2002). However, the graphic's outline of what structures learners may acquire at a given level allows instructors to link level-appropriate grammar instruction with the meaningful tasks that their learners desire to accomplish in their daily lives. Once a communicative task is selected, the instructor can analyze the task for what grammar concepts naturally occur and then reference the graphic to determine which items overlap with those appropriate for their level. In this way, instructors are not overwhelmed by the numerous options of grammar concepts present in any given task. Occasionally, a task selected by learners may require grammatical items that are well beyond their reach, according to the graphic. In these cases, it is recommended that instructors teach these items as "chunks" and treat them as vocabulary, rather than structural rules. Ultimately, the graphic affirms to instructors that grammar instruction is and should be an integral aspect of their task-based LINC class.

Conclusion

Although LINC teachers may vary in their approach to grammar instruction within their regular practice of TBLT, there is no doubt in my mind about the incredible value, quality, and benefit of this national language instruction and settlement program. Since 1992 it has been an irreplaceable support to newcomers, giving them a community where they can learn, access services, build relationships, and ultimately establish successful lives in Canada (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2011). LINC instructors are dedicated and capable, and they rightly prioritize their learners' needs in their instructional practices. This is why some instructors teach grammar as a separate component from their task-based lessons; they know that it is a critical for language learning despite how it may have been de-emphasized by SPOs and its somewhat ambiguous treatment in the CLB document. It is clear from TBLT theory experts that incorporating grammar instruction within the task cycle is not at odds with the TBLT approach. Let us then empower LINC instructors with the tools they need to adequately focus on form in their task-based classrooms.

The grammatical knowledge graphic presented in Figure 1 is just a single step toward this change. It will require a concerted effort from all stakeholders of the LINC program to move forward in promoting meaningful and integrated grammar instruction in the classroom. Learning more about the latest developments in TBLT is likely to offer useful insights into how tasks and explicit grammar instruction can be complementary to one another. SPOs need to ensure that their training includes guidance on integrating grammar into TBLT and provide support to instructors in identifying the grammatical items appropriate for their level. They can also modify their internal discourse to more closely align with TBLT theory and its application in the LINC classroom. The CLB document and associated works would benefit from improved clarity regarding how to focus on form within the task cycle and which grammar concepts should be included at each level. With these changes, it is hoped that LINC instructors will thrive as teachers of grammar.

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