



# The Synergistic Path of TBLT and CBLT — A Scenario-Based Task Chain Model for Language Competence Integration

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## Abstract

This study proposes an innovative Scenario-Based Task Chain Model to synergize Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Competency-Based Language Teaching (CBLT), addressing their respective limitations in fragmentation and goal ambiguity. Grounded in Robinson’s task complexity theory and van Lier’s ecological linguistics, the model constructs a three-dimensional reconstruction principle (structural, dynamic, and social) and a four-step design methodology (deconstruction, reorganization, ecologicalization, and evaluation). Through a case study on international business negotiation English courses, the research demonstrates that the situational task chain effectively integrates fragmented CBLT competence units into coherent, context-rich task sequences, fostering learners’ comprehensive language proficiency and strategic flexibility in real-world communication. Theoretical contributions include a dynamic “competence emergence” model, while practical implications involve guiding teacher role transformation and developing industry-specific task chain template libraries.

## Keywords

TBLT; CBLT; Scenario-Based Task Chains; Language Competence Integration

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## 1. Introduction

Competency-Based Language Teaching (CBLT) has been widely used in adult education, vocational training, and language teaching for specific purposes (LSP). The pedagogy focuses on observable behavioral objectives, breaks down language competence into fine-grained units of competence, and uses a standardized assessment system to measure learners’ mastery. However, despite the advantages of CBLT in terms of curriculum standardization and proficiency measurability, its methodological reductionist tendencies have also provoked widespread criticism. It treats language as a “mosaic of competences” that can be dismantled (Docking,

1994), ignoring the organic wholeness and dynamic interaction of language as a complex adaptive system, which often puts students in a “learning-use dilemma” (Larsen-Freeman, 2017). Specifically, CBLT suffers from the following core deficiencies: the atomistic fragmentation of language competence units; the lack of contextual dynamics; and the implicit regulation of ideology. As linguist Halliday (1994) points out, language is a unity of meaning and function, and any teaching method that fragments it goes against the nature of language. The integration of TBLT into CBLT can link up the originally scattered units of competence through task chains, so that students can achieve synergistic development of skills in a coherent context and solve the drawbacks of language fragmentation in CBLT teaching. TBLT focuses on dynamic tasks based on real-life scenarios, making up for CBLT’s static competency list’s inability to adapt to language evolution and contextual complexity, aligning teaching with actual language application. Their integration can make up for CBLT’s shortcomings in language wholeness and dynamics, provide TBLT with a clear competency framework, and promote a shift from fragmented research to an integrated paradigm.” In practice, it helps develop teaching models aligned with real-life scenarios, cultivating learners’ comprehensive language competence and cross-cultural literacy. Additionally, their combination innovates the teaching evaluation system, enabling a dynamic and multidimensional language proficiency evaluation mechanism. This study aims to investigate the TBLT-CBLT integration mechanism, analyse their complementarity, and construct a situational task chain model to solve CBLT’s defects of isolating competence units and TBLT’s ambiguous competence goals, providing an integrated paradigm for language teaching theory and supporting systematic teaching practices to cultivate authentic language use competence.

## **2. Current Research on TBLT-CBLT Integration**

In response to the inherent issues of CBLT outlined above, integration with TBLT has been proposed as a viable solution, and several scholarly and practical attempts have been made. In terms of complementarity studies, most of them emphasize that the task-driven nature of TBLT can compensate for the fragmentation tendency of CBLT. These efforts primarily emphasize the complementary nature of the two pedagogies. For instance, Norris’s (2009) Competency-Aligned Task Design (CATD) embeds discrete CBLT competencies into task chains, while Ellis (2017) empirically demonstrates how TBLT can activate CBLT-trained knowledge. At the application level, models like Van den Branden’s (2016) Dual-Track Model nest TBLT tasks within CBLT frameworks, such as deconstructing business negotiation competence into sub-skills for task-based practice. However, these approaches often remain confined to specific skill domains (e.g., vocational English) and exhibit critical limitations. They tend to overlook “cross-competency integration” necessary for holistic language use, pay insufficient attention to the “dynamic contextual

complexity” of real-world communication, and fail to integrate assessment systems. Consequently, the systematic construction of “situated task chains”—precisely the mechanism needed to coherently address CBLT’s fragmentation and contextual rigidity—lacks robust theoretical underpinning. This gap necessitates a more theoretically grounded integration model. Therefore, drawing on task complexity theory and ecolinguistics, this study constructs a systematic situated task-chain model aimed precisely at overcoming these limitations.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

#### **3.1. Applicability Analysis of Theoretical Tools**

Robinson’s (2011) task complexity theory, particularly the resource-dispersing and resource-directing dimensions, provides a scientific basis for sequencing tasks in situational task chains. The resource-dispersing dimension manages cognitive load (e.g., progressing from form-filling to conflict mediation in a “workplace complaints” chain), while the resource-directing dimension guides attention to specific language forms. For example, in an “applying for social security” task chain, information-gap tasks can naturally induce interrogatives, transforming isolated CBLT training into communicative needs. Meanwhile, van Lier’s (2004) ecological linguistics, with its core concept of “affordance”, enriches this framework by viewing language learning as a dynamic interaction between learners and their environment, not mere skill accumulation. Applied to task chains, this means designing open “linguistic ecological fields” that embed variables like cultural norms and power relations to mirror real social scenarios. Thus, in a task chain like “workplace complaint” (e.g., progressing from formal letters to face-to-face mediation), learners adapt strategies to shifting contexts, integrating form, function, and social meaning. This addresses CBLT’s neglect of language integrity. Together, Robinson’s and van Lier’s theories form dual pillars: one provides a sequencing framework, the other ensures ecological integration. Their synergy theorizes a path beyond CBLT’s reductionism.

#### **3.2. Theoretical Foundations of Synergistic Reconstruction**

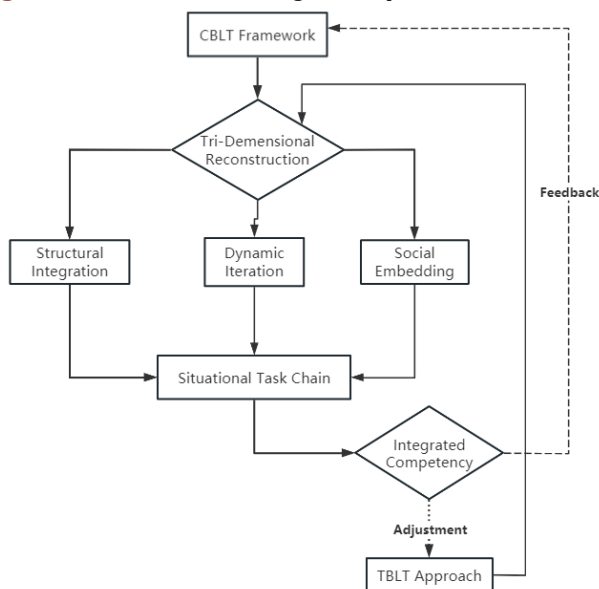
The synergy between TBLT and CBLT stems from their theoretical complementarity, aiming for a dialectical unity of “holistic” and “systemic” teaching. Theoretically, CBLT derives from behaviorism, breaking competence into measurable units (Docking, 1994), which aids standardization but fragments socio-cultural practice. Conversely, TBLT, rooted in social constructivism, emphasizes form-function unity in authentic tasks, compensating for this fragmentation (Ellis, 2017). Specifically, TBLT’s task-driven mechanism re-embeds CBLT’s discrete units into coherent contexts. Through cognitively sequenced task chains, learners integrate micro-skills in problem-solving, realizing competence emergence as in a “Complex Adaptive System”(Larsen-Freeman, 2017). Conversely, CBLT’s rigorous competency framework addresses TBLT’s “goal ambiguity” as its can-do statements anchor task

design towards clear proficiency goals (Van den Branden, 2016). This bidirectional complementarity creates a synergistic spiral, aligning with Halliday’s metafunctional theory to unite conceptual, interpersonal, and discourse functions. Epistemologically, it reflects Vygotsky’s (1978) view of language development as a dynamic unity of systematic knowledge construction and social negotiation.

### 3.3. Integrated Model Construction: Scenario-Based Task Chains

This study proposes a “three-dimensional reconstruction principle” (see Figure 1) to synergize TBLT and CBLT within situational task chains across structural, dynamic, and social dimensions. Structurally, CBLT’s competency index (e.g., “Business Negotiation” sub-skills) provides a clear, evaluable framework. TBLT’s task sequences then logically link these dispersed units into a coherent language-use process, preventing fragmentation. Dynamically, CBLT’s standardized assessment ensures measurability, while TBLT’s contextual flow, with variable factors (e.g., emergent cultural conflicts), develops adaptive competence. Socially, CBLT’s pragmatic goals define social functions aligned with learner needs. TBLT’s interactive scaffolding (e.g., role-playing) provides a path to realize these functions through meaning negotiation with peers. These dimensions are interpenetrating: structure ensures systematic development, dynamics promote flexibility, and social interaction provides cultural authenticity. Together, they form an integrative situational task-chain model that reunifies form, function, and meaning in language teaching. The operational mechanism is shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** The TBLT-CBLT Integrative Operational Model



## 4. Design and Implementation of Scenario-Based Task Chains

### 4.1. Methodology for Designing Scenario-Based Task Chains

The design and implementation of the situated task chain follows a systematic methodology, which is centred on transforming traditional CBLT units of competence into ecologically valid task sequences. In the deconstruction stage, teachers need to analyse the target language domain in depth, and remap the discrete competence points in the CBLT framework (e.g., “use polite language”) into real communicative situations. Taking the workplace complaint scenario as an example, the original isolated competency training items are integrated into tasks with real-world significance, including identifying the cause of the complaint, collecting evidence, and choosing the appropriate communication channel, etc. This process not only retains the standardized competency requirements of CBLT, but also restores the integrity of the language use through contextualization.

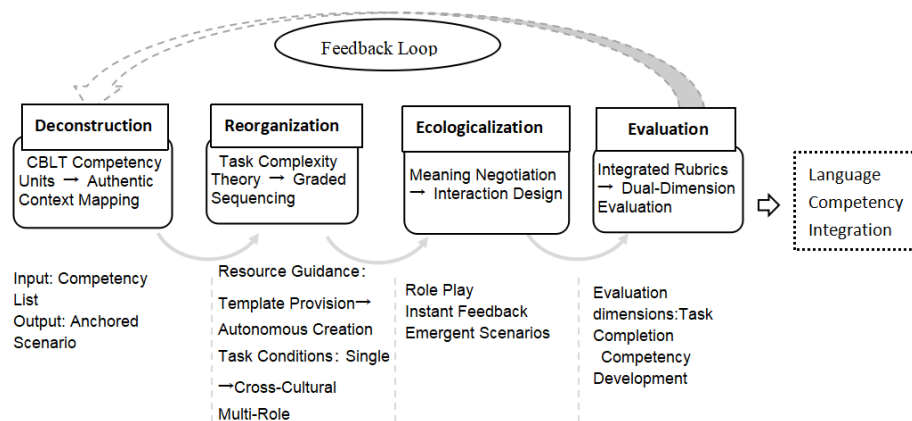
After entering the restructuring stage, designers need to consider both resource-oriented dimensions (e.g. time pressure, information complexity) and cognitive-oriented dimensions (e.g. linguistic form difficulty, cognitive demand), and reorganize the deconstructed competency elements into task chains with logical continuity. At the resource-oriented level, the primary task can provide sufficient linguistic cues (e.g., templates, commonly used sentence patterns), reduce the difficulty of information retrieval, and focus on basic competencies such as “accurately expressing the content of the complaint”; as the task advances, it gradually reduces the predefined resources, and requires the learners to independently call upon their linguistic knowledge to cope with more complex scenarios. At the level of task conditions, the transition from the simple task of “single-role, information symmetry” to the complex task of “multi-role participation, information asymmetry”, and ultimately to the advanced tasks such as “cross-cultural conflict mediation”, the task chain is accurately matched to the difficulty of the task chain and the progression of competence development, ensuring that learners’ competence spirals upwards when completing the sequence of tasks.

Ecological design is a key aspect of ensuring authenticity in the task chain, and an ecolinguistic perspective requires task designers to go beyond mere training in linguistic forms and embed authentic socio-cultural variables in the task. In the case of complaints, this means modelling authentic power relations (e.g. hierarchical differences between employees and supervisors), cultural norms, and the need for immediate interaction. Through interactive forms such as role-playing and immediate feedback, learners are no longer passive executors of preset scripts, but become active negotiators of meaning, developing overall language competence in dynamic communication.

The innovative design of the assessment link is directly related to the implementation effect of the task chain. The design of the scale should include two core dimensions: task completion and competence development: the former focuses on the actual effect of the task, e.g., whether the problem is solved in the task of

“Workplace Complaints”; the latter is based on the CBLT. The former focuses on the actual effect of the task, such as whether the problem is solved in the task of “Workplace Complaints”; the latter refers to the CBLT competency list, and evaluates the learner’s ability to respond to objections accurately and appropriately, such as the appropriateness of emotion regulation. At the same time, the scale needs to be dynamic, such as focusing on “correctness of language form” in the primary tasks and “flexibility of strategy application” in the advanced tasks. Through the combination of stage-by-stage assessment and overall feedback, it ensures that the implementation of the task chain is measurable and provides clear guidelines for learners’ ability development. Through the combination of stage-by-stage assessment and overall feedback, it not only ensures that the implementation of the task chain is measurable, but also provides clear guidelines for the development of learners’ abilities, and ultimately realizing the organic unity of “teaching-learning-assessment”.

**Figure 2.** The Cyclical Design-Implementation Process of Scenario-Based Task Chains



These four steps are not a linear process, but an interpenetrating whole (Figure 2): deconstruction provides a contextual basis for restructuring, restructuring builds a gradient framework for ecologicalization, ecologicalization brings assessment closer to real-life use, and assessment feedback feeds back the optimization of the previous steps, which together ensure that the situational task chain is rooted in the CBLT competence system and highlights the contextual dynamics of TBLT, and ultimately realises the deep integration of language competence from “unit mastery” to “comprehensive use”. This will ultimately achieve the in-depth integration of language ability from “unit mastery” to “comprehensive application”.

## 4.2. Case Study Analysis

In order to further verify the practical value of the situational task chain integration model, this study selects the international business negotiation English course as a case study, and reveals the actual impact of the integration of the two on the

cultivation of language competence by comparing the differences between the traditional CBLT teaching model and the integrated task chain model. Under the traditional CBLT model, international business negotiation English teaching mostly adopts the “skill module segmentation” approach, which breaks down negotiation competence into “business vocabulary recognition”, “price expression”, “clause translation”, “Translation of terms” and other isolated units, and the teaching activities are dominated by single-skill training. For example, in the “offer response” module, teachers usually explain core vocabulary such as “discount” and “counteroffer” first, and then let students complete fill-in-the-blank exercises, and then have students complete fill-in-the-blank exercises (e.g. Could you accept a \_\_\_\_\_ of 5%?). Then students can complete fill-in-the-blank exercises (e.g. Could you accept a \_\_\_\_\_ of 5%?), followed by mechanical dialogue simulations (A: Our price is \$100 per unit. B: We’d like a 10% discount.). Although this model allows students to master basic language forms, it cuts out the coherence of negotiation scenarios - students may be proficient in memorizing sentence patterns, but in a real negotiation, they will be passive because they don’t know how to adjust their strategies in light of the other party’s attitude (e.g., the logic of response when the other party emphasizes “cost pressures”). However, in a real negotiation, students may be passive because they don’t know how to adjust their strategies with the other party’s attitude (e.g. when the other party emphasizes “cost pressure”), which ultimately leads to a disconnect between learning and using.

In contrast, the integrated scenario task chain is designed around the core scenario of “cross-border procurement negotiation”, with three levels of progressive tasks: the primary task is “request for quotation” (focusing on information exchange and basic bargaining), the intermediate task is upgraded to “negotiation of terms” (embedded with variables such as delivery date and payment method), and the final task is “negotiation of dispute resolution” (introducing cultural conflicts and unexpected situations). Each task level strictly follows the task complexity theory, gradually increasing the time pressure and information density in the resource-oriented dimension, and increasing the linguistic complexity (e.g., from simple statements to strategic expressions such as conditional clauses and ambiguities) in the cognitive-oriented dimension. At the same time, based on van Lier’s eco-linguistic principles (2004), the task chain is embedded with elements typical of real business environments: role power asymmetry (e.g., purchasing manager vs. supplier representative), multicultural value conflict, and dynamic negotiation strategy adjustment. The core differences between the two models are presented in the following dimensions (Figure 3): the traditional CBLT aims at “skill attainment”, with static and isolated task design and assessment focusing on linguistic accuracy, which results in students acquiring fragmented knowledge but lacking the strategic flexibility required for real negotiations; whereas the scenario-based task chain model focuses on The task chain model is oriented to

“comprehensive negotiation competence”, the task design is coherent and dynamic, and the assessment takes into account the “quality of task completion” (e.g., whether to reach cooperation) and the “level of competence integration” (e.g., the effectiveness of strategy adjustment), which ultimately enables students to acquire fragmented knowledge but lack the flexibility of strategies required for real negotiations. The assessment takes into account the “quality of task completion” (e.g. whether cooperation is reached) and the “level of integration of competence” (e.g. the effectiveness of strategy adjustment), and ultimately enables the students to consolidate their language skills as well as form a holistic knowledge of the negotiation process in the simulation of the real scenario, thus truly realizing the “combination of learning and use”.

**Figure 3.** Comparison Between the Traditional CBLT Model and the Integrated Task-Chain Model

Dimension	Traditional CBLT	Integrated Task-Chain Model
Objectives	Mastery of standardized phrases	Dynamic strategy development
Task Design	Isolated sentence drills	Full-process simulation (plan-do-review)
Assessment	Error-focused accuracy metrics	Tripartite rubric (outcome/strategy/culture)
Culture	Appendix-style cultural notes	Real-time intercultural problem-solving
Limitations	Rigid strategy application	High initial cognitive load

This case shows that situated task chains can effectively bridge the fragmentation gap of CBLT and the goal ambiguity of TBLT, providing a practical path for language teaching with a clear competency framework and dynamic contextual coherence.

## 5. Conclusion

This study proposes the situational task chain as an integrative model for TBLT and CBLT, offering new theoretical perspectives on language teaching. Its core theoretical contribution lies in constructing a dynamic model of language competence development, based on Robinson’s (2011) task complexity theory and van Lier’s (2004) eco-linguistics. This model, operationalized through situational task chains, reconceptualizes competence not as static, discrete elements but as an emergent property from holistic, context-bound interaction. This dynamic, emergent view of competence addresses CBLT’s fragmentation of language and provides a structured solution to TBLT’s problem of goal ambiguity. Thus, it deepens the understanding of how task complexity, socio-cultural context, and

cognitive development interact in proficiency growth. Moreover, the proposed three-dimensional reconstruction principle provides an operable framework, bridging theory and practice. Pedagogically, the study offers key implications for teacher development and teaching resource design. It advocates a shift in the teacher's role from a competence assessor to a contextual task designer. This necessitates three core competencies: 1) analysing and deconstructing authentic communicative scenarios, 2) transforming CBLT competency indexes into cognitively graded task sequences based on task complexity theory, and 3) regulating classroom interaction to incorporate social variables like power relations and cultural differences. For teaching resources, it proposes developing an industry-oriented repository of situational task-chain templates. These are open frameworks comprising core contextual modules, variable elements, and integrated assessment scales, each aligning CBLT competency lists with TBLT's dynamic task design. The modular nature allows teachers to adapt task complexity for different learner levels. This approach provides a theoretically-grounded design framework, reduces preparation burden, and ensures content relevance to real-world scenarios, helping learners directly connect competence, situation, and application. This enables learners to establish a direct connection between "competence - situation - application" at the very beginning of their contact with the teaching materials, thus laying a solid foundation for their future vocational language practice.

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