

## Dave and Jane Willis

### Why do we need TBLT?

The aim of language teaching worldwide is to enable learners to use the language they have learned in school or college to communicate confidently and effectively with other users of English in the world outside. This aim prioritises fluency rather than accuracy. Learners should be able to use the language with speed and confidence even if this means sacrificing grammatical accuracy. A task-based approach, where learners actively engage in meaning focused activities, for much (but not all) of their time in class, is explicitly designed to achieve this.

How many learners leave Japanese high schools with a usable competence in English—confidently able to take part in a conversation on everyday topics, able to surf the net in English and to take advantage of the vast array of published material in English? Japanese teachers have often told us, “Our students know the grammar, but they can’t use the language.” This prompts the question, “Is there any point in knowing the grammar if you can’t use it?” Japan is not alone in this. English teachers all over the world express the same worries. Teachers of Spanish and French in the UK have the same concerns. There is something seriously wrong with the way languages are taught in many classrooms. We believe that one of the problems is a failure to recognise that language is much more than a grammatical system. Learning a language involves *Learning How to Mean* as given in the title of Halliday (1975). A command of standard grammar is a part of this, but we need to recognise two things. As we have seen it is possible to have some knowledge of how the grammar works without being able to apply that knowledge. On the other hand it is possible to communicate effectively in a language for all kinds of purposes without conforming closely to a standard grammar. Most teachers are aware of this and many are aware that TBLT offers a realistic alternative to the traditional grammar-based approaches which have consistently failed our learners. Among grammar-based approaches we would include PPP. In a PPP methodology learners are so dominated by the presentation and practice that at the production stage they are preoccupied with grammatical form rather than with

### Keywords

task-based, TBLT, TBL, TBI, TBA, meaning-based, communicative language teaching, CLT, language descriptors, CEFR, ACTFL, CLB

Dave and Jane Willis present a general overview of Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) inspired by questions posed by language teachers working in Japan. The paper includes a brief review of the literature, insights and arguments regarding the benefits of TBLT and how it might fit into the Japanese context, a description of how TBLT can be regarded as a development of Communicative Language Teaching, issues involved with introducing an innovation into existing curricula and, finally, methods of assessing TBLT. The article clarifies broad concerns about TBLT and provides a rationale for adopting it in Japanese classrooms.

本論は、日本で教える外国語教師による問題提起に感銘を受け Dave Willis氏とJane Willis氏により書かれたタスクを中心とした教授法(TBLT)の概要である。先行研究、TBLTの重要性の省察と議論、TBLTが日本の教育現場にどのように受け入れられることができるか、また、どのようにしてコミュニカティブ言語教授法の発展したものみなされるか、現存するカリキュラムに新しい教授法を取り入れる際の問題点、TBLTの評価方法などが論じられている。本論の目的はTBLTに関する主な懸念を取り除き、その教育法を日本の教育に取り入れ活用するための根拠を示すものである。



meaning. We need to shift the emphasis in teaching foreign languages to a focus on understanding and expressing meanings. This almost certainly entails beginning with a more lexical approach and gradually integrating grammar once learners have a wide enough vocabulary to be able to see how grammar can help fine-tune their message.

The purpose of this article is to address some of the questions which are constantly raised about TBLT and which perhaps get in the way of a much wider application of TBLT principles.

### How does TBLT relate to communicative language teaching?

Approaches to language teaching can be seen on a continuum from form-based to meaning-based. *Form-based* approaches rest on the assumption that language should be introduced or presented to learners item by item as a formal system. Once they have understood how a particular linguistic form is structured and used they can begin to use it for communication. *Meaning-based* approaches make the assumption that learners develop a language system through their attempts to use that language. The role of the teacher is to provide opportunities for meaningful activities, to organise exposure to language which will provide appropriate input for the learner's system, enabling natural acquisition, and to encourage learners to look critically at that input and learn from it, for example by finding a new way of expressing a particular meaning.

TBLT developed from communicative approaches. In TBLT, a task is seen as central to the learning cycle. A task has a number of defining characteristics, among them: does it engage the learners' interest; is there a primary focus on meaning; is success measured in terms of non-linguistic outcome rather than accurate use of language forms; and, does it relate to real world activities? The more confidently we can answer *yes* to each of these questions the more task-like the activity (Willis & Willis, 2007, p. 13). So a task-based approach is very much towards the meaning-based end of the spectrum.

Learners may engage with a task simply because the topic is appealing. For example, a group of teenagers asked to *Work with a partner. What do you think makes a good party?* may well find the topic intrinsically interesting and engage in discussion. But they are more likely to do this if they are given more specific instructions: *Write a list and agree on the three most important ingredients of a good party* (Kay & Jones, 2000, p. 62). And the chances of meaningful interaction may be further increased if there is a teacher led introduction in which the

teacher describes a really memorable party she attended and gives one reason why she found it so memorable. So a successful task starts with a basic idea but it is the way that idea is exploited that helps to ensure real learner participation.

It is possible to take a less promising starting point and generate a lot of meaningful interaction. A written text comparing the climate at the North and South Poles may not seem likely to engage the interest of teenage learners. But if you start with a question *Which is colder, the North Pole or the South Pole?* Learners will begin to commit themselves to an opinion. You can also introduce a questionnaire along these lines:

Look at these statements. Say whether each one is true or false:

1. *There is no land at the Antarctic—only an ice-cap.*
2. *The ice is several metres thick in the middle of the Arctic Ocean.*
3. *Water keeps in the heat of the sun better than dry land.*

Learners then begin to apply their knowledge of the world in order to examine possible arguments. This leads to animated discussion before the question is finally resolved in a reading passage which learners approach with real expectation and interest (for a lesson plan based on this idea see [www.willis-elt.co.uk/taskbased.html](http://www.willis-elt.co.uk/taskbased.html)). So even a relatively unpromising topic can be presented and contextualised in a task sequence in such a way as to maximise learner engagement and a focus on outcome and meaning.

Once we have established the importance of an outcome we can reasonably judge the success of task performance in terms of the achievement of that outcome.

Given the limitations of space here this is necessarily a very brief introduction. The best concise introduction to TBLT is probably Richard Frost's excellent article on the British Council/BBC Teaching English website:

[teachingenglish.org.uk/think/articles/a-task-based-approach](http://teachingenglish.org.uk/think/articles/a-task-based-approach)

To supplement this there are two papers (D. Willis *Accuracy, Fluency and Autonomous Learning: A Three Way Distinction* and J. Willis *Task-Based Learning – What Kind of Adventure?*) available online at [www.willis-elt.co.uk/books.html](http://www.willis-elt.co.uk/books.html).

## What does the research tell us about TBLT?

Researchers into second language acquisition over the last forty years disagree over detailed findings, but there is one powerful consensus. There is overwhelming evidence that learners need to engage with meaning if they are to develop a grammatical system. This begins with the interlanguage studies of Corder (1967) and Selinker (1972), through the work of Krashen (1981), Long (1988) to Skehan (1998) and Ellis (2003). There are variations in the detail. Krashen, for example, argues that the explicit study of grammar plays no part in the development of a usable language system. This is largely supported by Long, although he argues for a focus on language within a meaning-based context. Skehan accepts the value of studying grammatical form prior to use, but believes that language use is central to the learning process and explicitly rejects an approach based heavily on the presentation and practice of grammatical forms. The important thing, however, is that almost all studies see language learning as a developmental process which is mediated largely by the learner. In other words it is the learners' experience of using language which enables them to develop a usable language system. The question for teachers is how best to provide that experience and how best to help learners exploit it.

This is supported by our experience in the classroom. How many of these observations match your own experience?

- In the early stages of learning, learners achieve meanings by putting words together without paying too much attention to grammatical niceties. When producing language spontaneously they consistently produce utterances like *Yesterday I go cinema* instead of *Yesterday I went to the cinema*.
- In spontaneous production they continue to make mistakes even after they have learned the relevant grammar. They go on using the base form of the verb to express past time even after they have worked hard on learning the past tense and can produce past tense forms with reasonable consistency under controlled conditions, in a grammar test for example.
- Some grammatical systems are so resistant to teaching/learning that they go on causing problems for years after they have first been presented to learners. We are thinking here of things like the article system and the use of perfect and continuous aspect. We once asked a group of teachers to list the ten most frequent mistakes in year 1 and year 5 of high school. Seven of the errors were identified in both lists.

- If we set the goal of language learners as reaching an error free native-like performance then hardly any learners would ever reach this goal. And this is certainly the goal implicit in a grammar based approach even though many teachers, researchers, and scholars would argue that it is unrealistic.
- Because of their concern, even obsession, with accuracy many learners are reluctant to produce language for fear of making mistakes, and are quite incapable of attaining a level of fluency which would be acceptable for everyday use.

Our own experience in the classroom, our observation of classrooms, and our discussions with teachers over many years suggests that most, if not all, of these observations hold good in the majority of classrooms. And all of these observations reinforce the findings of SLA research. When we persist in a grammar-based approach with its overwhelming emphasis on accuracy we are flying in the face, not only of research, but also of our own classroom experience.

There are a number of research studies which are concerned specifically with communicative language teaching and which are applicable to TBLT. Ellis (1994) summarises the findings as follows:

1. Giving beginner learners opportunities for meaningful communication in the classroom helps to develop communicative ability and also results in linguistic abilities no worse than those developed through more traditional form-focused approaches.
2. Communicative classroom settings may not be sufficient to ensure the development of high levels of linguistic and sociolinguistic competence, although they may be very effective in developing fluency and effective discourse skills. (p. 604)

By linguistic abilities Ellis means control of the grammar. Given that the proper goal of language tuition is the development of fluency and effective discourse skills rather than a narrow linguistic competence, Ellis can reasonably be taken as endorsing meaning-based approaches. Even if we have some doubts about the efficacy of such approaches we should still be prepared to give them a realistic trial, given the recognised failure of the more traditional methods outlined above.

In the TBL approach proposed in Willis and Willis (2007) there is ample opportunity for learners to pay careful attention to language within the task cycle, and an explicit focus on form after the task cycle. Space does not allow us to provide a detailed discussion of the relationship between task and

language development, but we are sure that it is more complex than suggested in Little & Fieldsend (2009), and Samuda, (2001).

### **Will TBLT work in the Japanese context?**

There are often doubts expressed about the applicability of communicative approaches in classrooms which are traditionally teacher centred and in societies which show a preference for more transmissive styles of teaching. It would be right to be cautious if the existing approach were producing the desired results. But we have seen that this is clearly not the case. The great majority of Japanese learners leave school as *remedial beginners*, without a usable competence in English. Since the current approaches have been shown not to work it is necessary to try some sort of innovation.

Admittedly there are practical difficulties in the implementation of TBLT in Japanese classrooms. Textbooks in Japanese high schools are not designed for such an approach and most teachers are not trained for TBLT. But this is no reason for not making a start. Textbooks can be adapted and supplemented. Willis and Willis (2007) offer a chapter on integrating TBLT with existing materials. The teaching skills acquired in a traditional approach can also be used for a task-based approach. The important thing is to shift the balance of activities from form to meaning. What is needed is the conviction that a task-based approach can work and that it will offer learners much greater opportunities than the current sterile grammar-based methodology, including PPP. In Japanese universities and in the private sector there are fewer constraints because there is greater freedom of choice and action. Again what is needed is conviction and determination.

The level of methodological innovation is not as high as might at first be thought. Teachers in many parts of the world are familiar with the idea of a *skills lesson*. These lessons have a great deal in common with task-based approaches in that they depend on getting learners to do things with language, not simply to manipulate language. At present, skills lessons are seen as the icing on the cake, as giving learners the opportunity to apply the language they have acquired. In such a lesson there is little in the way of language input and much less teacher control of language. The switch to a more task-based approach would see skills lessons predominate. The study of language would be subordinated to the application of communication skills rather than the other way round. In a task-based approach, a skills lesson would end with a focus on forms that have occurred in the course of the lesson.

How will this kind of innovation be received by Japanese learners? Again this question leads us to question how current approaches are perceived by learners. The recognition that English tuition does not enable learners to use the language is widespread not only among teachers. Learners and parents know this as well. They will welcome change if it can be shown to produce results.

We accept that it would be foolhardy for individual teachers to challenge the received wisdom on their own. If innovation is to succeed it needs to be carefully managed. Ideally this should be sanctioned and implemented at as high a level as possible. The freedom to experiment should be sanctioned at a national level. Failing that, it is possible to work at the level of an individual institution—a school or college. There are many examples of teachers successfully applying task-based principles in Japan. Willis and Willis (2007) refer to Jason Moser's work at Osaka Shoin Women's University (pp. 182-183). Moser was careful to set out explicitly the rationale for change and explain clearly to learners, parents, and other interested parties the reasons for the new programme. It is also important to give learners constant feedback to reassure them of their progress.

### **Why is it so difficult to introduce innovations like TBLT?**

The management of innovation is important. If a proposed innovation is theoretically convincing it is met with a number of defensive reactions. The first is the one that we have noted already. All kinds of problems and criticisms are identified, despite the fact that those problems and criticisms apply in even greater measure to existing practice. So critics of TBLT point to the fact that research indicates that TBLT cannot guarantee accuracy, quite ignoring that the same criticism can be made of grammar-based approaches. They suggest that some learners might find the learning outcomes unsatisfactory, but they fail to acknowledge that under the existing approach almost everybody finds the learning outcomes unsatisfactory. They shake their heads and wonder if, given the lack of concern with formal accuracy, the proposed innovation will help learners achieve a usable competence. But they seem not to recognise that the existing approach clearly fails to do this. In other words all kinds of criticisms, problems, and obstacles are placed in the way of innovation, but there is a failure to apply the same critical criteria to existing practice. It is important to establish from the outset that the traditional methodology is failing learners. There is a clear need for innovation.



A second line of defence is to claim that the proposed innovation has already been tried and found wanting. People claim that communicative language teaching has been tried but that it was a failure so people have now gone back to teaching grammar. Although communicative language teaching has been widely recommended in the literature it has rarely been fully applied. A look at course-books and teaching materials worldwide will confirm this. It is difficult to find commercial materials that are communicative on anything but a very weak definition of that term. Overwhelmingly materials are grammar-based, and begin each teaching cycle with the presentation of some kind of language point. This is often the case even when the materials lay claim to some kind of task-based methodology.

### How can TBLT be assessed?

It is relatively easy to assess grammar-based approaches, but the important thing is not to find out whether students know the grammar, but whether they can use it.

As a starting point for task-based assessment (TBA), both summative and formative, we can take descriptors like the Common European Framework for Languages, the ACTFL Guidelines, and the Canadian Language Benchmarks. These are attempts to describe what learners can do with the language rather than how well they can manipulate it.

Commenting on procedures adopted by most international exam providers, Hawkey (Willis & Willis, 2007, p. 226) writes that “the rationale for task-based language teaching...is equally applicable for language testing. The task has become the basic element in the design of most main language tests.” The important thing is to apply communicative assessment criteria like appropriacy, fluency, and achievement of outcome and grade based on that. Many teachers already use split-marking incorporating these criteria, which can be supplemented (e.g., breadth of vocabulary) and weighted according to the task set.

Ellis (2003, pp. 312-316) suggests that for formative assessment, the tasks used in teaching can be used for testing. These “can contribute to the goals of monitoring progress and guiding instruction” (p. 312), and can be carried out by the teacher, using communicative rating scales, and possibly calling on a second rater for more objectivity. Learners can also be trained to use self-assessment. Planned testing of oral performance on tasks is more complex to set up (e.g., learners can be recorded doing tasks in pairs) and more time-consuming than testing writing. However, Ellis distinguishes between planned and incidental (day to day) testing, and,

on the latter, quotes Brindley (2001, p. 128), “with experience, many teachers become skilled judges and observers capable of evaluating the quality of language performances and making fine-grained diagnoses of learners’ difficulties.”

Any well-designed task-based programme should provide learners with a rich exposure to language and multiple opportunities to use the language for themselves. This experience should result in a wide vocabulary and a feel for what is right and thus equip learners to do better even in tests of a more traditional nature.

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**Dave Willis** worked for twenty years as a British Council English Language Officer, then as a teacher and teacher trainer, most recently at the University of Birmingham. He has published widely in the ELT field, authoring numerous books and twice winning the Duke of Edinburgh Prize. His latest books are *Rules, Patterns and Words: Grammar and lexis in English language teaching* (CUP, 2003) and *Doing Task-based Teaching* (OUP, 2007), co-authored with his spouse, Jane Willis.

**Jane Willis** is a veteran teacher and prizewinning author. She taught most recently in the TEFL/ TESOL graduate programme at Aston University. She has authored and co-authored many books, including the *Collins Cobuild* series (with her spouse, Dave Willis), and co-edited *Task-based Instruction in Foreign Language Education* with Betty Lou Leaver (Georgetown University Press, 2004) and *Teachers Exploring Tasks* with Corony Edwards (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). Her latest book, for young learners, is *English Through Music* with Anice Paterson (Oxford University Press, 2008).

They can be contacted through their website at [willis-elt.co.uk](http://willis-elt.co.uk).

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