

FEATURE  
**Supplementing  
 a task-based  
 curriculum  
 with the  
 European  
 Language  
 Portfolio**  
 REPORT  
 FEATURE  
 ARTICLE  
 REALITY  
 FORUM  
 INTERVIEW  
 CONFERENCE  
 REPORT  
 FEATURE

### Keywords

Task-based, TBLT, TBL, TBI, TBA, language descriptors, Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, CEFR, language portfolio, ELP, motivation, self-assessment, oral communication, autonomy, Council of Europe, can do checklist

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is designed to encourage more authentic communicative classroom interaction and to boost motivation through clear and quantifiable goals. This paper outlines how TBLT can be supplemented with the use of the European Language Portfolio (ELP) and the related Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) to foster learner autonomy. The reflective learning cycle of the ELP is explained before describing the use of this approach in the researcher's university EFL class in Japan. Some observations are presented for instructors.

タスクを中心とした教授法(TBLT: Task-based Language Teaching)は、教室における真正な会話のやり取りを奨励し、明確で数値化可能な目標設定をすることにより、学習動機を高めることを目的とする。本論では、このTBLTにヨーロッパ言語ポートフォリオ(ELP)やヨーロッパ言語共通枠組み(CEF)を取り入れることにより、いかに学習者自律を育成することができるかについて論述する。ELPの内省学習サイクルについて説明を行い、著者の所属大学での英語の授業におけるこのアプローチの実践例について述べる。

## Fergus O'Dwyer

Momoyama Gakuin Daigaku/  
 St. Andrew's University

**T**HE expressed aim of many Japanese university EFL instructors is to encourage learners to see English as a means for communicating with others, rather than simply as an object of study (Long & Robinson, 1998). Claro (2008) found that 81% of his university EFL learners want to improve their spoken English but find open-ended speaking activities difficult or impossible; learners have rarely had the chance to speak English since the focus of previous language instruction has been on reading, writing, and grammar. The role of the learner has traditionally been to listen, absorb, and retain information (McVeigh, 2002) with little learner self-direction. This paper offers an approach to foster autonomy through use of the European Language Portfolio (ELP) and to encourage more authentic communicative classroom interaction by implementing a task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach. It describes how a commercial textbook is supplemented with reflective and self-assessment elements of the ELP in a university EFL class in Japan.

### TBLT and the ELP

Ellis (2003) states that tasks can function as useful devices for planning a communicative curriculum, particularly in language learning situations where there may be few opportunities for authentic communicative experiences. One of the advantages of a TBLT approach is that learners are less constrained by prescribed language in a natural, personalised, and relevant context. Learners have a much more varied exposure to language with TBLT (Frost, 2004). Burrows (2008) argued that TBLT places too heavy a burden on learners in a collectivist culture such as Japan's; however the results of research by Falout, Murphey, Elwood, and Hood (2008) shows that the majority of Japanese EFL



learners favour less instructor-centred classrooms with more opportunity for oral communication. Kanemura (2008) also found that TBLT contributes to fluency development and produces a positive shift in attitude towards language learning for Japanese university EFL students. However, Kanemura went on to assert that practically it would be difficult for many secondary level instructors, whose learners must prepare to pass grammar-intensive university entrance exams, to switch to a TBLT curriculum. Nevertheless, with greater flexibility for curriculum development at the tertiary level, some instructors are in an important position to affect learners' continuing attitudes toward L2 learning. Not all Japanese EFL learners may make a smooth transition to a highly communicative approach, but TBLT does present the possibility for incremental, long-term learner development through interaction in realistic communicative situations.

Assessment is an important variable to consider when implementing a communicative curriculum. Traditional standardized objective achievement tests have been generally criticized as invalid measures of students' competencies (Lynch, 2003). The movement toward authentic, performance-based assessment is an attempt to achieve a more appropriate representation of student communicative competencies.

The ELP is one such attempt, which has come to be used widely in Europe and further afield. The language portfolio used in this study is based on an ELP created by the European Confederation of Language Centres in Higher Education (CercleS) in 2002, and includes three components: a language passport, in which learners summarize their linguistic identity and assess their own language competence; a language biography, where intermediate learning goals are set and progress is reviewed; and a dossier, which collects samples of work and evidence of achievements in language learning. The ELP is based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which was designed in 2001 by the Council of Europe to be an extensive, coherent, and transparent reference grid to describe communicative language competencies (see Appendix A). Both tools are explicitly designed to make the learning process clear to all stakeholders and to increase learner autonomy.

Designed to be robust enough to fit any language, teaching style, and curriculum, the ELP can enhance the pedagogy of a TBLT curriculum by introducing a reflective learning cycle of self-assessment, goal and objective setting, language task planning, self-monitoring, and finally a return to self-assessment to begin the cycle again. Self-assessment and reflec-

tion enable the learner to see how quickly they are progressing toward quantifiable and realistic language learning goals.

When using the ELP, learners initially summarise their proficiency in five language skills (reading, listening, spoken interaction, spoken production, and writing) according to the six levels of the CEFR: A1 and A2 (Basic User), B1 and B2 (Independent User), and C1 and C2 (Proficient User). This leads to the setting of language goals, including how well these are to be achieved and what may be learned in the process. Learners can set long-term goals of progressing onto the next level of CEFR proficiency by referring to the *Goal-setting and Self-assessment Checklists* which contain a set of *can do* statements for each skill at each level (Figure 1). These break down the long-term goal (e.g., reaching the next CEFR proficiency level) into a series of language tasks/intermediate learning goals (e.g., achieving specific *can do* statements). Thus, learners can easily observe their near-term progress toward their more distant goals. Perhaps more importantly, they are introduced to a potentially lifelong method of language learning: self-assessment through setting and reviewing goals. As the language learning process continues, learners can realise their developing skills and ascertain what they need to work on in order to progress. O'Dwyer (2008) outlined how this approach might be used in Japanese EFL university classes; the following will deal with how it has been implemented and the resulting observations.

## Implementation

Groups of approximately 40 pre-intermediate learners in General English classes in a Japanese university were introduced to the ELP and to a TBLT course based on a commercial textbook (Benevides & Valvona, 2008). This six-stage textbook, which involves learner groups simulating being employees in a company as they participate in a variety of connected discussion, interview, and presentation tasks, was selected as it was perceived to offer a structured, logical introduction to TBLT for instructors and learners. The ELP was modified to incorporate Japanese translations alongside the English explanations of its format and functions, and took the form of handout materials inserted into an A4 clear file (see Appendix B).

The instructor made an effort to adapt ELP usage to the psycholinguistic level of the learners. In particular, the learners' competence, prior exposure to English (predominantly through grammar-focused translation methods), and attitude toward English (possibly with little confidence in communicat-

ing in English) were considered. There was an explicit effort to value competence in a positive way. The learners were encouraged to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses in spoken, communicative English. The need for learners to use the English they knew was emphasized.

After self-assessment using the CEFR, most learners placed themselves within the A2 level. After consultation with the instructor, the class agreed upon a learning goal of progressing from level A2 to B1 of the CEFR for speaking. As the learner group started each of the six stages of the textbook they agreed upon near-term goals by using *can do* statements from the spoken interaction or spoken pro-

duction checklist. For example, the goal for stage 3 of the textbook, which involves discussing the pros and cons of several ideas previously brainstormed by peers in Stage 2 and deciding on the best one, was seen to fit with the fourth *can do* statement of Figure 1, *I can say what I like or dislike, agree or disagree with people, and make comparisons*. Thus the goal was to go from *I can do this well*(\*\*) to *I can do this very well* (\*\*\*)

The learners planned for this goal, as shown in Figure 2, by considering the influence of available time on the achievement of target, deciding dates for self-monitoring, making decisions about working methods, and by self-assessing perceived gains in language competence (Little & Simpson, 2003).

When assessing their performance in stage 3, one learner reflected "I could not disagree very well in stage 2 [which also involved discussing their own product ideas with team members]. I learned to disagree politely much more effectively in stage 3. I should use some of the forms to politely disagree suggested in the textbook (e.g., Yes, but what about...)." After each stage, learners reflected on how well they achieved the goal and what they learned. This shows how learners can focus on perceived weaknesses and on improving their proficiency in terms of *can do* statements and quantifiable learning goals.

Approximately 20% of the overall assessment for the learning period was based on homework which contributed to understanding and accomplishment of tasks. The remaining 80% was based on

### Goal-setting and Self-assessment Checklist

**Language:** h **Skill:** **SPOKEN INTERACTION**

*This is a checklist of SPOKEN INTERACTION skills drawn from the illustrative scales in the Common European Framework. Use this checklist (a) to set personal learning goals and (b) to record your progress in achieving these goals. Decide what evaluative criteria you want to use in the three righthand columns, and enter dates to record your progress. For example:  
I can do this \*with a lot of help, \*\*with a little help, \*\*\* on my own  
I can do this \*with a lot of effort, \*\*under normal circumstances, \*\*\*easily in any context*

**Evaluative criteria:** \* I can do this reasonably well    \*\* I can do this well    \*\*\* I can do this very well

Level A2	My next goal	*	**	***
I can handle short social exchanges and make myself understood if people help me	Stage 1 Orientation	0 →		
I can participate in short conversations in routine contexts on topics of interest	Stage 2 Interview	0	0 →	
I can make and respond to invitations, suggestions, apologies and requests for permission		0		
I can say what I like or dislike, agree or disagree with people, and make comparisons	Stage 3 Selecting an idea	0	0 →	
I can express what I feel in simple terms, and express thanks	Stage 2 Brainstorming ideas	0 →		
I can discuss what to do, where to go, make arrangements to meet (e.g., in the evening, at the weekend)		0		
I can ask and answer simple questions about familiar topics (e.g., weather, hobbies, social life, music, sport)	Stage 4 Market Research	0 →		
I can ask and answer simple questions about things that have happened (e.g., yesterday, last week, last year)		0	0	
I can handle simple telephone calls (e.g., say who is calling, ask to speak to someone, give my number, take a simple message)		0		
I can make simple transactions (e.g., in shops, post offices, railway stations) and order something to eat or drink		0	0	
I can get simple practical information (e.g., asking for directions, booking accommodation, going to the doctor)		0		
from spoken production Checklist:				
I can give a short presentation	Stage 5 Informal	0 →		

*Note that the checklists do not pretend to be exhaustive. For each proficiency level other tasks or activities can be specified (you can add your own in the blank spaces at the end of each section). It is not necessary to be able to perform all the tasks or activities listed in order to achieve the level in question. If, for example, you can already perform about 80% of the items on the list for A2 SPOKEN INTERACTION, you have probably achieved that level in terms of the self-assessment grid in the language passport.*

Figure 1. Checklist of spoken interaction for A2 level

<b>My next language learning target</b>	
Language <i>English</i>	
Learning target (1) <i>Stage 3 goal</i> (Use the self-assessment grid in the language passport and the checklists in the appendix to formulate your next learning target as precisely as possible.) <i>To say what I like or dislike, agree or disagree, and make comparisons very well (***)</i>	
How much time can I devote each day/week to achieving my target? (2) <i>2 to 3 hours a week</i>	
When shall I begin? (3) <i>Week 5 - May 14th</i>	When do I plan to finish? (3) <i>Week 7 - May 28th</i>
How do I intend to achieve my target? (4) For example, can I work alone or do I need to work with other people? <i>Complete Stage 3 of the Widgets textbook with my group</i>	
What learning materials do I need? (4) <i>Textbook, DVD, Language Portfolio</i>	
How shall I know whether or not I have achieved my target? (5) (For example, can I take a test or set and correct a test for myself? Or shall I need to ask my teacher, another learner or a native speaker to assess me? Or can I depend entirely on my own judgement?) <i>Judge from class activities and assessment of my Stage 3 presentation</i>	
Review of learning progress on or near my target date: (6) Have I achieved my target? In working towards my target have I learnt anything new about (i) the target language or (ii) language learning? What am I going to do with what I have learned? <i>I could not disagree very well in stage 2 I learned to disagree politely much more effectively in stage 3 I should use some of the forms to politely disagree, suggested in the textbook (e.g. Yes but what about...)</i>	

**Figure 2. My next language learning target**

how well the learners achieved tasks at the end of each textbook stage. This was connected with the *can do* statements used in goal-setting (see Figure 3 for an instructor assessment for stage 5 which involved making and presenting infomercials). In this way both instructor assessment and self-assessment were made transparent and directly related to learners' communicative competencies and progress toward learning goals.

In addition to developing task awareness by reflecting on their ability to use English communicatively to achieve curricular tasks, learners were encouraged to occasionally reflect on personal awareness (e.g., What do I expect of myself in this course? What are my strengths and shortcomings in communicating in English?) and situational awareness (e.g., What is a good group member like in our language class? Why? How might I improve my participation in my group?). The instructor made an effort to justify the benefits of reflection before undertaking the activities (Kohonen, 2007). Specific

and concrete instructor feedback on reflection (e.g., describing how the observations noted by learners in reflection on "How might I improve my participation in my group?" could be applied in the following textbook stage) and progress toward goals (i.e., generalizations on how learners carried out specific tasks and on which competences could be improved) is important. Once learners understood the concept and purpose of self-reflection, they completed the reflective exercises with enthusiasm.

### Challenges in implementation

While use of the L2 is an important part of the ELP-based classroom practice, reflection in the L1 alongside English was not discouraged as reflection can achieve a higher level of

sophistication, is more natural, and the learners' ability to reflect develops more effectively (Kohonen, 2007). Though learners weren't accustomed to such reflection, immediate positive results were seen, particularly in terms of higher personal and situational awareness. Learners prefer to be guided through the process but should gradually be encouraged to set goals themselves. Originally learners were expected to formulate goals independently by the end of the learning period but this proved unrealistic. Learners needed specific help, guidance, and support to achieve goal-setting, reflection, and self-assessment. For instance, the ability to work through the checklists and select a *can do* statement relevant to a particular learning stage was challenging. As a result, it became necessary to highlight relevant *can do* statements while goal-setting. One solution to this could be to provide the goal-setting and self-assessment checklists in Japanese translation. Accessing or creating a translation could benefit lower-proficiency learners, particularly in

### Stage 5 Assessment

Member name:	Total: 16/20
1 Your teams <u>information</u> was clear, well-prepared and informative	Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 <u>6</u> 7 Agree
2 Your <u>presentation</u> was clear and well-prepared	Disagree 1 2 <u>3</u> 4 Agree
3 You made a good effort	Disagree 1 2 <u>3</u> 4 Agree
4 <u>Overall</u> impression	1 2 3 <u>4</u> 5
Feedback: You can give a short presentation *(Reasonably well) ** (Well) *** (Very well)	
Comments: Always try to maintain good posture + speak clearly.	

**Figure 3. Instructor assessment of learner presentation tasks**

goal-setting and in self-assessment. Nevertheless the learner reflection upon achievement of their goals, as in Figure 2, appears to have been beneficial for learners. Equipping learners with tools to independently set and achieve language goals, however challenging, aids in fostering life-long language learners and should be pursued.

The time needed for instructors to become acquainted with the workings of the ELP should not be underestimated. For instance, adapting ELP usage to the psycholinguistic level of the learner (e.g., learner age, proficiency level, linguistic and cultural background, prior exposure to an L2 and English, and attitude toward English) and specific curricula need to be considered before implementation. Fortunately, there are many resources available online (see [www.geocities.jp/dlinklist/ENG/CefrSIG.html](http://www.geocities.jp/dlinklist/ENG/CefrSIG.html) for collated links about the CEFR and the ELP), and a growing interest in this type of approach; for instance, the establishment of the forming Framework & Language Portfolio SIG at JALT 2008.

The ELP does not promote one particular language teaching methodology, but instead presents options for the instructor to encourage learner autonomy in a particular context (COE, 2001). One further important observation should be noted when considering implementing or modifying an ELP in class: The CEFR is an extensive grid, which can be intimidating at first sight. Thus, rather than presenting the grid and asking learners to self-assess their level, the first class was made up of several communicative activities which can be mapped to the descriptors for level A2 of spoken interaction (e.g., exchanging information on familiar topics). These were designed to elicit examples of

spoken language which learners could later use to reflect on their level. After these activities, the CEFR in English with a Japanese explanation was presented for self-assessment. For the sake of simplicity and to discourage unrealistic self-assessments, only levels A1, A2, and B1 were presented. Furthermore, the Japanese translations allowed immediacy and greater understanding of the CEFR and the ELP's format and functions.

### Conclusions

Supplementing a TBLT curriculum with the ELP and CEFR can facilitate learning through setting and achieving quantifiable and authentic language goals (Benevides, 2008). If psycholinguistically-relevant TBLT pedagogy is implemented, learners, rather than shouldering a heavy burden (Burrows, 2008), do react positively with steps toward increased fluency and a positive shift in attitude (Kanemura, 2008).

The ELP can bring learners incrementally toward the goal of life-long language learning, by highlighting the exact whats, whys, and hows of learning through self-assessment and goal-setting. In short, it creates a focus and transparency missing in most communicative language courses. The EFL learners observed in this study benefited from reflecting on and working toward the achievement of specified intermediate language learning goals and language tasks, whereas metalinguistic considerations (i.e., personal and situational awareness) appeared to lead to greater self-direction. Learners quickly understood and adapted to the general workings of the CEFR and ELP when it was presented to them in a methodical manner. This in turn led to greater learner autonomy and motivation.

## References

- Benevides, M. (2008, October). *Task-based learning for EFL in Japan*. Paper presented at the Pearson Longman Teachers' Conference, Osaka.
- Benevides, M., & Valvona, C. (2008). *Widgets: A task-based course in practical English*. Hong Kong: Pearson Longman.
- Burrows, C. (2008). Socio-cultural barriers facing TBL in Japan. *The Language Teacher*, 32(8), 15-19.
- Claro, J. (2008). Interaction in the Japanese classroom-moving toward common ground. In Council of Europe [COE]. (2001). *The common European framework of reference for languages learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- European Confederation of Language Centres in Higher Education [CercleS]. (2002). *CercleS European Language Portfolio*. Dublin: CercleS.
- Falout, J., Murphey, T., Elwood, J., & Hood, M. (2008). Learner voices: Reflections on secondary education. In K. Bradford-Watts, T. Muller, & M. Swanson (Eds.), *JALT2007 Conference Proceedings* (pp. 231-243). Tokyo: JALT.
- Frost, R. (2004). *A task-based approach*. Retrieved September 10, 2008 from [http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/methodology/task\\_based.shtml](http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/methodology/task_based.shtml)
- Kanemura, Y. (2008). Using lexical and task-based approaches for speech fluency development. In K. Bradford-Watts, T. Muller, & M. Swanson (Eds.), *JALT2007 Conference Proceedings* (pp. 702-717). Tokyo: JALT.
- Kohonen, V. (2007). Learning to learn: A model for reflection for teacher trainers, teachers, and learners. Retrieved October 28, 2008 from [http://www.ecml.at/mtp2/ELP\\_TT/ELP\\_TT\\_CDROM/PagEF/e05.html](http://www.ecml.at/mtp2/ELP_TT/ELP_TT_CDROM/PagEF/e05.html)
- Little, D. (2007). Learner autonomy: Drawing together the threads of self-assessment, goal-setting, and reflection. Retrieved October 28, 2008 from [http://www.ecml.at/mtp2/ELP\\_TT/ELP\\_TT\\_CDROM/PagEF/e06.html](http://www.ecml.at/mtp2/ELP_TT/ELP_TT_CDROM/PagEF/e06.html)
- Little, D., & Simpson, B. (2003). *European language portfolio: The intercultural component and learning how to learn*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Long, M. H., & Robinson, P. (1998). Focus on form: Theory, research and practice. In C. Doughty & J. Williams (Eds.), *Focus on form in classroom language acquisition* (pp. 15-41). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lynch, R. (2003). Authentic, performance-based assessment in ESL/EFL reading instruction. *Asian-EFL Journal*, 5(4). Retrieved September 18, 2008 from [http://www.asian-efl-journal.com/dec\\_03\\_sub.rl.html](http://www.asian-efl-journal.com/dec_03_sub.rl.html)
- McVeigh, B. (2002). *Japanese higher education as myth*. Armonk, NY: East Gate Books.
- O'Dwyer, F. (2008). The European language portfolio in Japan? In K. Bradford-Watts, T. Muller, & M. Swanson (Eds.), *JALT 2007 Conference Proceedings* (pp. 643-651). Tokyo: JALT.

## Appendices

The appendices for this article can be downloaded from [jalt-publications.org/tlt/resources/2009/0903a.pdf](http://jalt-publications.org/tlt/resources/2009/0903a.pdf).

**Fergus O'Dwyer** has taught in various EFL situations in Japan since 2000 and now lectures at Momoyama Gakuin Daigaku/St. Andrew's University and Osaka Kyoiiku Daigaku High School. His current interests include the European Language Portfolio and the pedagogy of introducing World English in the classroom. He is currently involved in the forming Framework & Language Portfolio SIG. He can be contacted at [fodwyerj@gmail.com](mailto:fodwyerj@gmail.com). The writer would like to thank Michael Carroll for taking the time to discuss the paper and for volunteering concrete and constructive criticisms in the rewriting stage.

JALT2009



THE TEACHING LEARNING DIALOGUE  
AN ACTIVE MIRROR  
- NOV 21-23, 2009 -  
GRANSHIP SHIZUOKA  
<JALT.ORG/CONFERENCE>