



A Critical Review of Tasks Published by JALT's TBLT SIG

Chris Hastings

Aichi Prefectural University

Stephen Clarke

Nagoya College

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Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) aims to foster linguistic competence using meaning-based tasks. However, there is ongoing discussion and uncertainty regarding its effective classroom implementation and the characteristics of suitable materials. This study examines a sample of 26 tasks from the TBLT Special Interest Group (SIG) publication, analyzing their consistency with key criteria and exploring trends in task design. Findings reveal that only half of the tasks had a clear, non-linguistic goal, which is essential for communicative tasks, and around 65% demonstrated potential alignment with significant Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research findings, pending appropriate implementation. As TBLT seeks to be superior to the status quo in language teaching, innovative approaches are necessary to enhance its effectiveness further.

タスクベースの教授法 (TBLT)は、意味に基づいたタスクを用いて言語能力を育成することを目的としている。しかし、その効果的な教室での実施や適切な教材の特徴については、現在も議論が続いており、不明な点が多い。本研究では、JALTのTBLT分野別研究部会が発行する26のタスクのサンプルを調査し、主要な基準との整合性を分析し、タスクデザインの傾向を探った。その結果、コミュニケーションタスクに不可欠である明確な非言語的目標を持つタスクは全体の半数程度であり、約65%が第二言語習得 (SLA) の重要な研究成果と一致する可能性を示し、適切な実施が期待されることが明らかになった。TBLTが言語教育の現状を打破しようとする中で、その効果をさらに高めるためには、革新的なアプローチが必要である。

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) originated from Prahbu's 'The Bangalore/Madras Communicational Teaching Project' as a method of language instruction focused on problem-solving tasks that offered the development of grammatical competency through a focus on meaning alone (Beretta & Davies, 1985). Long (2015, p. 7) emphasized the importance of an approach to language teaching that aligns with psycholinguistic principles. In this regard, TBLT should draw upon 40 years of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) findings. However, as Ellis (2009, p. 221) has indicated, "...there is no single 'task-based teaching approach.'" Furthermore, Masuhara (2015, p. 109) has commented that there is "...remarkable confusion in terms of what exactly TBLT is, what TBLT materials look like and how TBLT may be implemented in the curriculum and classrooms." Therefore, depending on the context, the teacher, and the specific materials used, TBLT will exist on a spectrum of agreement with key SLA findings, and, in some cases, it may not even be considered TBLT if compared to key criteria that define it.

TBLT is largely teacher-led rather than being implemented top-down by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) in Japan, and TBLT-related professional teaching groups have been active for approximately a decade (The Japanese Association of Language Teaching's (JALT) TBLT SIG was founded in 2010). To date, research (Adams & Newton, 2009; Butler, 2011; Harris, 2016, 2018; Kotaka, 2013; Littlewood, 2007) about TBLT in Japan has focused on the beliefs of learners and instructors and the challenges to implementation based on sociocultural reasons. We believe there is a gap in the research on TBLT materials used in Japan, as we are not aware of any research that focuses on psycholinguistic plausibility and communicativeness. Furthermore, we predict that the Japanese TBLT context is dominated by Willis' (1996b) approach and that little attention has been given to the approach proposed by VanPatten (2017), who states that tasks are "the quintessential communicative event in contemporary language teaching" (p. 86). Therefore, the objective of this paper is to analyze recent TBLT materials published by the JALT TBLT



SIG. We aim to assess the extent to which these materials align with key SLA findings and promote communicative language use.

Theoretical Foundations of TBLT: Insights from SLA Research

Like Long (2015), we believe that language teaching needs to be consistent with what research has shown to be true about second language acquisition. In this section, we aim to critically examine the alignment between TBLT and findings from SLA research. We review key SLA insights presented by VanPatten (2020) and discuss the implications for TBLT, particularly focusing on Willis' task structures and the Noticing Hypothesis, while also introducing VanPatten's alternative perspective on task design. We seek to highlight potential inconsistencies and raise questions regarding the compatibility of TBLT with SLA research, urging further investigation and scrutiny of TBLT approaches in light of these findings.

SLA Findings

VanPatten (2020, p. 277) presented a series of “seven facts...about acquisition” most relevant to language teachers about SLA that are independent of any language acquisition theory. Similar lists of generalisations of SLA findings can be found as far back as 1985 in Patsy Lightbown's paper titled “Great Expectation: Second Language Research and Classroom Teaching.” For the purposes of our study, VanPatten's (2020) facts 1, 2, and 7 are the most significant, so they are listed below.

1. What winds up in learners' heads is an abstract, complex, and implicit mental representation. Language does not consist of the rules and paradigms presented in textbooks or other sources.
2. Communicatively embedded input is necessary for language acquisition. Such input forms the “data pool” from which a linguistic system is constructed. Communicatively embedded input is language that the learner processes for its meaning and occurs during communicative events.
7. Attempts to purposely alter or affect the processes of language acquisition are severely constrained because language acquisition is constrained. In other words, the effects of explicit instruction (and practice) are limited.

Since these are key findings about SLA, specifically chosen for their relevance to language teachers, by aligning instructional approaches with these insights, educators can create a conducive environment for effective language acquisition. Firstly, input

is central to language acquisition; therefore, TBLT practitioners need to ensure that their learners are being exposed to sufficient input to be able to develop the L2 in their mind/brain. Secondly, we would argue that facts 1 and 7 lead to a clear rejection of the current status quo in language teaching, in which grammar-based coursebooks are used to impart pre-packaged, bite-size chunks of explicit knowledge about the language (our interpretation of Jordan and Long, 2022). Research has shown that SLA is mostly, if not completely, implicit in nature and that “in the end, learners get language in their heads through interaction with the language in communicative contexts rather than through study and practice” (VanPatten, 2017, p. 48). TBLT is claimed to improve traditional teaching methods (e.g., Willis & Willis, 2009), but this will depend on what materials are used and how they are implemented.

Approaches to Tasks

Willis' Three-Part Structures

Willis has proposed two three-part structures for task design, which are outlined below.

Three-part Structure - (Willis, 1996b)

- Pre-Task (Introduction to topic and task)
- Task Cycle (task, planning & report)
- Language Focus (analysis and practice of features)

Task Sequence – (Willis & Willis, 2007)

- Priming & preparation (mini tasks)
- Target task(s) & Planning & Report
- Form focus

The difference between the two structures is largely cosmetic. From the perspective of VanPatten's facts about SLA, it is concerning that the analysis and practice of language features is given such prominence in Willis' (1996b) model. In the 2007 model, the last section of 'Form focus' may or may not be consistent with VanPatten's facts, depending on its implementation. VanPatten has argued that any focus on form should be “input-oriented and meaning-based” (VanPatten, 2017), thereby excluding much of traditional



grammar-based language practice, which does little to promote language acquisition (Jordan and Long, 2022).

If much of contemporary language teaching features a Presentation, Practice, Production (PPP) sequence (Jordan and Long, 2022), Willis-inspired TBLT has been described as “PPP the right way up” (Willis, 1996a, p. 62), because it features similar techniques and components that are presented in a more flexible order. However, according to our interpretation of VanPatten’s facts, learners do not acquire the rules presented in textbooks, and therefore it is not clear if the ordering of the three P’s, including a presentation of grammar rules, significantly affects language acquisition. In addition, Willis (1996a) has described the focus on form stage of the task cycle as having the aim of “consciousness-raising” (p.60) and of enabling learners to “notice new things” (p.58), implying an important role for conscious-learning and noticing, which we argue is not necessary.

The Noticing Hypothesis

TBLT approaches seek justification from the Noticing Hypothesis (e.g., Leeming & Harris, 2020; Willis, 1996a). Our interpretation of VanPatten’s facts, however, is that they do not support the Noticing Hypothesis, which has been criticized in the literature (e.g., Truscott, 1998; VanPatten & Smith, 2022). The criticisms are complex, but we will briefly outline two. Firstly, the theory derives no support from research in cognitive psychology (Truscott, 1998). Secondly, the Noticing Hypothesis is not based on a theory of language, so it is not clear how to define the linguistic forms that learners are supposed to be noticing (Truscott, 1998). This ties in with VanPatten’s fact number 1, which states that “(l)anguage does not consist of the rules and paradigms presented in textbooks or other sources” (VanPatten, 2020, p.277). Since learners do not acquire language rules (VanPatten & Rothman, 2014), it is difficult to imagine how noticing such rules in input can promote acquisition.

VanPatten’s Approach to Tasks

VanPatten (2017) does not offer an original definition of a task but describes them as instances of genuine classroom communication. Significantly, VanPatten is the only scholar we know who argues that any judgment of the communicative nature of language teaching needs to be informed by a definition of communication. VanPatten proposes that “(c)ommunication involves the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning in a given context for a given non-linguistic purpose” (VanPatten, 2019,

p.1). VanPatten (2017) elucidates these requirements as follows. Firstly, it is essential for communicative tasks to have a purpose that is not language practice. Their goal must be non-linguistic and can be classified as cognitive-informational, psycho-linguistic or entertainment. In addition, tasks must align with the classroom context, which is described as consisting of a setting and participants, which are always fixed. This means that the classroom cannot be transformed into a restaurant, for example, or that teachers or learners can become waiters or customers. Consequently, role-plays are by definition not communicative events. This position may appear extreme, but it follows naturally from using a definition of communication to inform practice. As Willis does not provide criteria for communicativeness, role-plays would be acceptable in a Willis-based approach.

In contrast to Willis (1996b) and Willis and Willis (2007), VanPatten (2017) does not offer a prescribed structure or task design, however, he indicates that the task is the culmination of a series of steps which enable the learner to complete the final task. Learners know when the task is complete because they have reached a concrete informational goal. After this, there is no reporting or language focus stage.

The Foundations of TBLT and SLA Research Findings

From the discussion above, it is clear that some of the foundations of Willis-inspired TBLT are irreconcilable with generalized findings about SLA. However, Willis (1996b, p.34) has provided broader descriptions of tasks, such as that they are “a goal-oriented communicative activity with a specific outcome, where the emphasis is on exchanging meanings, not producing specific language forms.” Such a description is consistent with VanPatten’s position, so there is room for Willis-inspired TBLT to be consistent with VanPatten’s SLA facts, depending on individual task design and the way the form-focused stage is implemented.

Methodology

The present study aimed to answer three research questions, which are as follows:

- RQ1. To what extent are JALT TBLT SIG materials consistent with VanPatten’s definition of communication?
- RQ2. To what extent are JALT TBLT SIG materials consistent with key SLA findings?
- RQ3. What trends are evident when JALT TBLT SIG materials are analysed for the following factors:



- What is the topical content of the task?
- What level of learner is the task aimed at?
- Are the tasks input-based, output-based or a mixture?
- How is the task structured?
- How is focus on form/s dealt with?

To critically evaluate the JALT TBLT SIG materials, we selected twenty-six task lesson plans (n=26) published in the JALT TBLT SIG publication *Taking It To Task* (originally titled *On Task*) from 2012 to 2021. This sample included all but two regular issues and two conference issues of the SIG publication, which were not included because, at the time of data analysis, they were not accessible and archival copies could not be found.

To answer RQ1, the tasks were analysed for consistency with VanPatten's (2019) previously mentioned definition of communication. To clarify the definition for this purpose, the following two questions were used:

1. Does the task have a clear non-linguistic purpose? Cognitive-informational (i.e., obtaining information for an immediate or future task?), Psycho-Social (i.e., team building, developing relationships and bonding), or Entertainment?
2. Is the task consistent with the classroom context? (i.e., not role-play and not using made-up information)

To answer RQ2, we reflected on the following question about the sample: "Is the task incongruous with VanPatten's (2020) seven facts related to SLA findings?"

To answer RQ3, we analysed the tasks for individual topical content and then categorized the individual topics into broader topic groups. If the activities contained in the task were approximately half input- and half output-based, they were judged to be mixed. In terms of structure, we compared the sample tasks to the Willis and VanPatten approaches described above. If necessary, a new category was created to describe the task structure appropriately. Finally, the sample tasks were analysed for whether they followed a focus-on-form (FonF) approach or a focus-on-forms (FonFs) approach. We understand FonF to mean an instance when an instructor brings the learner's attention to features of language in an unplanned manner while focusing on meaning. In contrast, FonFs refers to the planned teaching of preselected discrete linguistic items.

To attempt to ensure the validity of results, a first and second-rater created two separate data sheets of analysis independently and then, through comparison and discussion, final results were created.

Results & Discussion

Clear Non-linguistic Purpose

To be communicative, tasks must have a clear, non-linguistic goal, but from our analysis we discovered that approximately half (Table 1) have no such goal, meaning they do not meet the task requirements proposed by both Willis and VanPatten. Instead, many of the tasks have the goal of language practice or explicitly teaching language forms. For example, the purpose of the task 'Using Trivia to Stimulate Discussion' (Enns, 2012, p. 15) is to "generate discussions...to improve speaking and reading skills." The task lacks a clear communicative purpose as it is language practice for language practice's sake and revolves around forcing output related to trivia. Contrastingly, the task 'Investigating a Career' (Ballou & Clark, 2020) gives four clear goals, and the main goal of "Familiarizing students with the processes involved in finding employment" (p. 25) is evidently communicative and cognitive-informational as by completing the task the learner will gain useful, authentic information which is needed for another purpose. The most common type of goal among the tasks with a clear, non-linguistic, communicative purpose is cognitive-informational.

Table 1

Communicativeness - Non-linguistic Purpose

Category of Non-linguistic Purpose	Percentage of Total Results
None	50%
Mainly Cognitive-Informational	19%
Mainly Psycho-Social	8%
Mainly Entertainment	8%
Entertainment and Cognitive-Informational	8%
Psycho-Social and Cognitive-Informational	8%



Consistent with Classroom Context

VanPatten (2017) has stated that classroom learning contexts consist of a setting and participants that are fixed. Our results show that 69% (Table 2) of the tasks are in accordance with these facts about the learning context. However, 15% are inconsistent with VanPatten's description because they feature role-play, and 12% are inconsistent because they feature made-up information (4% feature both made-up information and roleplay). Providing learners with fake information in this manner reveals that the purpose of the task is to practice language use rather than to promote genuine communication. When a task has a genuine communicative purpose, such as in the previously mentioned 'Investigating a Career,' role-play and made-up information are unnecessary.

Table 2

Communicativeness – Consistency with the Classroom Context

Consistent with Classroom Context	Percentage of Total Results
Yes	69%
No - Roleplay	15%
No – Made-up Information	12%
No – Made-up Information and Roleplay	4%

Alignment with Key SLA Findings

Out of the tasks analysed, 65% (Table 3) are potentially congruous with the seven key SLA findings while 35% are not. However, this classification ignores optional elements of a post-task or supplementary vocabulary support which brings attention to language forms. It also ignores the lack of linguistic scaffolding to enable learners to complete many tasks. This scaffolding differs from the post-task focus on form proposed by Willis not only due to its place in the task cycle but also because its success is judged by how well the learners can perform the task, rather than on grammatical accuracy. Perhaps there is an unstated assumption that materials need to be adapted by teachers for their specific group of learners, which is why the task designers leave the provision of the correct level of linguistic support to individual teachers. Moreover, although input has a fundamental role in language acquisition, many tasks focus predominantly on output. We argue that any teaching approach that takes into account key SLA findings needs

to focus on input over output, because output does not play a direct role in language acquisition.

Out of the tasks that are incongruous with the seven key SLA findings, common tendencies are requiring specific forms to complete a task, explicitly teaching them, and focusing on the accuracy of their use. For example, the task 'Building Fluency and Accuracy Through Task Sequencing' (Thompson, 2013) is centred around the explicit teaching, accurate practice and correction of relative clauses. Other common incongruities are requiring students to find and correct their errors in an output task, or the explicit teaching of grammar rules related to errors found in the learner's output.

Table 3

Consistency with SLA Facts

Consistent with SLA Facts	Percentage of Total Results
Potentially Congruous	65%
Not Congruous	35%

Topic and Level

Out of the 26 tasks we analysed, individual topics could be categorized into eleven broader topics (Table 4). The most common kinds of topics are Personal Information, Stories and Creative Writing, and Creating Imaginary Inventions/Products.

Table 4

Task Topic Categories

Topic Category	
Business	Entertainment – Games & Cartoons
Stories & Creative Writing	Leadership & Team Building
Surveys	Study & Communication Skills
Creating Imaginary Inventions/Products	Life Skills
Food and Cooking	News & Global Issues
Personal Information	



As for levels (Table 5), the tasks were predominantly self-reported as being around the intermediate level aimed at university-level learners and there were no tasks aimed at beginners.

Table 5
Learner Levels

Learner Level	Percentage of Total Results
All Levels	8%
Unknown	4%
Beginner to Intermediate	8%
Lower-intermediate to High-intermediate	4%
Lower-intermediate and Above	11%
Pre-intermediate	8%
Pre-intermediate and Above	19%
Intermediate	15%
Intermediate and Above	15%
Intermediate to Advanced	8%

Input & Output

Eighty-one percent (Table 6) of the tasks were found to be output-centred, and often the output is forced in the manner of discussing a list of questions provided by the teacher. However, nothing is done with the information gained, meaning that there is no non-linguistic purpose to the activity. In one task, 'Alphabet Speeches' (Crawford, 2013), the main task requires students to give unprepared speeches on random topics that began with a certain letter of the alphabet for four, three, or two minutes. Given the central role of input, it not clear how such a task that focuses only on output can promote language acquisition. Because most of the surveyed tasks were output-centred, this may suggest that creating compelling level-appropriate input is either too difficult or time-consuming or that output-based tasks are preferred over input-based tasks.

Table 6
Input and Output

Input and Output	Percentage of Total Results
Output-centered	81%
Input & Output Mixed	15%
Input-centred	4%

Task Structure

Fifty-four percent of tasks (Table 7) follow the Willis (1996b) or the Willis and Willis (2007) structure. Only seven percent of tasks follow an approach similar to what VanPatten (2017) has proposed, which does not feature a post-task focus on form and frames the task as an instance of genuine communication. Of the two tasks that are consistent with a VanPatten-centric approach, one titled 'Utilizing Online Surveys in the CALL Classroom' (Harris, 2014) teaches learners how to create an online survey, and the other is the previously mentioned 'Investigating a Career' (Ballou & Clark, 2020). It is evident from these findings that Willis is a huge influence on the TBLT scene in Japan and that other approaches are either unknown or have not been implemented.

Table 7
Type of Task Structure

Type of Task Structure	Percentage of Total Results
Willis-centric (1996b or 2007)	54%
Project-based multiple tasks	23%
Pre / Task / Post (no language focus)	12%
VanPatten-centric	7%
Pre / Task (language focus in Pre)	4%



Focus on Form(s)

In the largest group of tasks, 46% (Table 8), no explicit instructions for either a FonF or FonFs approach are given, which is why many of the tasks are potentially congruous with the seven SLA facts. Thirty-one percent of the tasks feature a focus on form element which is generally either error correction of student output such as in the task 'Story Books to Foster Low Level Students' Writing Ability' (Patko, 2014), or suggesting language chunks that might be useful to complete the task as found in 'Around the International Business Table: A Task Utilizing Direct/Reported Speech and Active Translation Skills' (Turner, 2014). In 23% of tasks a FonFs approach is present that involves the teaching of preselected discrete linguistic items such as found in the previously mentioned task 'Building Fluency and Accuracy Through Task Sequencing' (Thompson, 2013). Such a task is clearly incompatible with the seven SLA facts.

Table 8
Focus on Form/s

Focus on Form/s	Percentage of Total Results
None	46%
FonF	31%
FonFs	23%

Conclusion

In response to RQ1, a significant finding of this study is that 50% of the tasks surveyed do not have a non-linguistic, communicative purpose. It was particularly disappointing to discover that fully half of the tasks do not meet the criteria proposed by both VanPatten and Willis. In addition, it was surprising to find that 31% of tasks do not use genuine information. Genuine cognitive-informational goals are based on real-world information, so unless the goal of the task is psycho-social or entertainment, we would argue that these tasks sell our learners short because our learners come to class with the expectation of learning something either about each other or the world around them as well as gaining language skills. Using fake information in a task suggests to us that the real goal is language practice. Materials are largely output-centred, and feature forced output, which is to say that learners speak for no particular purpose except to follow a teacher's direction, rather than for the purpose of meeting a non-linguistic goal.

In response to RQ2, the majority of tasks analysed are potentially congruous with VanPatten's facts about SLA, but much will depend on their implementation and the proficiency level of the learners. Lower-level learners will struggle to complete many tasks due to the lack of scaffolding and input. Task instructions do not make reference to the noticing of language elements in the input and it is not clear whether the tasks are purposely designed in such a way as to promote noticing.

In response to RQ3, it is clear that the tasks are strongly influenced by the Willis (1996b) or the Willis and Willis (2007) approach. However, little or no instruction is given in the tasks concerning the form-focused final stage of Willis' approach in many cases. Most tasks are output-focused and force output, however, we would argue that tasks need to prioritise input because of the central role of input in SLA.

In conclusion, teachers who implement TBLT need to reconsider the extent to which their practices reflect the core concepts of the approach. Judging by the tasks published in the TBLT SIG, a return to basics would seem to be required. Firstly, all tasks need to have a genuine communicative purpose. This is essential. There is also room for improvement in terms of task design. We would argue that learners need to complete a task once they have been given plentiful input related to the topic and have been taught in such a way as to give them the linguistic resources to complete the task. So, the teaching of language items is acceptable if it serves as preparation for task performance. Much of ELT at the university level is to non-majors with low expressive ability, so there is a mismatch between these learners and the majority of the tasks we surveyed, which were output-centred and featured little scaffolding. Finally, and most importantly, other approaches to tasks exist, such as those proposed by VanPatten (2017) and Lee and VanPatten (2003), and these offer a superior alternative, in our view, because they involve genuine communication and are informed by SLA research findings. Willis' approach is not informed by a definition of communication and so many of its task interactions are not genuinely communicative.

Our survey suffers from several limitations, including the difficulty of judging the appropriateness of the sample size and the fact that no statistical significance can be inferred since only simple descriptive statistics were used. Also, tasks from four issues of the TBLT SIG publication were not included in our analysis because, at the time of data collection and analysis, we could not access them.



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