

## Improving the Report Stage in Task-Based Learning

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### **Abstract**

This article provides a critical evaluation of task-based language teaching (TBLT) in second language teaching leading into the creation of a lesson attempting to redress what the author sees as TBLT's biggest challenges. The article first outlines the background and development of TBLT as a reaction against more traditional present-practice-produce (PPP) methods that prioritized language form over meaning and real-world relevance. The key characteristics of TBLT are then examined, including the primacy of meaning, solving communicative problems, using authentic language, and learner-centeredness. Debates around focused vs unfocused tasks, the role of grammar instruction, and authenticity of language are explored. The article then discusses two major practical challenges with implementing TBLT: 1) Its suitability for beginner learners who may lack the language resources for meaningful tasks, and 2) The frequent ineffectiveness of the report phase where students tune out during extended L2 listening. While acknowledging TBLT's strengths in promoting communicative competence, the article concludes that TBLT is not a perfect methodology but can be usefully combined with other approaches in a balanced way, especially for lower proficiency levels, and this is demonstrated with a lesson designed for CEFR A2 level learners. The article draws on key TBLT scholars such as Willis, Skehan, Ellis, Nunan, Long and Swan to present the arguments.

**Keywords:** task-based learning, TBLT, second language teaching, motivation

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### **1. Background**

TBLT emerged from the notion of communicative language teaching, which prioritised notion and function over grammar and lexis; in short, that the language used in class should be applicable and relevant to the real world. The communicative approach was, however, deemed a “weak form” by some, who felt that the study of language form still superseded that of use (Willis & Willis, 2001, pp. 174-175). The identification of a new pattern or structure to be presented, practised and produced became a common and

popular method of language teaching (the 3Ps or PPP), but meant meaning tended to be secondary to form.

As a reaction against this, one of the earliest, most influential, and best-documented task-based approaches was Prabhu's Bangalore Project, where the focus was on the outcome, not the form, and “[letting] the language relevant to the task [...] come into play” (Prabhu, 1987, p. 54). Prabhu's learners were evaluated as being more successful than those taught more traditionally (Willis & Willis, 2001). This helped fuel a move away from—and attack upon—PPP by leading proponents of TBLT. J. Willis (1996), Skehan (1998), and Ellis (2003) all contrast PPP unfavourably with TBLT, with Skehan (1998) calling it a “discredited and meaning-impooverished methodology” (p. 94). Nonetheless, PPP is still a popular model among communicative language teachers (East, 2021), and this deserves a closer look.

### 1.1 The Endurance of PPP

Ahmadian and Long (2021) observe that most language teaching and materials still follow the PPP model. They attribute this variously to the strangle-hold of publishers on teaching, a lack of training and ability in the L2, the need for expertise and investment in establishing TBLT programs, and a lack of clear models of practical TBLT functioning in the classroom.

For Long (2015) PPP is “excessively interventionist” (p. 20), while East (2021) describes how it has “implications for controlling and constraining the language that learners use and limiting their opportunities to be creative with language as part of their own self-efficacy” (p. 21). Ellis and Shintani (2014) feel the language is denatured into being used as a “tool” (p. 136).

Conversely, scholars like Swan (2005) and Klapper (2003) remain unconvinced by the sufficiency of TBLT as a replacement. Swan worries that “potentially useful pedagogic procedures are discouraged or outlawed on doctrinaire grounds” (p. 283).

To support their concerns, research has shown that significant numbers of both teachers and learners worry about the instruction and feedback TBLT provides. Carless (as cited in East, 2021, p. 160) found some teachers favoured PPP as it was easier to incorporate grammar teaching. Luo and Xing (as cited in East, 2021, p. 161) noted teachers' concern about the low proficiency of their learners and an attendant resistance to tasks. The suitability of TBLT to lower-level learners will be discussed in more detail below, but, in addition to the criticisms of TBLT noted here, there is the perception that PPP can be more suitable to lower proficiency, as reflected by Luo and Xing above, and

some empirical research showing the effectiveness of the method generally (Thompson, 2019). DeKeyser (2007) finds similarities between PPP and skill acquisition theory and that its initial explicit instruction can be combined with freer communicative use, leading to meaningful language acquisition. Additionally, explicit in the reasons Ahmadian and Long list above for the persistence of PPP are legitimate grounds for its continued relevance. For surely in the absence of training, investment or clear models for TBLT there must be something to fill that gap, and PPP can, with some reliability, be pressed into service here.

The limitations of PPP have been much discussed, and robustly so, but the fact it is still so widely used and defended suggests a durability, a dependability, making it relevant still. TBLT is more learner-centred (discussed below), which is preferable in this writer's opinion, but both can boast meaningful language interaction and attention to grammar or form.

Regardless, it is a reaction against this controlled, constrained language of PPP that leads TBLT proponents to argue the most effective way of teaching a language is "by engaging learners in real language use in the classroom" (Willis & Willis, 2007, pp. 1-11). Tasks are used to facilitate these freer meaningful classroom activities.

## **2. Characteristics of TBLT**

### **2.1 Defining Tasks**

Although, as we will see later, there are many areas of contention around TBLT there are some generally agreed precepts on what constitutes a task. Skehan (1998, p. 95), basing also on several other writers, puts forward six key characteristics:

- meaning is primary;
- there is some communicative problem to solve;
- learners are not given other people's meaning to regurgitate;
- there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities;
- task completion has some priority;
- the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome.

These characteristics, with some minor modifications, are broadly agreed upon (Ellis, 2009).

Jane Willis (1996) recommends a pre-task phase, a main task phase, and a post-task phase. The pre-task can allow for pre-teaching of useful language or the identification of topic language, while in the post-task phase there can be consciousness-raising activities

and attention may be drawn to form. For Ellis (2009) pre- and post-tasks can be optional, with only the main task phase being obligatory.

While tasks are generally performed in groups, they can also be done in whole-class contexts, in pairs or even individually (Ellis, 2009, p. 224). Other characteristics, considered below, are more diverse and, indeed, divisive.

## **2.2 Focused or Unfocused TBLT**

Jane Willis (1996) favours unfocused tasks, where learners are free to choose the language forms they want to convey what they mean while trying to fulfil the task goals. She writes how “it would defeat the purpose to dictate or control the language forms that they must use” (p. 24).

Skehan (1998) agrees that trying to impose a particular structure can “render a task so unnatural as to make it of dubious value for acquisition” (p. 130). He advocates the creation of tasks where learners will find some structures more natural to use, without them being compulsory.

Ellis (2009) believes tasks can be both focused and unfocused. For him, focused tasks are acceptable if they contain a “clearly defined outcome other than the use of language” and the target language is “hidden,” i.e. not made explicit (pp. 223-224).

This emphasis on naturalness has led to Sheen (2003) and Swan (2005) expressing concern that there is no grammar syllabus in TBLT—Swan going so far as to say it has been “outlawed” (p. 394). He feels that while useful new material can be introduced in Willis's post-task phase, it is “decoupled from the communicative activity which could have consolidated its acquisition” (2005, p. 391). Sheen and Swan's criticisms seem somewhat strident and misrepresentative, for, if the task is focused and the language hidden, it can be interwoven throughout the task, and explicitly noticed (Schmidt, 1990)—and further practised if necessary—at the end. Long (2014), in fact, talks about how older learners have a “reduced capacity for purely incidental learning” (p. 12), with his solution being a focus on form and opportunities for intentional learning. He distinguishes this from the older models of focus on form (PPP) but to this author it seems a distinction without a meaningful difference. Both include error correction and explicit noticing of patterns but, regardless, it shows a willingness to teach grammar.

Finally, Skehan (1996) writes how the degree of avoidance to specific structures and prescriptive target language are up to the teacher, and Ellis (2009) that TBLT practitioners view attention to form as necessary. This clearly shows they are not proscribing grammar.

### **2.3 Learner-Centred**

A key feature of TBLT is its learner-centredness. For Dave Willis (2003) language and topics selected and controlled by the teacher increase the learner's dependence on the teacher, whereas "tasks remove the teacher domination, and learners get chances to open and close conversations, to interact naturally" (J. Willis, 1996, p. 18). Though increasingly considered a good thing in teaching, learner-centredness, along with other key tenets, is also suspected of being one of the reasons TBLT is less prevalent than it might be. In a questionnaire, Lightbown and Spada (1999) found most students were concerned about a number of aspects of their instruction, especially a lack of error correction, attention to grammatical form and teacher-centred instruction. Skehan (1998) blames the resistance to TBLT on a "conservative profession, out of touch with language acquisition studies ... [transmitting] essentially the same view of how teaching should be organized, and what teachers should be like" (p. 94).

Swan (2005), however, worries the teacher is being minimised too much, becoming merely a manager and facilitator of communicative activities and not being tapped enough to provide new language. Ellis (2009) refutes this, believing "it places the teacher in the role of skilled communicator," and believes there are cases where TBLT can be more teacher-centred if called for (pp. 236-237).

### **2.4 Real Language**

Jane Willis (1996) regards exposure to a "rich but comprehensible input of real spoken and written language" as essential (p. 11). For her, the language should be simplified or graded as little—and presented as authentically—as possible. Simplification, Willis feels, deprives learners of key, regularly occurring features of language they will need outside the classroom. This has important implications for beginner learners that will be returned to in a subsequent section.

Widdowson (as cited in Ellis, 2009, p. 222) argues TBLT over-emphasises authentic language use. Ellis rebuts this by distinguishing between two types of authenticity—situational and interactional. Ellis (2009) claims interactional authenticity is what is important, where tasks "instigate the same kind of interactional processes (such as the negotiation of meaning, scaffolding, inferencing, and monitoring) that arise in naturally occurring language use" (p. 227).

Nunan (2004) accords with the importance of using authentic texts, but he also cites Brown and Menasche's (1993) continuum of five distinguishable degrees of

authenticity—from genuine to minimal—as a way of evaluating useful texts. This allows for flexibility in choosing a text.

### **3. Application of TBLT**

#### **3.1 Beginners and TBLT**

There is much debate about the suitability of TBLT for beginners. Seedhouse (as cited in Ellis, 2009, p. 229) cites a task interaction where minimal, almost “pidginized” language is produced. Ellis is weak on this point, merely suggesting that, at beginner level, this type of interaction “might” be of benefit in developing their ability to use their limited resources (p. 229). Widdowson (as cited in Ellis, 2009, p. 226) observes how a successful outcome to a task may not result in learning if only basic language is produced and though Ellis admits beginners' interactions will be limited, he maintains it is still of pedagogic value but fails to give compelling examples.

Swan (2005), reacting against assertions by Willis and Ellis that grammar is unnecessary for beginners, points out how “learners can hardly make the ... [recommended] ‘occasional shift in attention to linguistic code features’ ... if they know so little basic grammar that they cannot produce discourse to shift from” (p. 394). He goes on to recommend a well-planned traditional structural syllabus for lower levels. When Ellis (2009) concedes there is a role for complementary traditional structural teaching, and acknowledges trialling—and, surely, its logically-attendant error—is necessary with TBLT for beginners, there does seem, to this author, an obvious solution: more structural teaching at lower levels; ground the learners until they are developmentally ready for TBLT. Add the challenge of regularly and successfully choosing authentic input and deriving tasks from them at beginner level, this author finds it difficult to see the merit of an exclusively TBLT syllabus.

#### **3.2 Practical issues with the report phase**

In this author’s experience, the weakest link of a Jane Willis TBLT lesson is often the problematic report phase. Willis (1996) regards it as essential: “Without the incentive of the report, the learning process of planning, drafting and rehearsing would not happen” (p. 58). Bygate et al. (2021) believe it to be “crucial” and “key” (p. 40). Report phase presentations are not necessarily oral but often tend to be. It can, however, be very difficult to incentivise learners to give attention to others when presenting their findings. Simply put, even assuming a learner is developmentally ready to process 15 or more minutes of L2 speech (an average estimate for classes of 12 or more at B1 CEFR levels

or higher), many times they are not sufficiently motivated, and minds wander, leaving the presenter speaking to vacant faces. Although it is difficult to find literature addressing this, Ellis (2009) does concede TBLT is “not easily implemented in large classes” (p. 242), while Thompson (2024) notes how large class sizes in Asia can lead to class management issues, and this is a common criticism from teachers in all kinds of institutions, from secondary to private language schools, to tertiary-level. For example, the English for Academic Purposes Programme in Trinity College Dublin is task-based and its founding director, Dr. Lorna Carson, agreed that there can be tune-out on the part of both teachers and learners during presentations (personal communication, December 12, 2013).

This is not simply a failure in task-selection, or of class-management but, I argue, a combination of human nature (for, though meaning may be primary in TBLT, one person's meaning may not resonate with another's) and an over-taxing of processing load. It is not surprising people tune out when tasked with listening to an L2 at extended length; it can simply be too tiring. Brooks and Lutes (2024) stress “consistent observation ... is imperative to monitor group member participation” (p. 99) but this has practical limitations when students are reporting. Should a teacher constantly interrupt a presentation to wake students up, for example? Willis (1996) advises stopping an oral report stage early if it is becoming repetitive, tacitly admitting its inherent weakness and, if one were to cut it short, surely making something of a mockery of its importance.

Alternatives to oral presentations, such as producing posters, have also proved problematic. Ellis (2009) cites research done on Cantonese teachers, which found “many of the tasks resulted in non-linguistic activity, such as drawing, rather than use of the L2 as there was little L2 production” (p. 240). I have encountered some learners who felt they were being infantilised by being asked to make posters, so the choice of the most suitable type of report phase can be both nuanced and elusive. Clearly, there are times when the report phase works, and works well. But equally there are enough instances where this is not the case to justify regarding this as a problematic phase of TBLT, and one in need of further development or adjustment. It is specifically this problem in TBLT task design that the article will address below.

#### **4. A TBLT Lesson**

The lesson that follows was for a class of learners at A2 CEFR level, and the topic was centred on planning a weekend trip. The class consisted of 15 international students from a variety of countries and languages, with an average age of 23, in an English

language school in Ireland. The level was chosen to verify a TBLT lesson can be used productively at lower levels, despite the misgivings discussed in section 3.1 earlier. A2 was the lowest proficiency level in the school at that time.

The task was chosen with a view to meeting the 4 criteria for Keller's (1983) theory of motivation. This comprises (a) attention (or interest), (b) relevance, (c) confidence (the gain in confidence upon achieving a goal or task) and (d) satisfaction (from getting rewarded).

At A2 level the students are broadly familiar with the simple present tense and, to varying degree, with the simple past. Based on experience, the plan anticipated a mix of these two tenses. For example: "*We can book a hotel for Saturday. This looks fun. I went there before and it was good. Let's do that.*" Of course, it was entirely possible that future tenses would be produced or attempted by the students but this plan essentially follows the Jane Willis (1996) pre-task, main task, and post-task phases, where target vocabulary and topic language are elicited and identified in the pre-task. Instances of future tenses, whether correctly or incompletely attempted during the task would be looked at in the post-task phase. The full plan can be found in the appendix.

The lesson had a special focus on making the often-problematic report phase—again, considered crucial in much of the literature—more interactive and engaging. To this end, the aim was that by providing the students with a variety of options for their report phase this would hopefully keep the stage fresh and stimulating, as the format would change regularly. Among the choices for their reports were quizzes, role-playing and storytelling.

How well did it meet Keller's criteria? If the level of engagement can be allowed as a measure of success, then the lesson proved to be a rewarding, effective, and enjoyable experience for the learners. The topic of planning a weekend trip was relatable and engaging for the students as they were currently planning trips while in Ireland, motivating them to participate and apply their knowledge. This led to meaningful engagement, meeting criteria (a) and (b).

By engaging students in a collaborative and interactive process, the students felt confident in the achievability of the task, criterion (c). Specifically, the task-based approach encouraged students to participate actively in the learning process. By brainstorming ideas, presenting their plans, and providing feedback, students were able to practice their language skills in a meaningful context.

The interactive report phase fostered a collaborative learning environment where students could learn from each other and receive constructive feedback. This helped to build confidence and improve language skills.

The lesson provided ample opportunities for students to practice using the simple present tense, the simple past tense, travel vocabulary, and other relevant language structures. The TBLT framework identified the likely language that would be used, (the simple and past tenses, for example) but also allowed for other language to be organically and spontaneously incorporated, such as attempts at future tenses.

Crucially, the fact that the students were able to choose the method of report phase helped keep it fresh, avoiding repetition and providing motivation, while also reflecting their autonomy in learning. Instead of having 5 groups stand one after the other and present on their plan, with the class passively listening and potentially getting overloaded, bored or tuning out, the report phase was interactive, with activities like role-playing, quizzes, and storytelling, making the learning experience enjoyable and engaging. The feedback from the other students and teacher was positive, meeting Keller's last criterion, satisfaction.

Another welcome result was that as the students still felt engaged and motivated by the end of the report phase, this translated into good focus on errors in the post-task phase. When errors were boarded and corrections elicited, they were more alert and responsive. Error correction here is done without mentioning who made the error to avoid self-consciousness, but the learners responded actively, noticing in the Schmidt (1990) sense where they could improve. It seems overly obvious to say it here, but the more motivated they are, the more focused learners will be, and here avoiding the tune-out in the report phase had positive ongoing results for their accuracy and engagement.

Overall, the lesson plan effectively combined task-based learning and an interactive report phase to create a rewarding and enjoyable experience for the learners. By providing opportunities for active participation, collaboration, and language practice, the lesson helped students to develop their language skills and gain confidence in their ability to communicate effectively.

## **5. Conclusion**

At times, TBLT can remind one of a Winston Churchill aphorism: "Democracy is the worst system, except for all the other systems" (Langworth, 2008, p. 570). TBLT has elements problematic enough to prevent it rendering all other approaches irrelevant, but it still has many features—its learner-centredness, its focus on real language use and meaning—to make it compelling.

As the lesson above demonstrated, there were marked differences in learner motivation and attention to form, certainly over more passive sit-and-listen report stages.

On balance, TBLT is not perfect, but at least now, in the post-methods era, when people are less dogmatic about methodologies and approaches, it can be used as one tool of many, flexibly and adaptively. Perhaps it is at its most useful when used in tandem with complementary methods, including, for example, PPP.

To elaborate on this, and as has been noted earlier, TBLT can be unwieldy for larger class sizes, where PPP may be used more manageably. As PPP is more teacher-led it is more predictable, and possibly more precise in instances. There are many working parts to a TBLT lesson, with many stages, and in a bigger class the simplicity of PPP may offer more affordances. The focus on form of PPP may feel clearer and more explicit in some contexts than in a TBLT lesson, thereby feeling more relevant to learners. As a specific example, if the teacher discovers persistent issues with a language point during the post-task phase and a follow-up is determined to be necessary, a short, sharp PPP lesson may help raise awareness of the form. Further research may indicate which is more effective: a solely TBLT method or one in combination with the explicit scaffolding of PPP.

This author has found consulting with the learners to be a fruitful diagnostic in helping shape the methods to their needs, be it through one-to-one consultation, class feedback or assessment results. If requests are made to focus more explicitly on a grammar point, the teacher should hopefully feel unshackled by dogmatic approaches and free to proceed flexibly, in accordance with the needs of the learners.

Looking forward, may this paper suggest that by carefully considering what kind of report phase would best complement the lesson it can, as the included lesson hopefully demonstrates, be relatively easy to avoid tune-out and maintain student interest and motivation. More research into the applicability, suitability and decision-making of the report stage may help smooth out what can be a rote, at times glossed-over element of TBLT.

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## **Appendix: Task-Based Lesson with an Interactive Report Phase for A2 CEFR Level**

### **Topic: Planning a Weekend Trip**

#### **Learning Objectives:**

- Students will be able to plan a weekend trip.
- Students will be able to use simple past or simple present tenses to describe their trip.
- Students will be able to use vocabulary related to travel and planning.

#### **Procedure:**

##### **1. Introduction (10 minutes)**

- Greet the students and review and elicit vocabulary related to travel (e.g., plane, train, car, bus, hotel, booking, backpack, ticket). Note that vocabulary that cannot be elicited and is pre-taught by teacher gets noted for review and further practice in subsequent lessons.
- Introduce the topic of planning a weekend trip and ask students to share their experiences with travelling.

##### **2. Pre-task Activity (15 minutes)**

- Divide the class into pairs or small groups.
- Ask students to brainstorm and write down ideas for their weekend trip, such as:
  - Destination
  - Transportation
  - Activities
  - Accommodation

##### **3. Main Task Activity (10 minutes)**

- Have each group choose and prepare how to best present their ideas to the class. Note the intent of the variety of options listed below is to keep the report phase fresh, avoiding repetition with the freedom to choose providing motivation, while also reflecting their autonomy in learning.

- Encourage students to ask questions and provide feedback.
- Teacher monitors language and form, making suggestions if necessary, and taking notes to follow up in post-task phase.

#### **4. Interactive Report Phase (20 minutes)**

In groups, students present using whichever of the following ideas appeal.

- **Role-play:** Students can role-play as travel agents and clients, presenting and discussing their planned trips.
- **Quiz:** Students can create quizzes about their trips and test their partners' knowledge.
- **Presentation slides:** Students can create simple presentation slides to visually present their trips.
- **Storytelling:** Students can tell stories about their imaginary trips, using the simple past tense and descriptive language.
- By incorporating an interactive report phase, this lesson provides students with opportunities to practice their speaking skills, use the target language in a meaningful context, and receive feedback from their peers.

#### **5. Post-Task Activity (15 minutes)**

- Consciousness-raising activities to draw attention to form: error correction, pronunciation, highlighting examples of student-produced effective language. Any persistent errors or difficulties get noted here with the intention of following up in the next lesson
- Assign a follow-up writing exercise using the simple past tense to describe their trip.

#### **6. Wrap-up (5 minutes)**

- Review the main points of the lesson and ask students to share what they have learned.
- Encourage them to practice planning and describing trips in their free time.