

## FOCUS ON FORM IN TBLT: RESTRICTING OR EMPOWERING?

Dave and Jane Willis

### 1 Criticism of TBL

‘Task-based instruction (TBI) is frequently promoted as an effective teaching approach, superior to ‘traditional’ methods, and soundly based in theory and research. The approach is often justified by the claim that linguistic regularities are acquired through ‘noticing’ during communicative activity, and should therefore be addressed primarily by incidental ‘focus on form’ during task performance. However, this claim is based on unproved hypotheses, and there is no compelling empirical evidence for the validity of the model. Many advocates of TBI reject proactive syllabus design on doctrinaire grounds, while commonly misrepresenting ‘traditional’ classroom practice. While TBI may successfully develop learners’ command of what is known, it is considerably less effective for the systematic teaching of new language. This is especially so where time is limited and out-of-class exposure unavailable, thus making heavily task-based programmes inappropriate for most of the world’s language learners. The polarization of meaning-based and form-based instruction is unconstructive, and reflects a recurrent pattern of damaging ideological swings in language teaching theory and practice.’ (Swan, M. 2005: 376)

### 2 Here are three situations. What grammar do you predict would be required to help learners complete each activity?

- The desert island game: decision-making task  
*If you were cast away on a desert island which four of the following items would you choose to take with you: an axe; a gun; an English dictionary; a fifty metre length of rope; a month’s supply of tinned food; fifty boxes of matches; a dozen candles; a set of kitchen knives; a torch with a battery; an automatic torch.*  
*In pairs, discuss and reach agreement – be prepared to explain your reasons.*
- Making suggestions:  
*One participant is asking for advice on travel and tourism in South-east Asia. The other participant has a lot of expertise in this area.*
- Daily routines:  
*Find out what time your partner has breakfast lunch and dinner each day. Do not ask any questions about meals, mealtimes or food.*

### 3 Why restrict learner language?

‘If learners feel it necessary to use *should* all the time (for example at the production stage of a PPP cycle where *should* has been presented), they are confined to one wording and are missing out on experimenting with other ways of expressing a whole range of similar meanings. Learners may wish to express their meanings less forcefully than *should* suggests, so phrases like *I would say* or *I would recommend* or *Well. What you could do is ...* would be more appropriate. In a PPP lesson learners are being unnaturally constrained when they should be experiencing the richness of meaning potential and practising normal conversational skills.’ (Cox 2005:179)

#### 4 What is there to be learned? A look at modality

Underline references to the future:

*B: Janet, I hear you're planning a trip to Africa.*  
*J: Yes it's very exciting. Going in September to see my son who's doing VSO in Zambia. So I'm going to fly to Lusaka and he'll meet me there and we'll do a bit of travelling round. I think we're going to be staying most of the time in Monze, where he's working. It's about a hundred miles south of Lusaka. But we're planning all sorts of exciting things. We're going to go on safari...*  
*B: How long are you actually going for.*  
*J: Oh, six weeks. Quite a long time so we can do quite a lot. I think we're going to one of the big game parks – Luangwa – a game park – for a few days.*  
*B: Right.*  
*J: Probably going on down to see the Victoria Falls. And we're actually going to Zimbabwe as well.*  
*B: Matter of interest. What airline are you planning to fly by?*  
*J: Sorry? Er, Air Zambia.*  
*B: Air Zambia.*  
*J: I've had to do it as cheaply as I could and I went round all the bucket shops and got this flight. I mean it's a regular flight. It's not a charter or anything.*  
*B: Yes, yes.*  
*J: But it's er ... I think it'll be okay... I don't know.*

Underline suggestions and expressions of opinion:

*PK: What do you think of the one in the top left hand corner here Mary?*  
*MS: Well I'm absolutely positive that that's New York. That's in er, North America. What do you - Okay?*  
*PK: I think - I agree, yes, with the Statue of Liberty and all those skyscrapers. Mhm. Yeah.*  
*MS: Yes.*  
*PK: Erm . . . What about the one in the middle here at the top?*  
*MS: Well when I see a . . . er . . . a windmill I always think of Holland, so I would say Holland, for that.*  
*PK: Mhm. Yes I think I agree with you. It's flat as well, isn't it?*  
*MS: Yes.*  
*PK: Yes. So it must be Holland.*  
*MS: Right.*  
*PK: And the third one along the top?*  
*MS: Not too sure about that. Er. . .*  
*PK: Somewhere oriental perhaps?*  
*MS: Oriental definitely. It could be, er, Thailand? With that type of . . .*  
*PK: - That sort of roof?*  
*MS: - roof?*  
*PK: Mm. Yeah.*  
*MS: Erm*  
*PK: I think Thailand. I don't know enough about it to sort of say it's China.*  
*MS: It could be China - or Thailand. Shall we plump for -?*

*PK: I think Thai- - I think Thailand. I would plump for Thailand there.*  
*MS: Okay and erm, how about this one with the big vase?*  
*PK: Yeah. Next row. Big vase. Makes me think of Greece.*  
*MS: And me. Mm. And er . . . Looks like a Grecian urn. And it's hot.*  
*PK: It's hot, and tourists always look like that in Greece don't they? Dressed for the summer.*  
*MS: Yes. Okay, Greece.*

Underline references to the future:

*Dear Dr Tickoo,*

*I am writing with regard to my travelling arrangements for the RELC Language Seminar. I shall be travelling by Jordanian Airways and should arrive in Singapore at 1350 on 18<sup>th</sup> April. The return booking is for 0530 on 4<sup>th</sup> May.*

*I have not yet got confirmation of the arrangements for the Amman-Singapore section of the journey, so I will have to confirm these timings as soon as I have further information.*

*I look forward to seeing you next month.*

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*Dear Dave,*

*Thank you for your letters – an interim report from me. I am planning to make arrangements to arrive on Sunday April 1<sup>st</sup> and to leave either p.m. April 30<sup>th</sup> or a.m. May 1<sup>st</sup>. I have been in touch with the British Council Washington about the payment of my ticket and I am hoping to finalise those details this week.*

*I do not know yet whether I will be staying with Vijay Bhatia. I'll let you know as soon as I've heard from him.*

*Warmest regards to both you and Jane.*

Data from de Chazal (2009)

'To give a typical example, a 300-word front-page article in one of the free London newspapers contains no fewer than eight distinct forms:

***UK TROOPS POISED TO LEAVE IRAQ***

*thousands of British troops are to leave Iraq;*

*the death toll could increase;*

*those left behind would become more vulnerable to attack;*

*the number of British troops should be significantly lower;*

*when British troops started to 'draw down', the insurgent violence could intensify;*

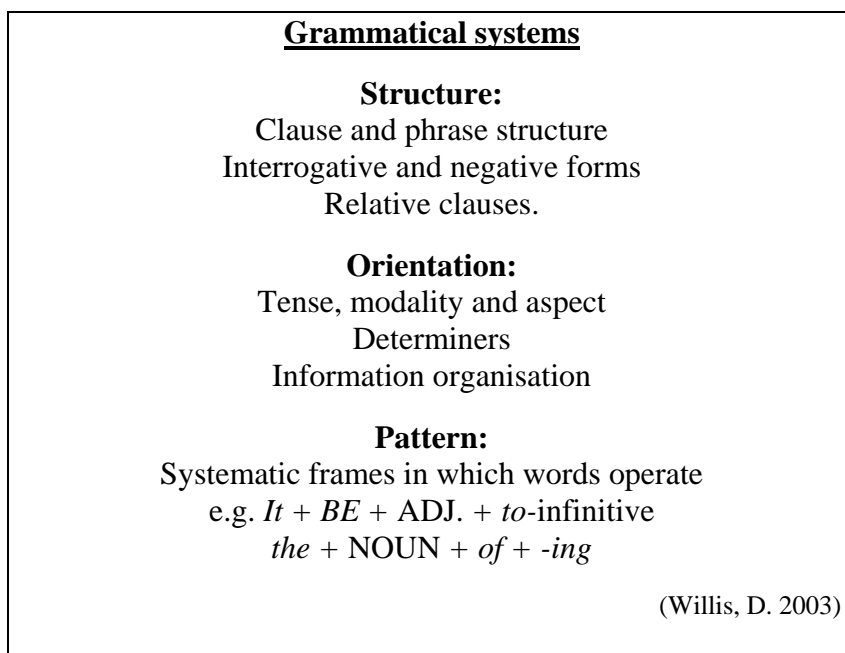
*as we move towards handover, perversely, the number of attacks on us may increase;*

*if troops were withdrawn immediately, the results would be 'catastrophic'.*

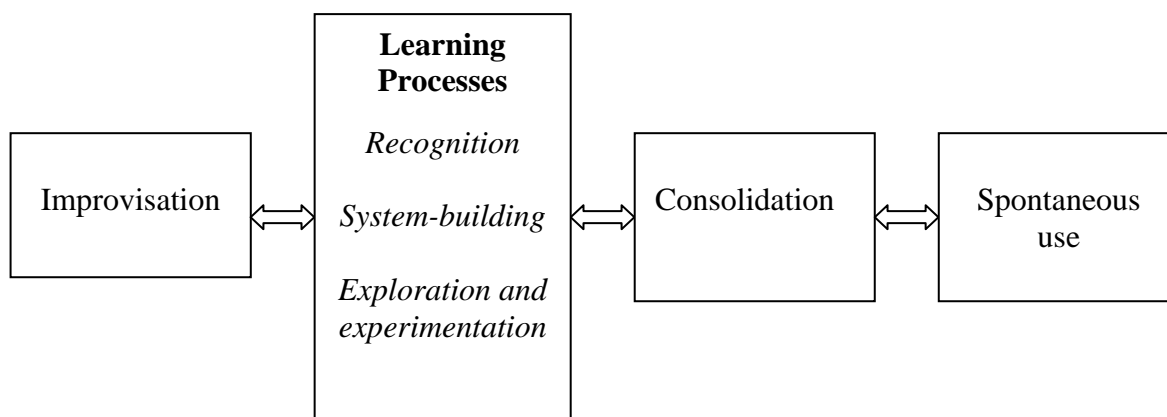
'... These structures provide rich pickings that enable the speaker or writer to express

nicely subtle meanings such as degrees of certainty and various functions. Indeed, we can celebrate the fact that English does not have a future tense as a liberation, an invitation to use some of the dozens of forms available. What is striking is the very limited coverage many such forms are given in course books and grammar books for both students and teachers.'

> What does this tell us about **language** and **learning** and **teaching**?



### 5 Empowering learners: learning processes<sup>1</sup>.



> Improvisation is initially a lexical process.

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<sup>1</sup> From Willis D. 2003

## When to work on language and focus on form?

### A task framework

#### Priming & Preparation

Availability of key lexis & useful phrases

#### Task > Planning >>>> Report of outcome

Language extension

>>Prestige language use/pushed output

#### Form focus

#### Analysis & practice

of language features from  
texts written or spoken that learners have read or heard

## 6 Why should learners bother to commit themselves to grammatical complexity in the classroom?

- Design and implementation of tasks
- Short term task sequences (lesson planning)
- Task framework (task > planning > report)
- Data – recordings of tasks, task reports and task related texts
- Language analysis (Skehan: Language use and language learning. Johns and Davies (1983) ‘Text as a vehicle for information (TAVI) and ‘Text as a linguistic object’ (TALO)
- Long term task sequences – based on topic or possibly on systemic/semantic analysis.

## 7 Lesson plan: How strict were your parents? (Tim Marchand in Willis & Willis 2007)

Priming / Preparation

### ***When you were a child:***

- Do you think your parents were strict or easy-going?*
- Did they allow you to stay out late at night?*
- Did they let you go on holiday on your own?*
- When you went out did you always have to tell them where you were going?*
- Did you always have to do your homework before supper?*
- Did your parents make you help about the house?*
- Did you have to help in the garden?*
- What jobs did they make you do?*

Tim recorded four people talking about their parents. Read the transcripts.  
Whose parents were stricter? Underline phrases that help you answer this question.

**A:** My Dad is a quiet man really, so he didn't really make me do much at home. He sometimes asked me to wash his car or cut the grass, but I was never forced to do it, and I could usually get some pocket money for it as well. I think my Mum was also pretty easy-going; she let me stay out late with my friends. As long as she knew where I was, she wouldn't mind so much what I did.

**B:** My father was definitely stricter than my Mum. If I had been in trouble at school, it was always left up to him to tell me off. But I wouldn't say that my Mum was easy-going exactly. She would sit me down sometimes and make me do my homework in front of her, or force me to eat my greens, things like that. I guess I was just more scared of my father.

Form focus:

***When you were a child:***

1. *Do you think your parents were ----- or ---- - -----?*
2. *Did they ----- -- -- stay out late at night?*
3. *Did they --- -- go on holiday on your own?*
4. *When you went out did --- always --- -- tell them where you were going?*
5. *Did you always ---- -- do your homework before supper?*
6. *Did your parents ---- -- help about the house?*
7. *Did you ---- -- help in the garden?*
8. *What jobs did they ---- -- do?*

Recall. How many of the sentences can you remember?

Controlled practice:

***Complete these to make true sentences:***

- 1 *When I was a child my parents **made me** ....*
- 2 *They **let me** ....*
- 3 *I was **forced to** ....*
- 4 *I was **allowed to** ....*
- 5 *I was **supposed to** ....*

## **8 Long term task sequence**

### **Which of you went to the strictest primary school?**

Recycles notions of permission and compulsion in the past, but probably in a more impersonal context. Probable use of authoritarian *they* and passive (data needed.)

### **Predict future legislation designed to reduce carbon footprints.**

Permission and compulsion – impersonal – future (data needed)

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