

One-on-One: Interview with Jane Willis

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Jane Willis is a teacher, trainer, speaker, author and ELT consultant. She has run teacher development courses and taken part in ELT consultancies in many countries including India. Known for her work in Task-based language teaching and learning, Jane Willis has authored many books including The Collins COBUILD English Course (a task-based course with a lexical syllabus), Task-based Instruction in Foreign Language Education: Practices and programs, A Framework for Task-based Learning (Intrinsic), Teachers Exploring Tasks in English Language Teaching (Palgrave Macmillan), which won a British Council Innovations Award in March 2006.

Jane, many thanks for accepting to be interviewed for the *Journal of English*

***Language Teaching (India).* About a decade ago, I had an opportunity to interact with you via British Council's TeachingEnglish. Then the focus of our discussion was on the difference between tasks and projects. Glad to be in touch with you again. Let me ask my first question. Jane Willis is one of the well-known names in Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) approach. When did you get interested and involved in TBLT? Did Dr NS Prabhu's work have any impact on your work in TBLT?**

My husband, Dave Willis, and I first got interested in TBL when we were teaching English at the British Council in Singapore in 1979. We had heard of Prabhu's five year Communicational Teaching Project, commonly referred to as the 'Bangalore Project', and we invited him to come and tell us about it. Their project team decided that *'teaching should be concerned with creating conditions for coping with meaning in the classroom, to the exclusion of any deliberate regulation of the development of grammatical competence or a mere simulation of language behaviour.'* (Prabhu, 1987.) He demonstrated an elementary level lesson, where the teacher starts by rehearsing / demonstrating a task in front of the whole class, for example creating a diagram based on different shapes (drawing on the board

triangles, circles and squares - large and small - and speaking as he does so, describing the diagram). The class is then asked to draw a slightly different diagram, following written instructions. The teacher would then look at the pupils' diagrams, and talk about them, explaining (in English) any instructions that had caused difficulty, but without any explicit grammar teaching other than incidental correction / reformulation of pupils' responses. Other early project tasks involved the use of clock faces, monthly calendars, maps, timetables and money.

What Prabhu demonstrated was in effect a strong version of what we now call task-based teaching. The aim is to create conditions for natural acquisition of grammatical competence, giving pupils lots of exposure to spoken and written language within the context of the task. There was generally no explicit presentation or practice of grammar per se. Prabhu spoke of pupils 'grappling' with meaning; for example, trying to understand the instructions, so they could reproduce the diagram. Over the first few terms, his pupils gradually gained confidence in speaking English, joining in the classroom interaction. At the end of five years, they were compared to their control groups: counterpart classes in other state secondary schools who had been following a behaviourist approach, with a Situational - Oral - Structural syllabus. At the age of 16, they all took the same state exams. Bangalore project school pupils were shown to be far better communicators, and they performed equally well in their grammar exams.

Thank you for narrating the success story of Bangalore Project. How successful has

the TBLT approach been in countries where English is taught either as a second or a foreign language?

In many countries, students leave school after 5 or even 10 years of being taught English still unable to use it to communicate with other English speakers. And sadly, this still happens. But there have been movements in several countries to change this, like Canada, where TBLT is well accepted as a teaching approach. But often it has been individual teachers who have introduced TBL to their institutions. Two of the biggest success stories I know about happened in Brazil and Japan. In Brazil, Juarez Lopes began using our task-based course book *The Cobuild English Course* in his language schools, and found his students were able to communicate quite well after one year of study. His schools more than doubled in size and popularity, (see Lopes, 2004 pp83-95). In Japan, TBL was introduced at College level by Jason Moser (2007 pp182-183) who described how over 700 college students who had previously disliked English 'came to life during the task cycle'. Both teachers found they had to overcome initial teething problems, but did so successfully.

Your model for task-based learning focuses more on meaning than on form. When learners carry out a communicative task, they try to focus more on meaning rather than on form. As a result, they might become fluent but their utterances are not always accurate. Does TBLT not focus on learners' grammatical accuracy? Isn't accuracy as important as fluency?

Yes, in TBL, the focus is generally on meaning, but equally on appropriate ways to express those meanings. In more formal contexts, we naturally pay more attention to how we express ourselves; when speaking in public, for instance we try to use 'prestige' language, where both fluency and accuracy are appropriate.

In our version of TBL, we introduced a three part Task Cycle: Task > Planning > Report. The task phase encourages students to achieve the goals of the task, in the privacy of their pairs or groups, using whatever English they already know, without fear of public correction (fluency practice). They are then asked to plan how they will report their results to the whole class, i.e. either speaking to or writing for a more public audience. This process creates a natural motivation to be accurate as well as fluent, as befits more formal public presentations. In the interim Planning stage, teachers can go round and give individual language support (suggesting more effective words, useful phrases, grammar corrections) to students who are seeking better ways of expressing themselves without making embarrassing mistakes. Then after the task cycle, we introduced an explicit Focus on Form – highlighting and practising some of grammatical structures, along with useful phrases that appeared in the written texts or task recordings.

So, in answer to your questions: Yes, TBLT in our model does have a focus on accuracy in addition to fluency at the Planning and Report stages, and again at the Form Focus stage after the task cycle.

And yes, there are more formal contexts in

everyday life (job interviews, giving a speech, and of course exams) where accuracy and fluency are both important - but always with a view to communicating what they want to mean in a socially appropriate way. For a more detailed distinction between Language Focus and Form Focus, please see Willis and Willis 2007, Chapter 6, page 133. See also the Overview of TBL Framework - diagram in Willis J 1996 pp155.

Can we say that grammar mistakes do not often impede communication?

Yes, interestingly, research has revealed that it is rare that grammatical mistakes actually impede international communication. Moreover, we can never expect learners to be 100% accurate at any stage (if they were we would be out of a job as teachers!) And indeed, not even native speakers are 'accurate' all the time, We do not speak written English, in full sentences. When we speak spontaneously, in real time, we compose one unit of meaning at a time and we often use phrases or chunks, (*Anything else?*) rather than whole sentences. Rather than concentrating on getting their grammar right, learners should be encouraged to broaden their vocabulary, i.e. to learn more words and collect more lexical phrases, far more fruitful ways of becoming more efficient communicators.

Bruton (2005) states that not all learners are motivated by TBLT. Is it because they have different learning styles and they are not comfortable carrying out certain tasks?

You said in your question that Bruton (2005) states that not all learners are motivated by TBLT. I would first ask Bruton 'Are all students motivated by grammar-based approaches?' I would then point out that most teachers trying out TBL in their classes for the first time have reported teething problems, but once these have been overcome, . Low learner motivation may stem from unclear task instructions which result in feelings of insecurity and/or a lack of appropriate priming before the task, or perhaps learners not understanding how doing tasks can help them learn to communicate. For ways to overcome these see problems, see Willis and Willis, 2007 (pp 217-224) where many experienced TBL teachers give their advice.

David Nunan (2001) distinguishes between “real-world or target tasks, which are communicative acts that we achieve through language in the world outside the classroom, and pedagogical tasks, which are carried out in the classroom”. Is it possible to carry out real-world tasks in the classroom? If such tasks are carried out in the classroom, won't they be artificial?

With regard to Nunan's distinction, I'd like to distinguish between 'real world tasks' and 'real world language use'. It is true that we do not generally play games like 'Spot the difference' (in Nunan's terms a 'pedagogical task') in the real world, but we do compare things, and when we recorded and transcribed fluent speakers playing 'Spot the Difference' collaboratively, we found a huge amount of real-world language being used: *So what do you think? Shall we just check? Anything else?* At the level of discourse

there were lots of really useful lexical phrases used for turn-taking, for comparing things, for sustaining an interaction. Closed tasks like these have very specific goals and are suitable for beginners because both the vocabulary and the task procedures are predictable.

Some task types relate closely to real-world skills and functions – like problem-solving, carrying out surveys, opinion sharing and anecdote-telling. I think Nunan is thinking mainly of real-world tasks as being transactional tasks like shopping, a visit to the doctor, or a teenager trying to persuade a parent to let them go to a late night disco... And yes, quite often these can be role-played. The risk here is that learners may not really be meaning what they say. But it is often possible to 'taskify' the lead-up to such real life tasks. For example, make a list of 5 phrases you think people might use when going to a chemist, or a clothes shop; or think of three arguments /excuses you could use to persuade a parent to let you stay out late. Tell each other your ideas and choose the five most useful. Then create a 2 minute play to perform to the class. The pupils' goal here is to create a play, and if the planning and rehearsing are all in English, that would naturally be meaning focused interaction. The finished product might even entertain the class. See Willis and Willis 2007 Chapter 1, sections 1.5 and Chapter 7, section 7.2 for more explanation.)

Though TBLT was introduced over 4 decades ago, in many countries ESL and EFL teachers are comfortable with the Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) model. Why is it so? Do you still believe that PPP model is a less productive

model?

Yes, both Dave and I firmly believed that PPP is a less productive model. With the focus on practising one or two specific structures, it restricts language use, thus reducing learners' exposure to natural language use, so there are fewer natural acquisition opportunities. Being form-focussed, with accuracy paramount, learners are often too scared of making mistakes to risk talking freely. Learners don't feel confident to use English to express their own meanings and often leave school or leave the course unable to communicate. There is a full but concise comparison between PPP and TBL in Willis J, 2012, Chapter 9, pp133-137.

The advocates of Task-Based Learning and Teaching say that TBLT is a learner-centred approach to language teaching. Of late, the need for learning-centred approach has been discussed much in different forums. Does it imply that we need to think beyond TBLT?

Yes, TBL is learner-centred in that learners are trying to express their own meanings in order to reach the goals of the task. They are free to decide who speaks when, and how best to achieve the task. TBL is also learning-centred, in that it creates essential conditions for natural language learning in the classroom. TBLT, along with Project-based learning, CLILL and variants, are all meaning based approaches. Perhaps we do not need need to think beyond them, but explore more deeply how they work. It is always good to reflect, discuss, question and think more deeply about our practice, and

research what happens if we change things...

Has enough research in TBLT been carried out? What is your advice to young scholars who want to do research into TBLT?

No, there are always aspects that need more research. An easy way in for new scholars is to read about action research that other teachers have done in other places, to select one aspect to investigate, and replicate their research methodologies, to see if they obtain similar results. See FAQs on our Willis-elt website. There are many possible projects described in *Teachers Exploring Tasks* (Edwards and Willis, 2005).

How relevant is TBLT in the twenty-first century classroom where technology is integrated into language learning/teaching? Do we need a new approach to language teaching in the twenty-first century?

Technology should be seen as a teaching aid, a tool, not as a new approach. For example it can be a vehicle for increasing learners' exposure to relevant language, for raising learner motivation to use language to communicate with others outside the classroom. In other words, technology can help us create better conditions for language learning, in line with our objectives. It can also be motivating. Students can make their own recordings of themselves doing tasks and then evaluate their performance, or use English in chat rooms to compare solutions to a problem. These can all be integrated into a task-based framework where meaning is prioritised.

Could you please share with me about *The Collins Cobuild English Course* which you co-authored with Dave Willis? How is this book different from many other English course books that were used by learners?

The Collins Cobuild English Course levels 1-3 combined a task-based approach to language teaching with a thoroughly researched lexical syllabus, focussing on the most typical uses of the most common words, and the phrases and patterns that these words occurred in. If you are interested in the linguistic research and rationale behind this 3 level course, which covered the most frequent uses of the top 2500 words, you can download – for free – Dave Willis’s book, *The Lexical Syllabus*. Ten years before he died, Dave also wrote ‘*Rules, Patterns and Words, grammar and lexis in language teaching*’ (2003) which shows how language work can be integrated within a task-based approach.

There is a currently a team of writers in Japan who are updating and revamping the original *Cobuild English Course* with a view to future publication. Maybe the time is right for a task-based approach in the wider world!

Can you suggest a website where teachers can find examples of task-based lesson plans?

If you would like some examples of Task-based lesson plans, or to know more about TBL, please see our website: www.willis-elt.co.uk

Thank you, Jane, for spending the time

to answer my questions. I am sure the readers of the interview will find your responses very useful.

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