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# Expanding on Willis' TBL Framework:
# The Integrated Input Output Framework

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## Introduction

Over twenty years ago, Jane Willis introduced her framework for task-based learning (Willis, 1996). The framework is simple, easy to follow and use, and importantly, it is based upon sound theoretical principles of language learning. This article is an attempt to develop the framework by adding the element of language input, which it has been argued, is often neglected in a TBLT approach. After detailing some of the potential issues with the implementation of TBLT in EFL contexts such as Japan, the authors outline the *Integrated input output framework for TBLT* and show how it answers many of the criticisms directed at TBLT, particularly for contexts where there are insufficient opportunities for exposure to language outside the classroom. Example materials are introduced to enable teachers to clearly conceptualize how the framework can be implemented in their own classrooms.

## Task-based Language Teaching

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) can be considered to have its origins in Prabhu's Bangalore project which began in 1979 and brought about an interest in the use of tasks in the L2 classroom (Beretta & Davies, 1985). Since then, TBLT has been adopted as "the new ELT Orthodoxy" (Howatt & Widdowson, 2004, p. 368), and its use is widespread. TBLT is predicated on the principle of students completing tasks which constitute the central component of the language course. Although there are some differences, there is general agreement among TBLT researchers that a task should have a primary focus on meaning, involve students using their own language resources, and have a non-linguistic outcome (Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 1998).

TBLT is argued to be effective for language learning in that it incorporates a number of principles considered central to SLA. Most researchers agree that learning occurs when students are focussed on real communication, and that this creates opportunities for negotiation of meaning (Long, 1996), and for output, which has been shown to be an essential condition for second language acquisition (Swain, 2005). Research also suggests that students have their own internal syllabus, and the freedom of language choice

in TBLT means that students are not forced to use or learn language they are not yet ready for developmentally (Ellis, 2018). The need to communicate meaning also facilitates noticing, as students become aware of the language that they do not have but that is necessary in order to complete the task, and are therefore primed for learning (Schmidt, 2001). Furthermore, success in the task is measured by how well the students could convey their intended messages, which is motivating for students because they have a chance to complete successful communicative transactions even with limited language resources.

Despite its increasing popularity, there are a number of researchers who claim that TBLT has some fundamental flaws that make it unsuitable for language learning (Burrows, 2008; Sato, 2009), particularly in EFL contexts where there is what could be described as a *poverty of input* (Swan, 2005). The basic argument of these researchers is that TBLT focusses on language output, and does not facilitate the teaching of new language items (Swan, 2005):

> But if students do not already know the linguistic conventions for opening and closing conversations, interrupting and challenging, etc, how are they supposed to learn them without input from the 'dominating' teacher? One cannot teach by eliciting what is not there. (p. 390)

Such arguments lend support to more traditional approaches, such as Present Practice Produce (PPP), in which language items are carefully selected and then explicitly taught to students. In this way, students are provided with the necessary tools before being asked to complete the communicative task. Although teachers seem to believe that TBLT can be successfully implemented in Asian contexts (Harris, 2016), in contexts such as Japan, where L2 use outside of the classroom is extremely limited, the issue of learning new language becomes important. How can students develop their L2 with so little chance for input?

Ellis has addressed these concerns (2009, 2013), and considers the issue of language input to be a misunderstanding of the true nature of TBLT. While it is true that TBLT often focusses on speaking tasks, Ellis (2009) argues that input tasks should also be used in order to introduce language to students. Long (2016) also calls this *speaking-only* argument a fallacy, and describes how a TBLT course may be almost completely input-based depending on the needs of the students. Shintani (2016) showed that input-based tasks can be used effectively to teach language, even to very young, beginner level learners who have almost no existing language resources to fall back on.

Willis (1996) introduced her framework as a guide for teachers to facilitate the implementation of TBLT. The framework is popular for its simplicity and also its flexibility, allowing teachers to use TBLT in their classrooms. Teachers need to consider their approach to language learning, and having decided on TBLT, the Willis framework provides them with a clear and manageable guide to a principled approach to language teaching. Although Willis (1996) does discuss text-based tasks (for example, explaining how reading tasks could be used within the task framework), there exists a certain disconnect between language input and output tasks. The aim of this paper is to introduce a framework based on Willis (1996), which leads to a deeper integration of input and output tasks, and which teachers can apply to their own teaching contexts to ensure students have both language input tasks to provide language, and subsequently, related output tasks in which they can use the language they have acquired. This is especially important for teachers of low-level language learners or in contexts where there are few opportunities to use the L2 outside of the classroom.

## The Integrated Input Output Framework for TBLT

If teachers are going to adopt TBLT in challenging teaching contexts, then a framework is needed to facilitate that process. Figure 1 shows our proposed *Integrated input output framework for TBLT*. An essential feature of the framework is that there is a strong link between the topic or theme of the input and output tasks. Therefore, language that may help students complete the output task is deliberately

introduced in the input task (without being explicitly 'taught' to students). Students are still free to use their own language resources for the output task, but for students who require it, the input task provides some support. We now discuss each section of the cycle, using an example lesson to illustrate the flow of a class using the framework (see Appendix for the full lesson material).

## Input Task

The input task follows the same sequence as the Willis Framework, with its own pre-task (serving to pique student interest or elicit certain language), main task (in the form of a reading or listening text), and post-task, (which includes a focus on language features that appeared in the main task). The example below utilizes a reading as the main input task, although a listening task could be equally effective following the same sequence.

**Pre-task**. Students are introduced to the theme of stories about people's lives. The story that forms the central part of the input task cycle is about Michel Lotito, a man who was able to eat metal and glass, among other strange things. The pre-task requires students to guess which items he may have eaten. This immediately sparks interest in the reading activity and gives students a real reason to read, rather than the typical post-reading comprehension questions so common with intensive reading activities. Students have made predictions and are invested in the task and may therefore be eager to find out if their ideas were correct.

**Task**. The task involves students reading to check their answers from the pre-task and encourages a focus on reading for meaning (Willis, 1996). This reading introduces students to vocabulary and language that will become important when students are required to produce language in the output task cycle. As can been seen from the Appendix, different examples of the past tense are introduced, all of which can be used when giving narratives. At this point, there is no explicit reference to language or vocabulary, encouraging students to use strategies to guess meaning from context (Nation, 2008), and also facilitating the noticing of unknown language structures.

**Post-task**. The post-task is where there is a direct and more explicit focus on language. Students are asked to identify the meaning of the unknown vocabulary or expressions, and also to reorder jumbled sentences. All of the example sentences involve language used to provide narratives, and all of the language focussed on has first been processed for meaning, and therefore the form-meaning connections so essential to effective language acquisition can be forged (Ellis 2009).

The entire Input task cycle could be considered to act as a kind of large "pre-task" to the subsequent output task, yet it is can also stand on its own as a complete lesson. Teachers focusing on input such as listening and reading may decide to move to the next topic, rather than completing the output task.
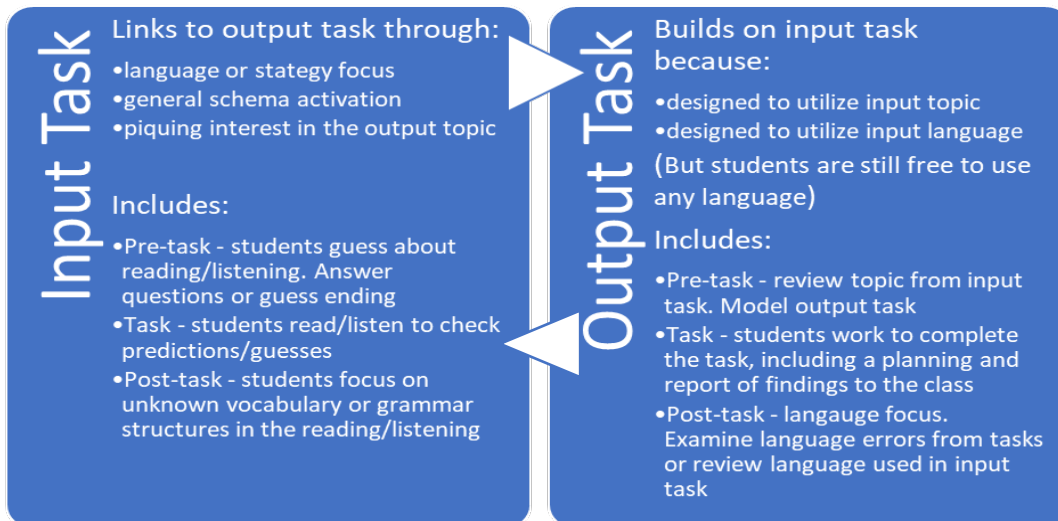
*Figure 1.* Integrated input output framework for TBLT.

## Output Task

Unlike the original framework proposed by Willis (1996), in the *Integrated input output framework for TBLT*, before the output task students have already been concentrating on the theme or topic in the input task stage, and therefore relevant schemata are already activated, making introduction of the output task easier, and creating the possibility of more challenging tasks in this stage. The output task builds on the input task by providing students with a need to produce language, often in the form of a speaking task, although a writing task could also be the main focus at this stage of the lesson. Like the input section, the output section involves three main parts; a pre-task, (preparing for the main task, or eliciting further useful language), a main task, and a post-task. Again, the post-task is a focus on language produced in the main task. For the purpose of materials design, there is a level of uncertainty involved in predicting what language will be used. However, with tasks that focus on specific areas, such as the narrative task in this lesson example, it is possible, and in fact in many cases teachers are able to adequately predict student language use (Harris & Leeming, in press). Experienced teachers are also fully able to respond to other language issues that arise in this task stage, allowing for more reactive focus on form. The example in the Appendix is a personal narrative task.

**Pre-task**. The teacher lists four examples of important events that occurred in his or her life on a timeline (written on a whiteboard). Students must ask questions to the teacher to find more information (see Appendix for output task materials). This is in line with task modelling described by Willis and Willis (2007) as an effective means of preparing students for the main task, but in this case students should be somewhat primed thematically, and possibly linguistically, after completing the input task. This pre-task also provides the additional motivational benefit of allowing the students to get to know a little personal information about their teacher.

**Task**. The main task is designed along the same thematic lines and within the same discourse genre as was introduced in the input task (a past narrative), thus providing students with an opportunity to use the language that was in the input task, and which was introduced more explicitly in the post-task stage of the input task. This main task is based on a timeline that was introduced in the pre-task. Students mark four unique or important events in their life on the timeline. Their partner then asks them questions about these events, with the aim of finding the most interesting experience of their classmates. The way in which this output task follows directly on from a related input task goes some way to addressing Swan's (2005) criticism that students might be asked to use language that they do not know and have never encountered.

Students are free to use any language available to them to complete the tasks, or indeed, non-linguistic strategies (Ellis, 2009). In addition, if students do not have the appropriate language available to them, they have already been exposed to it in the input task and may therefore be more likely to successfully perform the narrative. Task repetition is also incorporated, allowing an increased chance for language practice so often lacking in EFL contexts. The final outcome has students report on the most interesting story that they heard, maintaining the focus on meaning, and providing a non-linguistic task outcome. The human need for relatedness means that students are highly motivated to find out about the lives of the people around them (Ryan & Deci, 2017), and that creates the information gap in this task.

**Post-task**. The post-task stage of the output cycle involves more explicit focus on language. As with the original Willis framework (1996), language focus can be varied depending on the needs of the students and any problems that eventuated during the main task. For example, a script could be provided of two people performing the task, with students required to underline past tense verbs in the text. They could then repeat the task with a different partner. In the example provided in the Appendix, there is an explicit focus on past tense verbs, and it is extended to having students produce their own sentences. Writing ensures that students focus more on accuracy and are more likely to process the language being used (Manchon, 2011). One of the key benefits of the *Integrated input output framework for TBLT* is the repetition that is involved in the focus on language, with implicit introduction, followed by deepening levels of explicit focus on form. Vocabulary researchers claim that a word must be encountered 15-20 times before it is "known" by learners (Nation, 2008), and grammar also must be used repeatedly for use to become automatized (DeKeyser, 2007). It is also worth noting that the ultimate aim of a TBLT approach is to have students use language for successful communication, regardless of how they do it, and the lesson presented is not intended to focus on a specific grammar point. While grammatical accuracy is not ignored, the focus of a task is on meaning (Ellis, 2003; Nunan 2004). By the end of the output post-task, students will have encountered a potentially useful grammatical structure both implicitly and explicitly on several occasions, increasing the opportunities for uptake.

The sample task in the appendix has been used with Japanese high school, university and adult EFL learners of a range of abilities from false beginners to intermediate learners (CEFR A2-B2). Although the language in the input task may be challenging for lower level students, students are able to adapt the output task to their own proficiency level.

## Conclusion

The Willis (1996) framework has proven to be popular among practitioners and teachers, providing a flexible and practical method of implementing TBLT. While the original framework did allow for input-based tasks such as reading excerpts (Willis, 1996; Willis & Willis, 2007), a common misconception of TBLT has been that it is an approach focussed primarily on students speaking and communicating in pairs or small groups. This has led to the misguided criticism that it does not offer any opportunity for the deliberate introduction of new language, and often calls on students to perform output-based tasks that they may have little linguistic knowledge to successfully accomplish (Sato, 2009; Swan, 2005). Ellis (2009, 2013) and Long (2016) have both refuted this criticism by highlighting the role of input-based tasks in the language classroom. We believe that the *Integrated input output framework for TBLT* aids teachers attempting to implement TBLT in difficult contexts by providing a clear means of maintaining a task-based approach, while deliberately introducing language that students can use in a subsequent output task.

The framework outlined is not without limitations. Many teachers are working in contexts with limited time and resources available to plan and prepare materials, and while it may be relatively simple to develop a speaking task based on a reading that is found in a textbook, it is a far more demanding process

to develop readings that will deliberately introduce language and structures that can facilitate subsequent production in output tasks. Although this time constraint may be a serious issue, we believe that investment of time creating these materials will ultimately benefit the learners, and that teachers can gradually build up a bank of readings that can be adapted to fit with different output tasks. This framework also does not solve the more contentious issue of how to decide on the content and ordering of tasks, and how tasks should be assessed in a given language course. Although TBLT researchers suggest that successful task completion should be the criteria for assessment, in many contexts, teachers are required to give a specific numerical grade, and also to differentiate numerically between levels of performance among students. One possible way that assessment might be carried out for the task in the Appendix would be to create a structured speaking test focussing on the goal of talking about personal experiences. For example, a student could be provided with the beginnings of sentences as prompts "When I was an elementary school student…" and be required to finish these sentences by speaking for one minute about their own experiences. The teacher could then give a small piece of personal information and require the student to ask follow-up questions. A small-scale speaking test using such sentence prompts would provide a reasonable amount of language for a teacher to assess, with the aid of a speaking rubric. Finally, research has shown how task design and task implementation can vary significantly depending on the teacher (Rivers, 2008), and therefore designing materials based on the framework may still leave issues with how tasks are used in the classroom.

While we do not claim to have solved all of the problems facing teachers who wish to implement TBLT in their classes, our hope is that the framework outlined above gives teachers the confidence to create materials that will allow for the deliberate input of language, followed by opportunities for language use while maintaining a task-based approach to language teaching. We acknowledge a huge debt of gratitude to Jane Willis, who presented *A Framework For Task-Based Learning* in such a clear and logical way, and helped countless teachers understand not only the theory behind the approach, but also how to practically begin delivering lessons with tasks as the central component.

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# Appendix

## Example Lesson Plan for the Integrated Input Output Task Based Framework

**Lesson goal: Students can talk about personal experiences and ask questions about classmates' experiences.**

**Input Task cycle**

***Pre-task Part 1. Discussion.*** With a partner, discuss the following questions. What is the most unusual thing you have eaten? When did you eat it? Where did you eat it? How was it?

***Pre-task Part 2. Pre-reading.*** You are going to read about Michel Lotito, a man who became famous for eating many strange things in his lifetime. Before you read, work with a partner to guess which of the following things he ate. Circle the things that you think he ate.

  A wine glass
  A lightbulb
  A bicycle
  A bed
  A television
  A shopping cart
  A computer
  A small airplane

***Main Task. Reading.*** Read the article, and then check your answers from "Pre-task Part 2".

  Michel Lotito is in the *Guinness Book of World Records* for having the strangest diet in the world. He could eat metal and glass without injuring his stomach. In fact, in his lifetime, Lotito ate many strange items made from metal and glass.

  Lotito was born in France in 1950. He didn't realise that he could eat strange things until he was about 16 years old. One day, while having a drink, the glass broke and he started chewing on it, and swallowed it. He found out that he could eat glass! Actually, Lotito had a medical condition called "Pica", which causes people to want to eat strange things. Some people who have Pica eat things like paper, chalk, ice, soil, or even metal and glass. Of course, eating such things can be very dangerous, but for some reason, Lotito was able to eat such things without any harm to his body.

  As he grew older, Lotito started to eat more and more strange things, and often he appeared in public and on TV while eating wine glasses, screws, lightbulbs and many other things. In 1978, he participated in a fair in Canada and ate a bicycle within 12 days, beating the world record for the fastest time to eat an entire bike! Eventually, he became well-known in France and around the world due to his strange diet. Over four decades, he ate seven televisions, fifteen shopping carts, two beds, a computer, and many other things. His mouth was the normal human size of course, so in order to eat all of these things, he would break them up into small parts, and slowly eat each part. To help him digest the metal, he also drank a lot of mineral oil and water while eating.

  In his most amazing feat, he ate an entire four-seater, Cessna airplane. He began eating it in 1978, and it took him two years to finish!

  Doctors who examined Lotito's stomach after eating these strange items said that his stomach lining was twice as thick as a normal stomach, and he had unusually strong digestive juices. These two things probably helped him to eat these strange things, but meant that he couldn't eat some normal, soft foods. Weirdly, bananas made him feel sick. He also couldn't eat hard boiled eggs

  In 2007, Lotito died of natural causes, after a life of eating around nine tons of metal!

### *Post-task Part 1. Vocabulary Focus*

Match the vocabulary with the definition:

| | |
|---|---|
| injure | finally; in the end |
| medical condition | to join an event |
| appear | a sickness or illness that someone has |
| participate | to hurt yourself or other people |
| eventually | to be seen |

### *Post-task Part 2. Language Focus*

Re-arrange the words below to make sentences:
1.   well-known world he became France and around in the.
2.   he the started glass chewing on it broke and.
3.   finish took it years him two to.
4.   eggs he eat hard-boiled couldn't.

Now make two sentences about things that you did in the past.
1.   _____
2.   _____

## Output Task cycle

***Pre-task Part 1. Listening.*** Listen to your teacher who will tell you four things from their past. When they are finished, make a note about each thing in the spaces below.

1.   _____        3.   _____

2.   _____        4.   _____

***Pre-task Part 2. Planning.*** With your partner, think of a question for each thing in "Pre-task Part 1". Write the question in the space below, and then get ready to ask your teacher.

1.   _____        3.   _____

2.   _____        4.   _____

***Main task Part 1. Preparation.*** On the timeline below, make a note of four things that happened to you in your life. For now, just write one simple sentence about it and when it happened. For example: "When I was 15, I started learning the guitar".

***Main task Part 2. Speaking.*** Work with your partner. Take turns to tell each the events from your timelines. Mark your partners events on the timeline below, and then ask at least two follow-up questions about each thing. Then, repeat with two more partners. Find the most interesting experience that your classmates had.

***Main Task Part 3. Report.*** Choose the most interesting story that you heard. Ask more follow-up questions to your partner, then make a short report in the space below. Finally, get ready to tell the class.

***Post-task Part 1. Sentence completion.*** Look at the sentences below. Change the verb in brackets to the past tense to complete the sentences.

1. When I was in primary school, I (start) _____ playing the piano.
2. In junior high school, I (write) _____ a song with my band.
3. Last year, I (go) _____ to Finland for a vacation.
4. Yesterday, I (use) _____ my phone for five hours.

***Post-task Part 2. Speaking.*** Now, make sentences that are true for you by using the first part of each sentence (before the comma).