

# An Overview on Task-based Language Teaching

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## Abstract

**Task-based Language Teaching (hereafter TBLT) is a further development of Communicative Language Teaching (henceforth CLT) that many communicative activities have appeared in communicative classroom teaching. TBLT leads students to learn English by fulfilling a real-task in order to improve their ability of using English. It emphasizes on learner-centered. This paper introduces the theoretical background, definition of TBLT and task, characteristics of TBLT, design and implementation, application, advantages and disadvantages and prospect of TBLT in China.**

## Keywords

**Task; Theoretical Basis; Characteristic; Application; Prospect.**

## 1. Introduction

The traditional teaching method is mainly teacher-centered cramming teaching. Students are led by teachers, and they only passively accept knowledge without actively discovering, thinking and solving problems. This teaching method is relatively monotonous, often leading to students without knowing its meaning. Such classroom teaching does not fully realize the dominant function of language application in foreign language teaching, which is not conducive to stimulating students thinking quality and motivation, seriously affects students' comprehensive ability to use language, makes students feel tired of English learning and even lose interests in it. In the 1970s, communicative learning methods emphasizes teaching purposes should be made according to different learning needs, advocates communicative teaching process, combining the teaching process and cultivate communicative ability in teaching so as to create language environment as far as close to the real foreign language and communication, become one of the main methods of foreign language teaching. Since the 1980s, international language teaching method researchers have shifted their focus from communicative approach to task-based teaching approach.

Task-based language teaching method is a foreign language teaching method gradually developed in the 1980s and widely accepted by applied linguists and foreign language teaching practitioners. It is also a foreign language teaching method recommended and advocated by the middle school English curriculum standards formulated by the Ministry of Education. The Outline of English Teaching in Colleges of Higher Learning published in 2000 clearly stated that "classroom teaching should be student-oriented and teachers as facilitator and guide, which is a change of the teacher-centered teaching mode, and pay attention to cultivating students' learning ability and research ability [6].

Task-based teaching method organizes teaching with abundant tasks. In the process of task performance, the learning methods of participation, experience, interaction, communication and cooperation are used to give learners plenty of opportunities to present their own cognitive ability and mobilize their existing target language resources. In practice, perceiving, understanding and applying the target language, learning from "doing" and "using", embodies the more advanced teaching concept, it is an effective foreign language teaching method worth popularizing. But what is the definition of the task-based language teaching method? What are the tasks in the task-based teaching methods? What is the nature of the task? Is the task equal

to a normal exercise? How are the tasks organized in class? What are the advantages and disadvantages of the TBLT? What are the application scope of task-based teaching method? What is the development prospect of TBLT in China? In order to make the TBLT fully and effectively applied in the senior high school, as a middle school foreign language teaching practitioner, we must have a clear understanding of these problems. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss these problems in depth.

## 2. Definition and Characteristics

### 2.1. Definition of TBLT

Task-based language teaching is a further development of communicative language teaching which refers to an approach based on the use of tasks as the core components of instruction in language. It has stressed the importance to combine form-focused teaching with communication focused teaching. It is a language teaching method emphasizing "learning by doing" emerging in the 1980s. It is a further development of communicative teaching method, which has attracted wide attention in the world language education circle. This teaching theory of "doing things with language" has been gradually introduced into the basic English classroom teaching in China, which is a trend of the teaching reform of foreign language curriculum in China. This theory holds that mastering the language is mostly the result of using the language in activities, rather than the result of simply training language skills and learning language knowledge. In teaching activities, teachers should design specific and operable tasks around specific communication and language projects. Students can complete the tasks through various language activities such as expression, communication, negotiation, explanation and inquiry, so as to achieve the purpose of learning and mastering the language.

New English Curriculum Standards advocates the task-based language teaching mode that is to make the students under the teachers' instruction by perception, practice, participation and cooperation and so on to achieve the goals of the tasks and to experience the success. It is important to make the students adjust their affections and strategies in the learning process in order to generate the positive learning attitude to advance the language application ability in reality.

### 2.2. Definition of a Task

Candlin regard task as "a group of problem-oriented activities that the group involves the cognitive and communicative processes of learners, explore known and new information in a collective form, and accomplish an expected or temporary goal in the social context".[2].

Peter Skehan think that in task-based language teaching, meaning dominates and some issues need to be addressed through communication; It is comparable to activities in real life. The purpose of classroom teaching is to make students complete the tasks given by the teacher. The teaching beliefs is that task can trigger the natural acquisition mechanism of learners, develop the interlanguage, and cultivate their language ability.

Nunan defines communicative tasks as various learning activities in the classroom where learners understand, process, output, or communicate in the target language. In these learning activities, learners are focusing on expressing meaning rather than practicing language forms. Bygate, Skehan and Swain define a task as: " A task is an activity that requires learners to use language to achieve a certain purpose, emphasizing the expression of meaning in the process of the activity.[3] Ellis said: " Tasks are language activities that mainly express meaning.[4]" Tasks can be divided into real-world tasks and pedagogic tasks.[5].

Skehan believes that task-based teaching has three modes: (1) structure based, which emphasizes the application of electronic language forms for task execution, and requires the use of a special Language construct when completing a task; (2) communicative-driven,

emphasizing the authenticity and naturalness of the task. The task should not be designed for a particular Language construct, and the implementation of the task should not emphasize language norms and become the performance of language construct. The needs of the real world should become the driving force of the task, so as to promote the process of Language acquisition in an interactive way; (3) Intermediate position, which not only emphasizes the authenticity and naturalness of tasks, but also emphasizes that the design of tasks should take into account the practice of language forms to increase the development of Interlanguage. A balance should be achieved between the two features.

### 2.3. Characteristics of TBLT

Task based Language Teaching emphasizes the language teaching method of "learning by doing". Use language to do things, in order to achieve the goal of mastering language and learning to use it. In order to complete tasks, students focus on meaning and try to mobilize various language and nonverbal resources to co-construct meaning, in order to achieve the goal of solving certain communication problems. The selection of teaching tasks, as well as the organization, implementation, and evaluation of classroom teaching, all revolve around tasks. The characteristic of task-based teaching is to focus on teaching interactivity, authenticity, and process.

Willis believes that the operational process of task-based teaching is divided into three stages: pre-task, task cycle, and post task. In the pre-task stage, the teacher introduces the topic and the operation methods of the task to the students. In the task loop, students perform tasks assigned by the teacher and process the results of the tasks to prepare for the task completion report. In the post task stage, the teacher summarizes and summarizes language problems that arise from students completing tasks or task completion results, and organizes students to practice and practice language as needed. Nunan also summarizes the characteristics of task-based teaching as follows: (1) An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language. (2) Introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation. (3) The provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language, but also on the learning process itself. (4) An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning. (5) An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activation outside the classroom.

## 3. Design and Implementation

The task-based language teaching has the following educational principles: providing teaching scaffolding; establish task chains; recycling; meaningful learning; active learning; integration; reflection; copying to creation. When designing tasks, you can focus on authenticity and tasks are learned by doing.

Willis proposed three stages, namely pre-task: teacher learning: introduce the topic and tasks to students, and provide them with time for reflection and task cycle: students use the language knowledge they have learned to the best of their ability to complete communication tasks. The task cycle consists of three parts: task, conception, and reporting. The language knowledge points are also known as the post task stage. The teaching steps of TBLT are as follows:

- (1) The teacher introduces the task, presents the knowledge required to complete the task, introduces the requirements of the task and the steps to implement it.
- (2) Task cycle: One person, in groups of two, performs various tasks, and the group reports the completion of the tasks to the class.
- (3) Post task: composed of two parts: analysis (students analyze and evaluate the execution of tasks by other groups) and practice (students practice language difficulties under the guidance of the teacher).

#### 4. Advantages and Disadvantages

Through reading various text and paper about the task-based language teaching I found that some obvious advantages of TBLT are the following: (1) Task -based teaching offers the opportunity for 'natural' learning inside the classroom; (2) It emphasizes meaning over form but can also cater for learning form; (3) It is intrinsically motivating; (4) It is compatible with a learner -centered educational philosophy; (5) It can be used alongside a more traditional approach.

However, it also has some disadvantages: (1) Limitations in task-based language teaching itself. Limitations in task-based language teaching itself cause it is difficult to implement objectively, for example, it is difficult to guarantee the authenticity of the income of the tasks and control the variability in teaching process. (2) The pressure that teachers facing. Advocating task-based language teaching is a completely new issue for the teachers. Compared with traditional language teaching, it involves changing the teaching material, teaching pattern, learning pattern, teaching content, evaluation and so on. So changing traditional teaching idea is not the only pressure that teachers facing, which includes changing teachers' roles, the challenge of knowledge structure and designing tasks. All of them are the factors that affect implementing task-based language teaching mode.

#### 5. The Scope of Application of TBLT

Task-based language teaching is that students learn the language by using the language to complete a series tasks. Its application scope is very wide, from primary school to middle school to high school and even university classroom can use the task-based language teaching method, even not only limited to one subject, but also other subjects such as Chinese, mathematics, chemistry etc. The following are specific application of task-based language teaching method in English teaching and learning: (1) Design tasks: Teachers can design various tasks related to subjects, so that students can learn knowledge and skills in the process of completing tasks, such as research, experiment, writing, discussion, evolution, etc. (2) Social situation: teachers can guide students to carry out tasks by setting up social contexts. For example, through role-playing, games and other ways to make students better understand and use what they have learned. (3) Higher level of students participation: the task-based language teaching method focuses on students' active learning, so students have higher participation, which can present and develop their initiative and enthusiasm better. (4) Help students to explore independently: the task-based language teaching method enables students to think and explore actively. Teachers should play the role of instructors and guides, stimulate students' interest in learning, and let students explore independently. (5) Reflect comprehensiveness: Task-based language teaching method not only focuses on the learning of subject knowledge, but also focuses on the cultivation of students' comprehensive ability, such as information search, analysis, problem solving, etc.

#### 6. Prospect of TBLT in Second Language Teaching and Learning in China

The promotion of task-based teaching method in China has effectively corrected the culture of foreign language learning in which input is the main focus, presenting a new face to foreign language teaching, and fundamentally improving learners' language proficiency. Its introduction has important reference significance for changing the traditional English classroom teaching in China. However, the unique learning conditions and environment of learning English as a foreign language in our country are different from the specific environment and learning conditions in which many English learners in Western countries learn English as a second language. In addition, the problems and limitations of task-based

teaching itself make it necessary for us to not blindly imitate task-based teaching, but to grasp its essence and absorb its essence.

In the current foreign language teaching classroom, teachers have to some extent used some task-based teaching, but there are still some practical problems that need to be solved to systematically and comprehensively carry out task-based teaching. The design and implementation of tasks also put forward high requirements for teachers. Teachers should not only be the designers and organizers of group activities and tasks, but also the guides and instigators of activities. As long as we understand the task correctly. Our English classroom will surely glow with vitality through the use of a type of teaching method and reasonable utilization.

## 7. Conclusion

TBLT is indeed an effective way because its teaching target is in accordance with the ultimate goals of language acquisition which is for communication in L2 in the real world. Meanwhile, a great effort should also be invested into research on TBLT to make it a more standard, systematic and practical teaching methodology in language teaching classroom.

But any teaching method has its own focus and is not perfect. Therefore, it is necessary to implement different teaching methods suitable for specific scenarios based on different teaching content. In the implementation process, teachers need to change traditional teaching concepts and methods, establish new teaching models, transform the traditional "scholar centered" teaching method into "learner centered and transform teaching method mainly based on learner participation. And change the traditional "cramming" and "closed" teaching methods, design a task-based teaching method based on individual and social needs, emphasize the central position of learners in the classroom, and focus on enhancing their hands-on and practical abilities. This can fully mobilize learners' learning enthusiasm and initiative, encourage independent thinking, and cultivate learners' innovative awareness to maximize their potential.

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