

# Teaching English Reading to EFL Students in Grade Nine: A Task-based Language Teaching

Jiaying Bai

China West Normal University, Nanchong, 637000, China

## Abstract

Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT), emerging in the 1980s, is a new type of language teaching approach emphasizes 'learning by doing', focusing on the student's main status, and achieving the teaching goal through the assistance of teachers. In the first part of this article, brief introductions of TBLT, tasks and the teaching principles are respectively given. In the second part, guided by three of the teaching principles of TBLT proposed by Nunan, including learning to communicate through interaction in the target language, focusing on the learning process and attaching importance to the learner's own personal experiences, a reading teaching plan for the grade nine students is presented. Learners are inspired to discover rules by experiencing language, and use the target language to communicate and solve problems in the process. Under the guidance of TBLT in this reading class on tea culture, we can find that during the most of the time in class, students can not only perform communication actively about tea topic but also perceive more related linguistic knowledge and consolidate reading skills in the process of completing a series of tasks independently or in cooperative ways. Thereby, the student-centered principle can be realized.

## Keywords

TBLT; Reading Teaching; Student-centeredness.

## 1. Introduction

Reading plays a crucial role in English learning and should be emphasized by English teachers in language teaching. With the gradual deepening of the reform of English teaching in junior high schools, The New English Curriculum Standards advocates teachers to pay attention to students' language practice and cultivate their ability to use the language. Nowadays, the task-based teaching approach has witnessed a tremendous growth of research since it was firstly advanced. It advocates the concept of student-centeredness and encourages teachers to issue tasks from easy to difficult, so that students can deepen their understanding of the content of the articles in the sense of accomplishment of completing the tasks, thus improving students' comprehensive English literacy in the teaching process and helping them to get the desired grades. In a word, TBLT conforms to the requirements of the new curriculum reform.

## 2. Literature Review

This part mainly provides a brief introduction of TBLT (Task-based language Teaching). It is divided into three parts which include the definitions of TBLT, the definition of task, and the teaching principles of TBLT.

### 2.1. Definitions of TBLT

Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) seems to be a broadly defined approach to language teaching research and practice which uses task as a unit of analysis for research and practice in communicative language teaching. The emergence of the TBLT is connected to what became

known as the 'Bangalore Project' [2] initiated in 1979 and completed in 1984 [3]. Willis [4] represents TBLT as a logical development of Communicative Language Teaching since it draws in several principles. Skehan, P. & Pauline Foster [5] noted that how to pay attention to form without weakening the communicative nature of the task is significant. Additionally, TBLT has been situated within experiential 'learning by doing' educational philosophy espoused by Dewey and others [6] [7]. Just as Nunan [1] noted that "The key point is that it is the learner, not the teacher, who is doing the work. This is not to suggest that there is no place at all for teacher input, explanation and so on, but that such teacher-focused work should not dominate class time." Similarly, Cheng [8] also pointed that the main responsibility of the teacher is to design tasks, provide necessary materials, put forward activity requirements, and monitor the completion of tasks by students.

Drawing on SLA research on interaction and negotiation, TBLT proposes that the task is the pivot point for stimulation of focused conversation, negotiation of meaning and input-output practice. Thereby, in the task-based language teaching class, language teachers should design some tasks to help students learn in an interactive and active way.

## 2.2. Definitions of Tasks

TBLT proposes the notion of 'task' as a central unit of planning and teaching. Although definitions of tasks vary in TBLT, there is a commonsensical understanding: for example, Long [6] and Long & Crookes [9] emphasizes the 'non-technical everyday, real world' interpretation of task as any purposeful activity done in the classroom or workplace; distinguishing this from pedagogic tasks, as an important construct for needs analysis. Besides, pedagogic tasks have generally been defined in terms of common criteria in tasks used in research and in proposals for task-based syllabuses. Five main characteristics of the "task" proposed by Skehan [10] got widely agreed:

- 1) meaning is primary;
- 2) learners are not given other people's meaning to regurgitate;
- 3) there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities;
- 4) task completion has some priority;
- 5) the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome.

That is to say, the task not only focuses on how students use language to communicate information but also emphasizing the form of language used. Besides, students should focus on how to complete the task, and the criterion for evaluation is whether the task is successfully completed.

## 2.3. Teaching Principles of TBLT

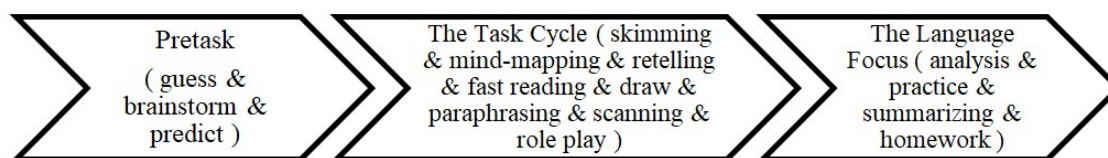
With the development of TBLT, different researchers hold their various perspectives to the principles of TBLT. After absorbing the main characteristics of the teaching principles, David Nunan [1] proposed that task-based language teaching has strengthened the following principles and practices pedagogically:

- 1) A needs-based approach to content selection.
- 2) An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language.
- 3) The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation.
- 4) The provision of opportunities for learners to focus not only on language but also on the learning process itself.
- 5) An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning.
- 6) The linking of classroom language learning with language use outside the classroom.

Thus, the conclusion can be drawn from above that TBLT focuses on students' needs, communicative interaction, authenticity of language materials, experiential learning, learners' personal experiences, and correlation between classroom language learning and extracurricular language usage [11]. That is to say, when doing a teaching plan designing, it is significant to obey these principles as a teaching procedure consisting of varied tasks which integrates elements including linguistic structure, and communicative meaning can make the learning process is more active.

### 3. Application of TBLT in Reading

Recommended by procedures provided by Willis [4], namely pretask, the task cycle, post-task, an English reading teaching to EFL students in grade nine was designed (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Teaching Procedure

Accordingly, this part mainly introduces and explores how to apply three of teaching principles raised from Nunan [1] of TBLT into the teaching plan, namely, learning to communicate through interaction in the target language, provision of opportunities for learners to focus not only on language but also on the learning process itself, as well as an enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences.

#### 3.1. Emphasis on Communicating through Interaction in the Target Language

Based on the second principle put forward by Nunan, Richards & Rodgers [12] also notes that language learning is believed to depend on immersing students not merely in "comprehensible input" but in tasks that require them to negotiate meaning and engage in meaningful communication.

Therefore, guided by the second principle proposed by Nunan, a task would be designed to help students learn to communicate through interaction in the target language. It appeared in the last part of task cycle session. After learning the structure of a passage about the history of tea, five students in a group were launched a task, cooperating to do a report in front of class. Supposed that one of them is Jason, a foreign student from the US interested in the tea, they are inspired to make up a complete and creative conversation to share the history of tea with the information from the mind map made in the while-reading session.

The process of the reproductive task can reflect how much knowledge students have mastered and how the active interaction process is performed. Besides, the communicative situation provided enables all parties to continuously modify their own language from feedback from others, learn to use communicative strategies and cooperative principles to negotiate meaning to achieve the purpose of communication.

#### 3.2. Provision of Opportunities to Focus on both Learning Process and Language

The fourth principle of TBLT noted by Nunan [1] insists providing opportunities for learners to focus not only on language but also on the learning process itself as the language acquisition seems to be an 'organic' process [13][14].

In the learning process, the students sometimes will create their own meanings and language. To begin with, this will result in idiosyncratic 'interlanguage', but over time it will approximate more and more closely to native speaker norms as learners 'grow' into the language. Thereby, various tasks were designed for providing more opportunities by the teacher, from drawing their own mind-maps based on the reading input, practicing memorized retelling and rephrasing, to taking part in an information gap role play.

Besides, the active involvement of the learner is the central to TBLT, different from a 'transmission' approach to education in which the learner acquires knowledge passively from the teacher. Thereby, before focusing on linguistic elements of the passive voice-the 'be done' structure and analyzing elements of the linguistic system, the students would have seen, heard and spoken the target language within communicative context through retelling and paraphrasing tasks. Hopefully, compared with the traditional approaches in which linguistic elements are isolated and presented out of context, this will help the learners to perceive the usage of passive voice deeper in the process of meaning negotiation and interaction.

### 3.3. Learner's Personal Experiences as Important elements to Class Learning

The fifth principle which holds an enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning [1] seems as a further supplement to the fourth principle. This principle embodies the attention to the learner's subject status.

On the one hand, the students' knowledge background and the existing experience of language learning should be utilized as resources. Considered that they have learned about some basic knowledge about tea based on their prior knowledge, there would be little difficult in helping them explore the history of tea about how tea was invented by accident, Lu Yu and his book Cha Jing, and how tea was spread to other countries. Besides, with the help of reading skills, the input process would be more accurate and efficient. On the other hand, an emphasis on the students' active participation, cognitive feelings and experience of the learning can help them build a complete understanding of language structure, function, semantics and usage. Thereby, not only "non-task preparation activities" [15] such as brainstorming and mind maps but also the individual task rephrasing tea trade route and group task of interview designed in my teaching plan would be set for activating students and evoking the knowledge they have learned.

## 4. Conclusion

Through the implementation of several activities under the guidance of TBLT principles and a flexible framework for task-based learning recommended by Willis in this reading class, the teaching key points in this lesson were achieved through both on their performance in class and feedback after class. Besides, the students' subjective initiative and cooperative inquiry ability can also be developed correspondingly. However, time is limited in class so that maybe the students cannot get fully preparation for activities. Additionally, the problem, not all the groups can get a chance to perform, also do still exist.

In the most of time in class, nevertheless, guided by these principles in the practicum, students can not only perform communication actively but also perceive linguistic knowledge and consolidate reading skills in the process of completing a series of tasks independently or in cooperative ways. Thereby, the student-centered principle can be realized.

## References

- [1] D. Nunan: Task-Based Language Teaching. (Cambridge University Press, England 2004), p. 1.
- [2] N.S. Prabhu: Second Language Pedagogy. (Oxford University Press, England 1987).
- [3] A. Sánchez: The Task-Based Approach in Language Teaching, International journal of English studies, Vol. 4 (2009) No.1, p.39-71.

- [4] J. Willis: A Framework for Task-Based Learning. (London: Longman, England 1996).
- [5] P. Skehan, P. Foster: Cognition and Tasks, *Cognition and Second Language Instruction*, (2001) p.183-205.
- [6] M.H. Long: *Second Language Acquisition and Task-based Language Teaching*. (Wiley-Blackwell, England 2015).
- [7] V. Samuda, M. Bygate: *Tasks in Second Language Learning*. (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, U.S. 2008).
- [8] X.T. Cheng: *Task-based Language Teaching*. (Higher Education Press, China 2004).
- [9] M. Long, G. Crookes: Three Approaches to Task-based Syllabus Design, *TESOL Quarterly*, vol. 26 (1992), 27-56.
- [10] P. Skehan: *A Cognitive Approach to Language Learning*. (Oxford University Press, England 1998), p. 95.
- [11] D.F. Shu, Z.X. Zhuang: *Modern Foreign Language Teaching: Theory, Practice and Method*. (Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, China 2008).
- [12] J. Richards, T. Rodgers: *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. (Cambridge University Press, England 2008).
- [13] W. Rutherford: *Second Language Grammar: Teaching and learning*. (London: Longman, England 1987).
- [14] D. Nunan: *Second Language Teaching and Learning*. (Cengage Learning, U.S. 1999).
- [15] R. Ellis: *Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching*. (Oxford University Press, England 2003).