

The Analysis and Evaluation of Task-based Language Teaching

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Abstract

This paper attempts to present the theoretical basis, definitions, and design structure of task-based language teaching by sorting out articles related to task-based language teaching and learning. Combining the author's own understanding and thinking, this paper analyzes the advantages and disadvantages of TBLT by taking parts of the task design of Unit 5 Why do you like pandas? in the second book of Grade 7 as an example. Finally, this paper draws a conclusion: We are in the post-method era. There is no one-size-fits-all method that can be adapted to every situation. So English teachers should be ready to use the most effective aspects of the various methods according to their own style, experience and ability to adapt to the various variables in teaching.

Keywords

Task; Task-based Language Teaching; Learner.

1. Introduction

Task-based Language Teaching is a language teaching method that emerged in the 1980s and emphasizes "learning from doing". In fact, Task-based language teaching is originally one of the teaching techniques of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). However, researchers in foreign language teaching and second language acquisition have gradually focused their research on language learners' learning strategies and cognitive domains since 1980s, then the task-based language teaching gradually moved away from Communicative Language Teaching and became a new, independent language teaching method. In other words, it's also a further development of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).

The impact of task-based language teaching method on foreign language education in China is enormous. In July 2001, the Ministry of Education formulated the English Curriculum Standards, which emphasizes that English education should "be based on learners' learning interests, life experiences and cognitive levels, and advocate a learning style of experience, practice, participation, cooperation and communication and a task-based language teaching method to develop learners' comprehensive language skills". In terms of English teaching strategies, it clearly states that "this course advocates a task-based language teaching model" and requires that "teachers should avoid teaching methods that simply teach language knowledge and adopt task-based teaching as much as possible. The curriculum advocates a task-based language teaching model.

2. The Analysis of Task-based Language Teaching

2.1. Task

2.1.1. Definitions of Task

In the past 2 decades, the research on task-based language teaching has been flourishing at home and abroad. Task, as the core of TBLT, its definition and orientation are different from various perspectives.

Feng Yufang, Tang Xiaoyan (2004) summarized the different definitions of the task by different researchers (see table1).

Table 1. Different definitions of the task by different researchers

Researcher	Time	Main description
Long	1985	a task is a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward.
Richards, Platt & Weber	1985	Tasks are activities that people carry out after learning, understanding and experiencing language.
Crookes	1986	A task is a job or activity that people do with a clear purpose.
Prabhu	1987	a task is an activity which requires learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thoughts, and which allows teachers to control and regulate that process.
Breen	1989	Task... refers to a range of work plans which have the overall purpose of facilitating language learning from the simple and brief exercise type, to more complex and lengthy activities.
Nunan	1989	a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form.
J Willis	1996	Tasks are activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome.
Skehan	1996	Task...are activities which have meaning as their primary focus. Success in tasks I evaluated in terms of achievement of an outcome, and task generally bear some resemblance to real-life language use.
Lee	2000	A task is "(1) a classroom activity or exercise that has a goal that can only be achieved through the interaction of participants, an interactive mechanism for constructing and sequencing, and that puts the focus on meaningful communication; and (2) a learning of a language that requires learners to be able to understand the target language, process it, and/or express it in the target language while implementing a set of plans".
Bygate, Skehan & Swain	2001	a task is an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain a goal.
Ellis	2003	Tasks are those language use activities that are primarily aimed at expressing meaning.

Although the definitions of tasks vary among researchers, a comparison shows that most of them believe that tasks should be linked to real life and require communication to accomplish the corresponding tasks. What's more, the communicative process should focus on the meaning, which is one person conveying information appropriately through the particular task to another person, and not over-emphasize the form, language functions and so on. However, Long considers while task-based language teaching should take advantage of meaning-centered language teaching, it should also focus on form to compensate for its shortcomings. Likewise, there has to be an outcome to a task which learners do or do not achieve. The goal is to carry out the task and complete the task itself.

2.1.2. Task and Exercise

Traditional Chinese teaching is based on deductive method, focusing on knowledge-based and classroom teacher's lecture. Peter Skehan (1998) summarized this presentation-based approach as three P's, namely, presentation, practice and production. H.G. Widdowson took the 'there be' sentences teaching as an example of traditional teaching, which, he thought,

characterized by repetition and mechanical substitution to enable learners to reach the goal of language learning, is “exercise”.

Jia Zhigao summarized 4 points of the difference between task and exercise as follows:

The First point is that the task is purposeful. The ‘purpose’ here has two meanings. One is the non-instructional purpose of the task itself. The other is the non-instructional purpose that the task designer expects the learners to achieve. While exercises usually have only a pedagogical purpose.

The second point is the instructional purpose. Tasks usually produce non-verbal results and exercises always produce verbal outcomes.

The third point is that the task is open-ended, that is, there is no predetermined pattern or pathway for the performance of the task, or a uniform outcome is achieved.

The last point is that the task is interactive in nature. Tasks are usually collaborative activities where interaction can be between learners, between learners and teachers.

2.1.3. How to Design a Task

After figuring out what a task means, and distinguishing the difference between task and exercise, let’s pay attention to how to design a task. In 1987, Breen has suggested that teachers need to address four sets of questions when designing tasks:

What is the objective of the task?

What is the content of the task?

How is the task to be carried out?

In what situation is the task to be carried out?

In order to answer the above questions, we can take some specific steps in designing tasks. There are basically five steps:

Step1. Paying attention to learners’ needs, interest and abilities

What kinds of things do they like to do? What can they deal with?

Step2. Brainstorm

List some communicative tasks for topics that students may like to do. However, these tasks should have a communicative purpose and should be goal-oriented.

Step3. Choosing the list

We need to evaluate value, appropriateness according to the learners needs, interest and abilities, availability of resources, time limits. What’s more, we need to connect them with the language items.

Step4. Preparing material

At this stage, we need to prepare the materials that learners will need to perform the tasks. These tasks should involve the use of communicative language. In a word, we should be aware of the following points. First, in terms of language, the teacher should review what is happening in the task. It may include the forms of language that learners are using, the problems that learners encountered, and the forms that may need to be more involved or that were not used.

2.2. Task-based Language Teaching

2.2.1. Theory of Language

TBLT was developed based on Vygotsky's (1962) theory of language and learning. Vygotsky emphasizes the social nature of language learning and the important role of teachers and learners in facilitating individual learning. Thus, Learners discover, learn and apply knowledge through social interactions and interactions. We must change the traditional teacher-centered and form-defined view of teaching and learning, so that learners receive education in a social environment.

2.2.2. Theory of Language Learning

The core of task-based language teaching method is 'learner-centered' and 'human-centered', and its philosophical psychology is based on 'constructivism'.

Fosnot (1996) states that constructivism is a theory of knowledge and learning. The theory assumes that human cognition develops together with experience, and that knowledge is the reorganization and reconstruction of experience, a continuous process of mental construction, a process of experience, discovery and creation. Authentic and natural teaching tasks provide learners with this valuable experiential process.

2.2.3. Definition of TBLT

In a word, Task-based language teaching is a human-centered, and task-oriented teaching method that requires learners to complete a variety of real-life, learning, and work tasks in the target language, and to complete conduct purposeful communicative activities.

Specifically, teachers design purposeful communicative activities with clear goals and feasible tasks around specific communicative purposes and language items, thus involving learners, who complete the tasks by expressing, asking, explaining, communicating, negotiating and other forms of multilingual activities, thus developing learners' ability to use English.

2.2.4. Features of TBLT

Freez (1998) also generalize some features about TBLT:

- a. The focus is on the process rather than product.
- b. Basic elements are purposeful activities and tasks that emphasize communication and meaning.
- c. Learners learn language by interacting communicatively and purposefully while engaged in the activities and tasks.
 - a. Activities and tasks of a task-based syllabus are sequenced according to difficulty.
 - b. The difficulty of a task depends on a range of factors including the previous experience of the learner, the complexity of the task, the language required to undertake the task, and the degree of support available.

2.2.5. Procedure of TBLT

Feng Yufang, Tang Xiaoyan summarized 'task-based' teaching model and they thought that the tasks should be designed from simple to complex and from easy to difficult. It is composed of the following links:

First, classroom introduction: According to the conventional classroom teaching procedure, classroom teaching should be introduced first.

Second, engaging the Task: The task is presented. This is a unique aspect of task-based classroom teaching. Task-based language teaching allows learners to clarify the tasks to be completed from the very beginning of classroom teaching, and then learn language knowledge and skills driven by tasks.

This is conducive to strengthening learners' interest and motivation and putting them in an active and positive state of competence.

Third, learning new knowledge: It refers to language knowledge learning, but task-based language teaching emphasizes that knowledge teaching is related to the task. Knowledge that is necessary to complete the task and that learners lacked before.

Fourth, consolidation of new knowledge: learners are guided by the teacher to consolidate what they have learned. It is difficult for learners to apply what they have learned to real-life situations until they reach proficiency in the new knowledge.

Fifth, practice and application: this is the last part of the task-based language teaching procedure, This link is the key for learners to internalize knowledge and apply what they have learned flexibly to real life.

By combing through the above about task-based teaching, we can find that the purpose of teaching, the roles of learners and teachers, and the use of teaching resources have all changed dramatically compared with the traditional English teaching. Learners are transformed from listeners to participants in the classroom, taking control of their own language use. Teachers are transformed from traditional classroom leaders to task designers and facilitators. Teaching resources are no longer limited to textbooks, but rather a variety of teaching tools are used in the activities to assist learners in completing the tasks. This demonstrates that the task-based language teaching method is always learner-centered and intended to develop learners' overall language skills.

3. The Evaluation of TBLT

3.1. Advantages of TBLT

From the above specific analysis of tasks and task-based language teaching, the advantages of task-based language teaching over traditional teaching are very prominent. Here are parts of the task design of Unit 5 "Why do you like pandas?" in the second book of Grade 7.

In this unit, 'Why...? Because...' sentence patterns are the focus of this lesson. The teacher sets the task situation: the zoo is looking for a manager to form the zoo management team. Since a zoo manager has to know the animals in depth, let's ask all the applicants to use their talents to get the job! The teacher then plays the role of the interviewer and organizes learners to work with each other to form cooperative teams that will participate in the interview. The team members discuss the animal they want to present and combined with the structure of 'Why...? Because...', and think about how to use and answer questions to get the job.

Firstly, this task is realistic and natural, which can leave a deep impression on the learners so that it can receive better teaching effects. This task gives learners an authentic situation where they are interviewed for a job in animal management and can stimulate their interest and enthusiasm in communication. At the same time, the task is close to real life, the animal topic is relatively familiar to learners, so it can also activate their previous knowledge and experience and make them have something to say.

Secondly, in this task, language knowledge and language skills are naturally combined in the process of completing tasks. 'Why...? Because...' Sentence patterns and communicative skills are integrated so that it can develop learners' comprehensive language use skills. What's more, learning in such communicative activities can develops learners' interpersonal, thinking, decision-making and adaptive skills, which is good for their overall development.

Thirdly, in task-based language teaching, there are a large number of group or pair activities, where everyone has his or her own task to complete. Working in groups allows for better teaching to all learners, which provides more equitable opportunities for each student to use the language, promotes active participation in language communication activities, and inspires their imagination and creative thinking, which is beneficial to the development of learners' subjective role.

Finally, in this task, each student has the opportunity to think independently under the guidance of the teacher. Opportunities for active participation make it easy to stay motivated to learn and develop good study habits. Learners work in groups, come up with their own ideas, and be inspired by other's thoughts. Their thoughts are diversified and innovative thinking is promoted.

3.2. Disadvantages of TBLT

Although task-based language teaching provides authentic, communicatively meaningful task situations, it is conducive to stimulating learners' interest in learning and developing their ability to use English in an integrated manner. However, there are still problems that cannot be ignored in the actual teaching process of TBLT. On the other hand, this also supports the necessity of English learning activity outlook.

Concept confusion.

As the author summarized earlier in the article, the definition of task is not clear at home and abroad, and each researcher has his or her own perspective and viewpoint. As a result, teachers were also confused about whether the concepts were strictly aligned, for example, what is a 'task', 'real meaning', 'concrete outcome', etc. It is often the case that some teachers use Task 1, Task 2 to represent teaching sessions in the classroom, which in turn leads to questions from the audience: Are these tasks? The lack of clarity on what a task is suggests that the concept is too rigid and not fundamentally focused on the effectiveness of task in promoting learner development.

Teaching focus.

TBLT emphasizes the use of language, that is, 'learning by doing, learning by using'. As a result, learning is not as efficient as it could be, and the ultimate effect of teaching is not satisfactory. Although TBLT also proposes to focus on form, which is theoretically aware of the importance of language form, it overemphasizes the communicative and realistic nature of the tasks, and in actual teaching, learners are more autonomous and teachers are more permissive and do not provide enough guidance and assistance to learners, which easily leads to in real class, learners' autonomy is too much, and teachers' guidance is not sufficient to help learners learn, which may lead to the problem of using rather than learning.

Teaching assessment.

In TBLT, assessment is not a necessary part of teaching. Long (2015) proposed that the assessment of TBLT should be 'task-based, criterion-referenced performance tests'. Therefore, TBLT focuses on the process of task completion and the outcome of task, and assessment does not play a role in the learning process, that is to say, assessment and learning are separated to some extent. However, the fact is that no outcome of a language activity can be achieved without the process of moving from language input to the internalization and transfer of knowledge and skills, and the process of pre-task preparation and task completion is often more important than the final outcomes.

The three most common problems that teachers face when designing a lesson with task-based language teaching are that they obsess over the accuracy of the task concept, fail to balance the meaning and form of the language, and ignore the process of task completion, leading to the separation of teaching and assessment. This is also where task-based language teaching, as an 'old' teaching method, conflicts with contemporary teaching concepts.

3.3. TBLT and English Learning Activities Outlook

3.3.1. English Learning Activities Outlook

In order to achieve the goal of developing and enhancing learners' key competence, English teaching needs to change from a teaching model that focuses on transferring knowledge and developing skills to a new teaching model that is led by themes, supported by discourse and activities.

So how to implement English teaching, that is, how to design activities in English classroom teaching? The New English Curriculum Standard also specifies the concept of 'practicing the combination of learning and thinking and using creativity as the basis' in English learning activities. Specifically, teachers are required to design and implement teaching activities based

on different types of discourse, reflecting the integration of learning and thinking, learning and using, learning and creating, and proposing three types of activities: learning and understanding, applying and practicing, transferring and creating.

The New English Curriculum Standard put, English learning activities outlook has three dimensions, which guide learners to transition from shallow to deep thinking. First, learning and understanding. In this kind of activities, learners are expected to obtain information based on the discourse, perceive the connotation of language and its value orientation. Second, applying and practicing. It refers to the process by which learners internalize the knowledge and skills they have learned to develop their language skills. Third, transferring and creating. It is the process of using the knowledge and skills learned to creatively solve problems in unfamiliar situations and promote the transformation of abilities into competence.

In short, English learning activities outlook is not a fixed pattern of activities, but a relatively macro method to learning. The learning activity view is most often directed towards the cultivation and development of the learner's key competence.

3.3.2. The Relationship between TBLT and English Learning Activities Outlook

Task-based language teaching caught public attention in the 1980s. In 2003, China's General High School English Curriculum Standards (Experimental) (Ministry of Education, 2003) in the section of teaching suggestions has put forward the concept of task-based language teaching. After years of study and practice, the concept of task-based language teaching has been popularized in China, and a lot of experience has been accumulated. It is because of years of practical experience and in response to the shortcomings of the task-based language teaching that a more macro-level language teaching approach has been developed in China, namely English learning activities outlook. We can assume that English learning activities outlook was born out of the task-based language teaching. Until now, many scholars in China have not made a complete distinction between tasks and activities when writing articles about ELT in that these experts do not see much point in such a distinction.

4. The Enlightenment of TBLT

After the above analysis, we can find that task-based language teaching has both significant advantages and limitations that cannot be ignored. Therefore, here I present my views on these three limitations by reading and sorting through the literature, combining my own understanding.

4.1. Comply with the Big Principles, Do Not Dwell on Small Concepts

In real teaching practice, it is meaningless and unnecessary to identify tasks and activities too carefully. Activities themselves are more flexible developments of tasks, and front-line teachers usually do not distinguish between the two concepts. Instead, they design tasks or activities according to three levels: learning and understanding, applying and practicing, transferring and creating. There is no fixed model for teaching, and it is not a big deal to dwell on some small concepts in practice. However, it is important to note that the big principles of task design in teaching are the rules that teachers need to follow when designing their task or activity.

Authenticity principle.

In the task design, the input materials used in the task should come from real life, and at the same time, the scenarios and specific activities to perform the task should be as close to real life as possible.

Form/function principle.

Based on the principle of authenticity, the relationship between language form and function is made explicit so that learners can fully experience the relationship between language form and

language function, as well as the relationship between language and context in task performance, and enhance their understanding of language appropriateness.

Coherence principle

This relates to the relationship between the tasks and the steps and procedures for their implementation in the classroom, i.e., how to achieve pedagogical and logical coherence and flow in the implementation of the designed tasks.

Feasibility principle

In the task design, the issue of its operability in the classroom environment should be considered, and classroom tasks with too many links and overly complicated procedures should be avoided as much as possible.

Practicality principle

Task designers should create conditions for individual student activities as much as possible, using limited time and space to provide maximum opportunities for student interaction and communication.

Interest principle

One of the advantages of the task-based teaching method is that it effectively stimulates learners' motivation through interesting communicative activities in class and makes them actively participate in learning.

4.2. Design Semi-controlled Tasks Appropriately, Focus on Meaning and Form

Theoretically, task-based language teaching focuses on both language meaning and language form, but in practice, it is difficult to balance both in the design of tasks, which are prone to let learners complete the task freely and ignore the language form. Therefore, the author thinks it is necessary and practically meaningful to design some semi-controlled tasks appropriately. The teacher can control the form of the language used by the learners, or consciously ask questions related to language knowledge or form to draw the learners' attention and thinking. As mentioned above about the task of designing an interview for a zoo manager, in which the teacher designed the question using 'Why' and asked learners to think about how to respond using 'Because', such a way facilitates the learning of language knowledge. Of course, the number and extent of such semi-controlled tasks must be controlled, after all, leaving enough space and time for learners to use the language freely is a key concern of task-based language teaching.

4.3. Pay Attention to the Task Completion Process, Use Various Assessment

Task-based language teaching repeatedly emphasizes the outcome of task completion, which it considers to be the only indicator of whether learners have been successful in learning. This is clearly at odds with our current educational philosophy. The New English Curriculum Standard emphasizes that teaching should pay attention to the learning process, use a variety of assessment, play the motivating and guiding role of assessment, and promote teaching and learning with assessment.

For example, formative assessment can be used to record and evaluate learners' performance, participation, etc. in the classroom as they complete tasks, and then provide feedback to students, so that learners can adjust their learning to their own situation. Besides, teachers can use this as a basis for adjusting their teaching strategies, such as giving help to learners in need.

5. Conclusion

In fact, each method has advantages and disadvantages and was created to suit the needs of that era. As future English teachers, we should be fully aware that we are in the post-method era. There is no one-size-fits-all method that can be adapted to every situation.

Therefore, English teachers should be ready to use the most effective aspects of the various methods according to our own style, experience and ability to adapt to the various variables in teaching, such as the age of the learners, their pre-existing foundations, the size of the class, the timing and pace of the lesson, the influence of other subjects and activities, etc. The only sure way to use ELT methods is to combine theory and practice.

On the one hand, seriously study the theory of English teaching method, compare different teaching methods and processes, and master a wide variety of measures and means. On the other hand, insist on trying and verifying in teaching practice for various situations and accumulate rich practical experience. Only in this way can our teaching level be continuously improved and teaching effect be constantly improved.

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