

Study on the application of Task-based Language Teaching in English Class

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Abstract

In the late 1980s, the Ministry of Education advocated “designing certain language activities aimed at completing tasks” in professional English teaching. The revised outline in 2000 also stipulated that “more task centered and diverse teaching activities should be carried out”. In 2001, the Ministry of Education emphasized that middle school English instruction should advocate a “task-based teaching method”. As a task-centered approach to English teaching, Task-based Language Teaching has been studied and implemented by many Chinese and foreign researchers and teachers. While it is acknowledged that Task-based Language Teaching brings benefits to students and instruction, especially compared to traditional language teaching, its application to different types of real-world classroom lessons has exposed some problems. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the theoretical basis, relevant information about tasks, previous research, advantages, problems, procedures and suggestions for the implementation of Task-based Language teaching, and to express some of personal opinions to some extent.

Keywords

TBLT; Application; English Class.

1. Introduction

Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) is a foreign language teaching method with international influence that has gradually formed and developed since the 1980s. It reflects the understanding of foreign language education experts and second language acquisition research experts on foreign language education and the achievements of foreign language teaching research. It is a language teaching method widely used in the international foreign language teaching community. In addition, Task-based language teaching is a language teaching method based on the theoretical premise that “language is best learned and taught through interaction” (Pica et al., 1993). In China, while many teachers have recognized the benefits and role of TBLT, its effective implementation is still under study. This paper aims to sort out the theoretical basis, details of the task, previous studies on TBLT, advantages and challenges, procedures and suggestions. It is of interest to secondary school teachers and attempts to provide them with some new ideas for teaching English.

2. Theoretical Foundation of TBLT

According to Ellis (1999), the theoretical foundation of TBLT is input and interactionist hypothesis. This hypothesis is based on Krashen’s Acquisition or Learning Hypothesis and the Input Hypothesis as well as Long’s Interaction Hypothesis.

For Krashen, acquisition is “informal subconscious learning in a natural language environment” similar to children picking up language. In the process of acquisition, learners do not pay

attention to the form of discourse, but only pay attention to the understanding that they want to express or understand (Wang, 2001). Learning is conscious, systematic and formal. Learners learn certain rules of grammar from the instructions of their teachers and from their own reading, and then they are able to realize and talk about the rules. He also pointed out that people's ability to use a second language comes mainly from acquired knowledge, not learned knowledge.

Also, Krashen (1981) believed intelligible input is an essential technique for second language learning, and language input difficulty is slightly higher than the existing level of "I". In order to comprehend the freshly entered linguistic elements, "I + 1" will rely on prior knowledge and experience, as well as contextual judgment. The so-called intelligible input is expressed as "i+1". According to Wu Peng (2001), "I" denotes a language learner's current competency level, whereas "1" denotes language knowledge that is superior to their current proficiency level. Students can not acquire comprehensible information if "I + 2" or "I + 0" appears, indicating that the language knowledge is too challenging or easy for them.

Long stressed the importance of understanding the input more. He made the point that the key to language learning is modified interaction, and that what language learners actually need are not simple language forms but rather opportunities for comprehensible input and output (Wei, 2003). In fact, the tasks of TBLT mostly embody modified interactions.

In conclusion, a theoretical basis is indispensable for a method. Anything that can be called a method is so because it has a theoretical foundation. Input and interactionist hypothesis play an important role in the emergence and development of TBLT.

3. Relevant Research of TBLT

In order to better understand TBLT, it is necessary to investigate related studies of TBLT. Task, previous research, advantages and challenges of TBLT will be discussed in the following sections.

3.1. Relevant Research of Task

TBLT was first proposed by educator John Dewey and is almost 40 years old. It is a teaching method based on the use of tasks as core units. It fully embodies the idea of student-centred learning, which takes into account the needs, interests and abilities of students. Guo Yanzhi and Guo Ruizhi (2007) pointed out that language teaching focuses on the use of language, so that students can learn knowledge and skills, complete authentic tasks, and directly train students' language ability. Therefore, the most important component of TBLT is task.

3.1.1. Definitions of "Task"

Different scholars form different definitions of "task" from different perspectives. Long (1985) defined tasks as paid or unpaid work performed by oneself or others and various things that people did in their daily lives, worked, and played from a non-linguistic perspective. Richards et al.(1986) and Ellis considered "task" from a language teaching aspect. For them, tasks refer to activities or actions that people perform after processing and understanding language, and tasks refer to language application activities centered on meaning. In addition, Nunan (1989) believed from a communicative perspective that the communicative task in language learning was a classroom communicative activity where learners employed the target language to understand, use, input language, or interact. The task focuses on the meaning of language rather than its form. Moreover, Bygate et al. thought about "task" from the aspect of learner autonomy. According to Bygate, Skehan, and Swain (2001), task means an activity that requires learners to use language to achieve their goals while emphasizing language meaning. For Willis, "task" referred to communicative activities with goals or a process of learners engaging in communication activities to achieve a specific goal. Peter Skehan (1998) summarized five

characteristics of tasks: First, tasks focus on meaning; Second, communication is crucial to a mission; Third, a task is realistic and authentic; Fourth, complementation is the first thing needed; Fifth, consequences of a task need to be assessed.

In summary, while the different definitions consist of different details, they emphasize certain things in common, such as meaning, application of language and goals. Therefore, this paper's definition of task is that "task" refers to an activity with communicative purposes which focus on the meaning of language and can help learners understand, learn and use language.

3.1.2. Components of a Task

According to Clark, Scarino, and Brownell (1994), a task consisted of four main components: a purpose, a context, a process, and a product. A purpose means ensuring that the learner has a reason for undertaking the task; A context may be real, simulated, or imagined, and involves sociolinguistic issues; A process is getting learners to use learning strategies and a product implies that there will be some form of outcome, either visible or invisible.

As an instructional task of TBLT, Jia Zhigao (2005) held the view that it should have six basic elements: purpose, content, procedure, input material, roles of students and teachers as well as context. Specifically, a teaching task should first have a purpose, which means it should have a clear goal orientation. Secondly, any task needs to be given substantial content. The performance of task content in the classroom is the specific behaviors and activities that need to be fulfilled. Third, procedure refers to the manner and steps of operation employed by the learner in the process of a certain task. Fourth, the input material refers to the auxiliary materials used or relied on during the completion of the task. Fifth, not all tasks clearly represent the roles of students and teachers, but they more or less represent the characteristics of the roles of students and teachers. Finally, context refers to the environment or context in which the task was designed and implemented, involving the language communication environment and the organizational form of the classroom task.

In short, to design a task, teachers need to consider the above components. First, they provide a framework and direction for teachers. Second, considering components can guarantee the quality of the task to some extent

3.2. Previous Research of TBLT

Previous studies on TBLT can be divided into empirical studies and literature reviews. The former focuses on the application of TBLT to practical instructions. Almost all the literature review essays focus on TBLT related issues.

Most empirical research essays emphasize the use of TBLT in real-world education. Specifically, many studies have examined how TBLT is applied in college classrooms and oral classes. Xie Yuanhua and Chen Qiuli (2019) investigated the understanding and classroom implementation of TBLT concepts among college English teachers. Differences in the understanding and implementation of task-based teaching principles were found among college English teachers, based on a questionnaire survey of 163 teachers and quantitative and qualitative analysis of 22 classroom hours of classroom recordings. Matt Kessler, Ian Solheim, and Mengfei Zhao (2021) investigated a persistent complaint of TBLT questioning the applicability of TBLT to curricula in English as a Foreign Language settings and, in particular, whether realistic tasks could be created for EFL learners. The authors investigated the Chinese EFL environment, looking at students enrolled in two universities in various provinces, to better study the issue. Guo Wenqi (2016) conducted a semester of teaching practice on 64 vocational college students. Based on Willis's three-stage task-based teaching and incorporating the actual situation of vocational college students, the tasks are divided into six stages, and the teaching activities are organized according to the teaching objectives of the six stages. It was found that the students had a relatively high degree of active learning towards the task-based learning mode, and their verbal proficiency had improved to some extent.

Most of the literature review essays focus on relevant TBLT topics such as task design, TBLT principles, and TBLT advantages. Rahim Najjari (2014) researched two barriers in his paper *Implementation of Task-based Language Teaching in Iran: Theoretical and Practical Considerations*. According to him, the nature of innovation, the appropriateness and legitimacy of using current linguistically oriented material for communicative purposes are the main reasons influencing the development of TBLT. In addition, Rahim specifically placed TBLT into the context of Iran and used the literature research method and thinking method to discuss dilemma, resolution, pedagogy and models. Li Guangfeng (2015) mentioned background, theoretical basis, principles, implementation and trend of TBLT in China. In her opinion, the trend of TBLT development in China is mainly manifested in the following four aspects: systematic introduction and study of TBLT abroad; continued improvement in the level of localization of task-based teaching; promoting the effective integration of task-based teaching theory and practice; strengthening interdisciplinary research on TBLT. In *Task-based Language Teaching: Theory and Practice*, Rod Ellis (2020) mentioned five parts. Section 1 outlines the history of task-based research and practice, as well as the definition of tasks and task features. Section 2 presents various theoretical perspectives affecting task-based research, including cognitive interactionism, psycholinguistics, socio-cultural, psychological, and educational perspectives, as well as research findings supporting each perspective. Part 3 focuses on practice and focuses on the principles of task sequencing and selection, task-based curriculum design, method selection at each stage of course implementation, and an overview of task-based assessment. Section 4 narrows the scope and examines the effectiveness of task-based teaching compared to other language teaching methods at the procedural level. This book concludes with Part 5, which revisits the issues raised in Part 1, evaluates the criticisms commonly used by "insiders" and "outsiders" in TBLT research, and provides recommendations for future research.

In summary, the advantages and dilemmas of TBLT have been investigated and suggested. However, feasible and practical measures for teachers to practice are still lacking. Also, while TBLT has indicated the direction of English teaching, how to use TBLT effectively and correctly remains a problem for educators. More importantly, TBLT is frequently studied by researchers in speaking and writing classes, while experiments and reflections on TBLT in grammar and vocabulary classes still need to be taken seriously. To inject new energy into Chinese education, research on TBLT requires more attention and effort.

3.3. Advantages of TBLT

The advantages of TBLT are clear. First, the combination of linguistic knowledge and communication opportunities is more effective in improving students' fluency and accuracy in language use than simply teaching grammar. Second, the active participation of learners in language activities is closely related to their improvement in language proficiency. Third, TBLT supplies a genuine need to use language to communicate and creates an environment where students are free from language control and free to exchange ideas. TBLT greatly balances form-focused teaching with communication-focused teaching. Language mastery is achieved through learners actively participating in attempts to communicate in the target language (Yuan, 2002). Fourth, tasks-completion skills promote career readiness, self-directed learning, and lifelong learning. A task requires learners to collaborate with one another, come up with a plan to achieve an outcome, tap into their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources, and report the outcome to others. In this case, all important skills for lifelong learning and workplace performance are cultivated (Huang, 2002). More importantly, TBLT emphasizes student learning and can contribute to the development of the whole person as it takes into account the needs, interests and abilities of students.

3.4. Challenges of TBLT

Despite the popularity of TBLT and its many benefits, there are unavoidable challenges. According to Murat Hismanoglu and Sibel Hismanoglu (2011), the challenges were as follows: (1) The drawbacks of TBLT rely not so much on the potential powerfulness of this type of instructional content but on problems of conducting the instruction. (2) TBLT involves a high level of creativity and dynamism on the part of the teacher; This type of teaching can be impracticable if teachers are restricted to more traditional roles or do not have the time and resources to provide task-based instruction. (3) TBLT necessitates resources beyond the textbooks and related materials generally available in foreign language classrooms. (4) Students may, at first, refuse or object to TBLT in that this type of instruction is not what many students expect and want from a language class. (5) Some learners employ the mother tongue when they face difficulty or if the group feels intolerant (6) Some individuals enhance superior communication strategies, e.g. miming and employing gestures, but get by employing just uncommon words and phrases and let others provide the more challenging language they need. (7) TBLT may give rise to the fossilization of those individuals prior to improving very far in the syntax of the target language. (8) Some learners are inclined to get caught up in making an effort to find the appropriate word, and do not worry about how it is placed into the discourse. (9) There is a danger for learners to attain fluency at the expense of accuracy.

4. The Implementation of TBLT

As an advocated method, TBLT actually brings positive influence on English instruction. Thus, many people pay more attention to how to apply it effectively in practice. This paper will point out some procedures and suggestions for the application of TBLT.

4.1. Procedures of TBLT

TBLT is task-centered. Around a task, we can divide the whole procedure into a pre-task phase, a while-task phase, and a post-task phase. The details of these three phases are discussed separately in the following sections.

4.1.1. Pre-task Phase

Four things can be done in pre-task phase: (1) Support students in performing a task similar to the task they will perform in the “while-task” phase of the lesson. (2) Ask students to observe a model of how to perform the task. (3) Engage students to non-task activities designed to prepare them to perform the task. (4) Strategically plan the main task performance (Hashemi et al., 2012).

4.1.2. While-task Phase

According to Yuan Changhuan (2002), the phase of implementing tasks consists of three parts: task, plan and report. The part task means students work in groups to complete learning tasks according to reading or listening. At the same time, teachers monitor and encourage students to participate in the tasks. The second part plan is of vital in this phase. Students prepare in spoken or written form how they completed the tasks and what the results of the tasks were. Teachers act as consultants to help them solve problems they meet. The last part is the report. Students are required to share their achievements with the whole class. Teachers are considered as hosts to pick up representatives for presentations and give feedback.

4.1.3. Post-task Phase

In the post-task phase, several alternatives are available. These have three primary pedagogical objectives: (1) Offer a chance for the activity to be repeated; (2) Promote reflection on how the task was carried out. (3) Promote attention to form, particularly those forms that the learners found challenging when they carried out the work (Hashemi et al., 2012).

4.2. Suggestions for the Implementation of TBLT

There is no doubt that TBLT can bring energy to English instructions, but how to apply it more effectively still needs to be considered. After reading many papers, this study tries to conclude some useful suggestions in common for implementing TBLT: following the principles of designing a task, adapting textbook materials to tasks, clarifying the roles of teachers and students and implementing effective assessments.

4.2.1. Following the Principles of Designing a Task

Researchers have mentioned various principles for designing a task. While the names vary, some points are common: authenticity, hierarchy, interest and operational principles.

The most accepted principle is the authenticity principle. This means that teachers should provide students with input material from real life and try to create a context that is similar to their daily lives. The context is more realistic and the knowledge mastery is better. It is only in this environment that it is easier and deeper for students to understand and use language. The second one is the hierarchy principle. Teachers should design easy, moderate and difficult tasks. Thus, when a class is held, students can go through tasks at different levels. Specifically, tasks need to be displayed from easy to hard, from shallow to deep, and from simple to complex. The next principle is the principle of interest. Interest is the best teacher of children's learning. Only children who are interested in something can learn it in a positive mood and achieve good results. To design tasks that trigger interest in students, teachers should analyze their age, personality, learning style, language proficiency, and more. They then need to identify interesting points and select topics that resonate with students, which can stimulate their thirst for knowledge and actively engage them in classroom activities. The last principle for designing a task is the operational principle. A wonderful task becomes useless if the student cannot even carry it out. In task design, teachers should consider its operability in the classroom environment and try to avoid classroom tasks with too many links and overly complex procedures. Also, task instructions matter. If students cannot understand what they need to do, the tasks cannot play their role and effectiveness.

4.2.2. Adapting Textbook Materials into Tasks

Textbooks refer to the vast variety of materials now used in language classrooms. It plays an important role in many ways. First, a textbook is a framework that regulates and multiplies programs. Second, it means purpose and a serious attitude for learners. Third, a textbook can serve as a syllabus in many situations. Fourth, a textbook provides a ready-made teaching text and learning tasks. In short, textbooks should be viewed as one of many resources that teachers can use to create effective lessons. However, this does not mean taking everything from the textbook. Teachers should analyze their instructional needs, select appropriate content and adapt it to their task. To adapt textbook materials to tasks, several ways and steps are mentioned. Adding, deleting or omitting, modifying, simplifying and reordering are common methods. In addition, the common steps are mainly divided into three steps. The first step is macro-adaptation, ideally done before the start of the language scheme; the second step of adaptation is the adaptation of a unit; the third step is to adapt the specifics within a unit.

4.2.3. Clarifying the Roles of Teachers and Students

The relationship between the roles of teachers and learners is the core of the teaching process. With the rise of TBLT, it is inevitable that relevant groups will be affected. The roles of teachers and students in TBLT show many differences from traditional teaching methods.

As one of the main subjects of instruction, the social roles and functions that teachers undertake are bound to constantly change and innovate with new changes and requirements. Compared to traditional teaching methods, TBLT requires more communication, equality, autonomy, interest, and learner-centeredness. Therefore, the roles of teachers in TBLT are promoters,

organizers and assessors. Promoter is a student-centered teacher role. Control of the classroom is basically transferred to students, allowing them to learn independently. Teacher's "guide", "encourage", and "promote" students' learning (Li, 2009). More importantly, teachers should give appropriate prompts when students are unsure how to start an activity or what to do next, or what to say next. The most important and difficult role a teacher has to play is as an organizer. Teachers need to select and choose materials as well as design and organize tasks that students can perform in the class. In addition, one of the main parts of a teacher's job is to evaluate the learning of students in order to understand the quality and progress of their learning so that they can adapt their teaching to the students in a timely manner. As assessors, teachers need to do two things: correct mistakes and organize feedback. Correcting should be gentle and organizing feedback is an effective way to assess students' performance so that they see the extent of their success or failure. Teachers should focus on students' success or progress so that they can create a success-oriented learning atmosphere.

Because of the differences between TBLT and traditional teaching methods, the role of students in TBLT is certainly different from the latter. First of all, students are the center of a class. Not only does TBLT give them the freedom to play their role, it also pushes teachers to engage in communication with their students. What's more, students become cooperators. In a class implementing TBLT, students work in groups or teams with a clear division of labor and reliability to accomplish common tasks. Along the way, students communicate, collaborate and compete with others, ultimately gaining a deep understanding of the learning content and the spirit of cooperation. According to Murat Hismanoglu and Sibel Hismanoglu (2011), students also monitor as well as risk-takers and innovators. With reference to monitor, it should be emphasized that tasks are used in TBLT as a tool to facilitate the learning process. It is important to plan classroom activities that give students the opportunity to see how language is used in communication. Students should "attend" to the task work's message as well as the format in which it is normally presented. Considering innovators and risk-takers, it may be said that many tasks will force students to create and elaborate messages for which they do not have sufficient linguistic resources or prior experience. This is said to be the goal of these tasks in actuality. It may be necessary to improve the ability to make educated estimates based on linguistic and contextual cues, to ask for clarification and to discuss with other students.

4.2.4. Implementing Effective Assessment

Upon completion of the task, an assessment is necessary. The outcome of TBLT should give students a sense of achievement and pride. In English teaching, assessment of tasks can focus on the following three aspects: First, adhere to multiple evaluation criteria. When evaluating the results of a student's task, teachers should not only evaluate their knowledge mastery, but also their ability. This diverse evaluation can stimulate student interest in self-directed learning of English and is more conducive to improving their language proficiency. Secondly, combine student self-evaluation and peer-evaluation. Self-evaluation requires students to evaluate the completion of their English learning tasks in multiple aspects, see the achievements and areas for improvement, and actively adjust learning goals, strategies, and methods, gradually improving their autonomy in learning. Peer-evaluation requires students to objectively and fairly evaluate their peers and provide constructive opinions. Not only does it help students see their own learning shortcomings more clearly, identify gaps with others, and clarify the direction of their next effort, but it also helps students supervise and learn from each other, as well as enhance their sense of responsibility and collaboration. Thirdly, implement good evaluation of teachers. The teacher's evaluation is indispensable after the student has completed the task. For both mastery of English knowledge and familiarity with tasks, teachers were higher than the students, allowing them to better identify their strengths and weaknesses. In addition, teachers should focus on using value-added assessments when evaluating students, focusing on their development process rather than just looking at the results.

5. Conclusion

TBLT has received a lot of attention in the last few decades. Many researchers have pointed out their opinions about TBLT and done some empirical research. This study sorted out theoretical basis, definition of task, components of a task, previous research, advantages, challenges and procedures. In addition, suggestions for implementing TBLT were mentioned: following the principles of designing a task, adapting textbook materials to the task, clarifying the roles of teachers and students, and implementing effective assessments. In China, more and more people have recognized the role of task-based teaching and have attempted to apply it in practical classrooms. However, to achieve its desired effect, it is still necessary to clarify the role of task-based language teaching in English teaching in China, and to truly find the connection between it and English teaching at all levels in China.

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