

A Reaction Paper: Task-based Language Teaching in a Local EFL Context

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Abstract: This reaction paper provided a detailed summary and reflection on the implementation of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in a local EFL context based on Liu and Ren's (2021) research. It highlighted various aspects, including the understanding of TBLT among Chinese university teachers, obstacles faced in adopting TBLT, roles of teachers and students, curriculum design, difficulties in implementation, and implications for improving TBLT in the Chinese EFL setting. The paper began with an introduction to TBLT and the methodology used in the research, which involved semi-structured interviews to understand teachers' perspectives on TBLT. The findings were divided into sections focusing on teachers' and students' roles, implementation of TBLT, difficulties faced, and implications for improvement. The reflection delved into the criteria for TBLT tasks, emphasizing the need for tasks to focus on meaning while integrating form and meaning effectively. It discussed the challenges teachers faced in designing tasks and assessing students' performance within the TBLT framework. The reflection also touched on the need for ongoing professional development and autonomy for teachers in curriculum design and assessment. The conclusion acknowledges the potential of TBLT to enhance language learning but calls for ongoing support and training for teachers, alongside institutional backing in curriculum development and assessment strategies. This paper underscores the significance of adapting TBLT to fit the local educational settings and suggests directions for future research and practice in the context of Chinese EFL education.

Keywords: Task-based language teaching; EFL context

1. Introduction

Based on the research of Liu, Y., & Ren, W.(2021)^[1], this paper discussed the application of TBLT in local EFL environments from the perspective of Chinese university teachers, with emphasis on the understanding of Chinese English teachers on TBLT and the obstacles encountered in adopting TBLT in college English teaching in China. This paper's understanding of the application of TBLT was built on the idea of separating the strong and weak versions of TBLT given by Ellis (2017^[2], 2019^[3]), namely task-based language instruction and task-supported language teaching, respectively. In contrast to task-supported language teaching, which only added tasks into conventional language-based teaching strategies(usually utilized in the practise phase of standard current practise production (PPP) approaches), the approach of "employing task as the unit of analysis at all phases in programme design, implementation, and assessment" was known as "task-based language teaching." (Jung 2016)^[4].

2. Summary of the research methodology

Semi-structured interviews were employed in the research to examine the actual circumstances surrounding the application of TBLT. Through a qualitative survey, the study provided further details on "the use of TBLT in Chinese institutions" from the perspective of the teachers. As it was mentioned in the research, compared to quantitative study, qualitative investigations can elucidate nuanced meanings and offer deeper insights into individual variance, which are typically excluded from quantitative research(Dörnyei &Griffiee 2010)^[5].

However, given the complexity of the English teaching context in China and the possibility that the unequal growth of various areas may have an impact on the teaching quality of various institutions, the size of the participant group in this study was rather small. The majority of the study's results were based mostly on the opinions of the 12 instructors who were interviewed, but students' needs and opinions should also be considered as they constitute a significant portion of TBLT instruction. It was suggested that the interviews shall include some students who attend the 12 interviewed instructors' classes in addition to the teachers themselves. In order to confirm the validity and dependability of the teachers' feedback from various angles, the study can determine if the instructors' teaching strategies actually adhere to the fundamentals of TBLT from the viewpoint of the students.

3. Analysis and findings

The research mainly focused on the roles of teachers and students in the classroom and the difficulties faced in the implementation of TBLT.

3.1 The roles of teachers and students in the classroom

Interview data showed that most interviewees did not view themselves as authorities but as “facilitators” and “task organizers,” embracing a “westernized teacher-student relationship”. Two teachers believed their roles varied with the subject. This shift from a teacher-centered to a more collaborative approach indicates a significant change in role perception among Chinese TBLT teachers. However, this perception was based solely on self-assessment, lacking student verification, so the accuracy of these reflections might not fully align with reality. Interview results also indicated that most professors were satisfied with their students’ collaboration and engagement in class. However, two teachers observed that some students lacked creativity and adaptability in their study approaches, attributing this to the exam-focused educational environment. These conclusions were largely based on subjective perceptions as teachers did not detail individual student performances. A more reliable investigation would involve researchers observing actual classroom activities to record and analyze students’ behaviors and interactions accurately.

3.2 Difficulties in the implementation of TBLT

All of the participating instructors in this survey stated that the primary sources for their curriculum designs were textbooks, syllabus, and class schedules. Teachers could not use the tasks in TBLTS as the foundation for the whole curriculum because of the pressure to complete teaching tasks and the constrained amount of teaching time. Instead, classroom tasks in TBLTS were typically considered as a supplement to the integration of textbook activities. However, despite the limitations of the current setting, they continue to look for supplemental resources that may be used with the TBLT in the teaching process. Therefore, it can be concluded that the weak version of TBLT should be considered as a local adaptation of TBLT, rather than a poor implementation of the strategy.

The study also highlighted challenges in implementing Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in China, such as a lack of suitable textbooks, insufficient teacher training, large class sizes, and curriculum constraints. These issues complicated the use of TBLT, leading teachers to use it only as a supplementary activity due to difficulties in student engagement, classroom management, and assessment within limited time and heavy teaching loads. The findings indicated that the majority of the questioned instructors lacked the necessary knowledge and abilities for adequate task design, efficient task evaluation, and assessment. They faced varied degrees of difficulty when trying to arrange students, make assignments engaging, provide clear instructions, and get the right input during the pre-task cycle, which also highlighted the need for comprehensive TBLT training for teachers. The research also identified the constraints placed on teachers by the centralized educational system while implementing TBLT, and it is suggested that local organizations and educators should be given the authority to create and modify curricular content in terms of its development and assessment.

4. Reflection

Since the beginning of this century, task-based teaching has attracted more and more attention in the educational community, as it not only takes the language view and language acquisition view of communicative approach, but also overcomes the weakness of communicative approach that pays too much attention to the expression of meaning and ignores the form of language (East 2012)^[6], and its practical performance can promote learners' language use and help learners better learn the language.

Considering the task-based approach and the promotion of "teacher-led and student-centered teaching philosophy" were both promoted by China's National English Curriculum Standards (NECS) in 2015, the implementation of TBLT in China has been extensively studied in recent years, including the main barriers to teachers adopting a task-based approach in both primary and secondary schools (Chen & Clare, 2017), the influences on teachers' implementation of TBLT (Zheng and Borg, 2014), and teachers' assessments on the challenges involved in adopting TBLT in the context of Chinese EFL at the university level (Liu, Mishan & Chambers, 2018) and so on.

However, although a considerable amount of research has focused on the implementation of TBLT, the academic community has no consensus on the research on the tasks of classroom activities of TBLT, which is reflected in the numerous definitions. Based on the perspective of "task" and the above research results, this paper will discuss the implementation and improvement of task-based teaching.

4.1 Criteria for TBLT tasks

As mentioned above, Ellis (2016, 2017) distinguished between a strong version and a weak version, referred to as task-based and task-supported language teaching, respectively. Actually, Ellis (2019) also proposed four criteria for judging TBLT tasks: 1) Focus on the expression of meaning; 2) Between the two parties, there is some sort of information gap; 3) Students accomplish the assignment using mainly their own (verbal and non-verbal) resources; 4) The language consequences are sometimes explicit and unfocused. Samuda(2015) summarized the

above theories into a process of "from meaning to form and then to meaning", arguing that they can be applied not only to classroom practice but also as a guiding framework for research. However, a large number of educators avoid or reject activities in their lessons because they are frequently unprepared to integrate task-based learning. TBLT has been implemented in English classrooms around the world with many difficulties and little effect, with few successful cases (Zhu & Shu, 2017).

Interviews revealed that Chinese English teachers often relied on predefined tasks and methods from textbooks or researchers when implementing Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), leading to misunderstandings and ineffective outcomes. Many believed TBLT only focused on speaking and listening, overlooking that it should encompass all language skills. This suggested a lack of comprehensive TBLT training. In the interviews, although teachers used various tasks in TBLT classrooms, they viewed these tasks merely as methods to practice previously taught language knowledge, not for acquiring new skills. Tasks were seen as practice tools, reducing their effectiveness. Therefore, training for teachers should have included more focus on practical skills like task design, implementation, and assessment. Without adequate training and reflection, teachers faced challenges in implementing TBLT, leading to disorganized or prolonged task execution in classrooms.

4.2 The Progress of Tasks Moving "from Meaning to Form to Meaning"

The interview excerpt from the research also shows that the instructor was unaware of how language forms may be emphasized by including topic input in TBLT teaching phrases. To decrease the cognitive and linguistic load without losing sight of the task-based method's fundamental meaning-focused focus, form-focused instruction or content input can be included into various phases of the task-based approach. (Gilabert, 2007). Moreover, Ellis (2017) explains methods that participants in a task may use either implicitly or blatantly to concentrate on form while finishing it. These methods encourage the notice of language forms, which may increase the task's acquisition value.

The results of the study show that the Chinese EFL teachers were not acquainted with these methods for emphasizing form in TBLT. All of these point to the need for college teachers to continue to advance their theoretical knowledge of TBLT so that they can not only be familiar with the concept and core principles of this approach but also comprehend its rich theoretical foundation and the necessity of fusing input, learner potential, and language output in a natural way so that students can use language to construct meaning. To effectively advance pupils' acquisition of second languages, it is important to strike a balance between language's meaning and form.

4.3 Task Assessment

The aforementioned study also highlights the shortcomings of the centralized educational system in terms of teachers' ability to implement TBLT, and recommends that local institutions and teachers should be given the authority to create and modify curriculum content in terms of its design and assessment. However, given the complexity of educational development in various regions of China and the disparity in the quality of teacher resources in various regions, the achievement of teaching outcomes will largely depend on the quality level of teachers. If teachers are given more autonomy over handling instructional materials, there is a possibility that the gap between the educational outcomes of developed and undeveloped regions may continue to expand.

Another issue that should be taken into consideration is that how to control students' learning outcomes systematically if the uniform assessment of instructors' teaching performance is removed. Compared with the traditional paper examination, the assessment procedures and results of TBLT are more flexible. First of all, it establishes a higher standard for the expertise and competence of teachers, which requires teachers to appropriately devise an evaluation strategy that corresponds to the academic level of their students. Secondly, even though teachers are given a lot of freedom and rights, the TBLT assessment places a higher standard on their professional qualities, requiring them to put aside their personal preferences and provide students with objective, scientific evaluations while maintaining a just and fair attitude.

5. Conclusion

In short, task-based teaching strategies offer numerous advantages but also impose more demands on instructors. In order to effectively integrate TBLT theory and practice, teachers are supposed to continually improve the spectrum of their knowledge, fully engage in the roles of task designers and mentors, accurately assess task difficulty, and be well-organized in the coherence of task formulation. To help instructors adapt to the current top-down reform of English education, colleges and universities are also supposed to provide a support framework for their professional growth in terms of TBLT curriculum design and evaluation.

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