

Task-based Language Teaching for EFL Students Based on Blended Learning

Meng Fanhong^{1,a,*} Fengchi^{2,b}

¹Dalian Neusoft University of Information, Dalian, Liaoning, China

²Dalian Neusoft University of Information, Dalian, Liaoning, China

^amengfanhong@neusoft.edu.cn ^bfengchi@neusoft.edu.cn

*Corresponding author: Meng Fanhong

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Abstract. This paper discusses the Task-based language teaching of college English courses based on the blended learning model. It argues that Task Based Learning could be realized in a blended learning environment. It suggests that the design should be carefully made in the Task-based learning activities and after-class tasks to make full use of classroom teaching and online learning, and that the purpose is to cultivate students' autonomous learning ability and self-supervision awareness in online learning. It also claims that the online learning and classroom teaching should be integrated through the tasks.

1. The situation of college English teaching in China

There have been many reforms in college English teaching in China, which definitely improves the teaching quality of college English and also enhances English language proficiency of college students. The Teaching Requirements of College English Courses issued by the Education Ministry in 2007 clearly specify the stipulations of college students' English communicative competence. Bachman pointed out that an English class is a place full of questions and answers and language communication, and that the learning efficiency of a language should be improved through authentic communicative activities [1]. In an EFL (English as a foreign language) class, especially in the college English class in China, the classroom teaching activities should be designed to help students develop and improve their communicative competence. A college English class is a place where students can learn and practice using the language, so there should be enough output activities in the class.

With the development of online learning, blended learning which combines the advantages both of online learning and traditional classroom teaching becomes a popular learning style in higher education. This paper is to discuss the appropriate way that can promote students' language output and improve students' English language level in a blended learning environment.

2. Blended learning

2.1 The development of blended learning model

The teaching model of blended learning comes from online learning. It attributes to Sal Khan who is the founder of the Khan Academy that offers a lot of teaching videos and interactive learning material database for students in up to 200 countries around the world every month and also makes the concept of "blended learning" more and more accepted. Before the appearance of the Khan Academy, many students may have already experienced some blended learning in schools or some training centers.

In 2015, Michael B. Horn and Heather Staker tried to clarify people's misunderstanding of blended learning and put forward three parts of the definition of "blended learning" [2]. Blended learning is an authentic education project, and at least one part of students' learning process must be carried out online where the students can self-regulate their learning time, place, approach or progress. At least a

part of the students' learning activities should be conducted at a place where their learning is supervised outside their family. That is, the students must go to school or a learning center where their study are guided by a teacher or an instructor.

2.2 The structure of blended learning

The whole learning process of students of a certain course must combine the online learning with the face-to-face classroom learning and after-class consolidation. These parts constitute an integrated course. In the online learning part, students' learning progress, learning difficulty, learning time will be recorded, and teachers will match their classroom teaching with students' online learning record. Blended learning is a flexible learning method, and combines the advantages both of the traditional classroom learning and online learning. When it is used in college English teaching, it can offer solutions to the existing problems.

Different universities may employ different kinds of blended learning models to suit their students. In recent years, a mainstream blended learning model is the flipped classroom, which uses various kinds of educational technologies to reorganize the teaching activities and reallocate the teaching time and teaching structure and shift the dominance in teaching from teachers to students. In the flipped classroom teaching, the teacher does not use the classroom time to explain the textbooks, but focuses on checking the accomplishment of the pre-class tasks assigned beforehand and give students feedback and help them solve problems if there are any. Thus, task-based language teaching is involved here. Teachers restructure the textbooks and split them into several parts, that is, tasks. Students get the tasks before class and set down to finish them by watching teaching videos, reading related learning materials, and discussing with their peer classmates. Task-based language teaching needs the students to have a good self-regulated ability and self-supervision of their study.

3. Task-based language teaching

3.1 The concept of task-based language teaching

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is a type of teaching model that depends on the use of authentic target language to do meaningful tasks. TBLT is also viewed as task-based instruction (TBI) and can be considered a branch of communicative language teaching (CLT). The concept of tasks is central to this type of instruction. The evaluation of learning is generally based on task outcome and not only on the accurate use of the target language. For this reason, TBLT is thought to be effective in achieving target language fluency and enhancing students' confidence.

To employ Task-based language teaching, we need to make clear the definition of "task" and what has distinguished "task" from the usual classroom activities and practices. Despite the numerous attempts of optimizing the definition of "task", the one that is recommended to achieve a comparatively overall view of a task goes as follows: "A task is a holistic activity which engages in language use in order to achieve some non-linguistic outcome while meeting a linguistic challenge, with the overall aim of promoting language learning, through process or product or both" [3].(Samuda and Bygate,2008)

3.2 The design of tasks

In fact, most teachers have already witnessed that unstructured, free-floating explorations do not sufficiently attract students' attention, or guide students to use what they have already known as teachers expected. Now they tend to learn that students are most stimulated when challenged with absorbing or puzzling tasks or questions, and when students have a clear sense of the expected result. But teachers who wish to use TBLT must have a critical and creative mind to be able to design tasks and to apply them in the classes. Several things should be taken into consideration for teachers while designing the tasks.

3.2.1

The tasks must be meaningful. As Krashen put it[4], language acquisition is the unconscious incorporation of the target language system through the process of using in communication. In addition, language learning results from formal instruction in which students learn the structures and rules of the language. Teachers should provide students with natural settings and enough linguistic hints and sufficient language chunks in order for the students to unconsciously learn to use the language points while they are using them to solve a non-linguistic problem. This is an imitation of the natural acquisition process. Before the students get down to the tasks, teachers might as well lead all the students smooth into the whole process by doing some brainstorming work to warm them up.

3.2.2

The forms of the tasks should be diversified. One of the appealing part of tasks is that the outcome of tasks is unpredictable. Just as Professor Peter Skehan claimed in one of his lectures “tasks generate interesting language”, which is one of the final goals of language learning--the appreciation of the language itself. According to cognitive theory, doing a task itself is not that important; the point lies in getting the task done by using communicative strategies verbally or non-verbally. Teachers should integrate both visual and audio materials into the task to alleviate the learning eagerness and be supportive in whatever possible way.

3.2.3

Students should be presented with various tasks according to different occasions. And the time span the students need to get the tasks prepared should be carefully examined. Those tasks which are too difficult should not appear in the task design process. Although we stress the meaning a lot in TBLT, one thing should be kept in teachers' mind that only completing tasks is not enough. There has to be a language focus as well, especially when it is in an EFL class.

4. The management of TBLT in a blended learning environment

EFL teachers had better think carefully about the advice of Samuda(2001) [5]to take a task slowly by keeping in mind that teachers should be “canny” and “sneaky”. Tasks are meant to be delivered but the way of delegating them should be paid full attention to. Usually, teachers will feel uneasy when the students are working in pairs or groups. Many of them hold that this is a reconciliation process of teachers' responsibility relating to course coverage and pedagogical commitment to carrying out a student-centered learning pattern. Once students really take up their designed role in the language learning process, the teachers may need to shift their thoughts about covering the academic content to more relevant issues as individual growth and developing ability uplifting.

Furthermore, we teachers should figure out another question as “what is the purpose of carrying out tasks?” Teachers are meant to be aware what to teach, and the materials needed by the students must be manifested by them. That is to say, teachers should be capable of guessing the students' needs from their performances. During the pre-task stage, teachers should plan the proper tasks carefully and motivate the students both in their minds and their bodies. This part should be accomplished before class. Students get the tasks and materials online or through emails. They discuss the materials and task requirements in groups in the blended learning model. Then, in the during-task stage, teachers should circulate around the classroom to get involved into the completion process of the tasks to give students feedback and clarify some confusing part. And the post-task period is the consolidation stage. Focus on Form should be achieved in the last stage and further assessment and analysis should be elaborated by the teachers.

That is to say, the shift of the roles of both teachers and students in the language classroom should be fully aware of. As a language teacher of EFL students, his roles should include the following three aspects: Firstly, teachers play an active role in choosing, designing tasks and making sure the tasks are in line with students' needs, interests and various levels of language skills. Secondly, teachers should get involved in the activities together with students, such as task introduction, clarification of task instructions, brainstorm of beneficial words and expressions to make sure the tasks could be

accomplished easily. Thirdly, teachers need raise the consciousness of students towards the tasks, such as highlighting the materials, drawing students' attention to the tasks through guidance, and so on.

As for the students, they are not only the listeners and note-takers any more in the language classroom. They need to participate in different tasks either in groups or pairs. They do not just do the whole-class activities or individual work. In addition, students have the chance to observe how language is used while people communicate. The designed tasks are only utilized in order to helping the students' learning process. They need to pay attention to both the messages and the forms. Finally, without prior experiences in most cases, students need to guess according to the linguistic and contextual hints, ask for more explanation or discuss with other students.

5. Conclusion

With the fast development of information communication technology and educational technology, the traditional college English teaching encounters unprecedented challenges. Teachers should always learn the latest information and knowledge to catch up with the development of the times. Task-based language teaching of college English courses in a blended learning environment needs the teachers to improve their abilities and can help students improve their English proficiency. The task-based language teaching is an effective method that needs to be applied in the real teaching practice and gradually accumulate practical experience. Through probing into the theoretical foundation of implementing task-based language teaching, the EFL classroom activities can be further reshaped and affirmed.

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