

The Application of Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) in Biblical Literature Course

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Abstract—Biblical literature is offered as an optional course for English majors in many colleges and universities in China. This writer introduced TBLT into the teaching of this course and the result from this practical exploration proves that this method can effectively avoid the disadvantages of traditional teaching method, such as students' insufficient attention to the course and poor teaching results. TBLT can inspire students' initiative, improve their language skills and develop their comprehensive abilities, thus effectively improving the current situation of this course.

Keywords—Biblical literature course; Task-based Language Teaching Method; task designing; teaching results

I. THE ANALYSIS OF THE CURRENT TEACHING STATUS OF BIBLICAL LITERATURE COURSE

The Bible is not only a religious scripture, but also a historical encyclopedia, a literary masterpiece and a treasure house of the art of language. As the bedrock of Western culture, the Bible has already permeated into every field of the ideology and spiritual life in the western countries. Today, the biblical text has been constantly translated and spread. With its influence also being felt in the eastern countries, the Bible has already become a worldwide cultural phenomenon.

Over the last 20 years, with the deepening of cultural exchanges between China and the West, the English majors in our colleges and universities have been no longer restricted to the mastering of four basic skills, namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing. In order to better adapt to the needs of the times, they have to develop professional skills, broaden studying range and improve knowledge structure. Teaching Syllabus for English Majors which was published in 2000 explicitly pointed out that under the premise of laying a solid foundation in English language and mastering English professional knowledge, English majors should broaden knowledge of humanities and science and technology, master the basic professional knowledge related to their work after graduation, focus on the cultivation of knowledge acquisition ability, the independent thinking ability and innovation ability, and improve ideological and moral quality, cultural quality and psychological quality. The Syllabus lists the Bible as one of the social and cultural courses for English majors, therefore, biblical related courses are offered in many universities to English majors, such as An Introduction to the Bible, Appreciation of Biblical Literature, An Introduction to Biblical Culture and Cultural Reading of the Bible, etc. To read the

Bible, to understand its major content and implications should be a kind of basic skills for English majors, which are also helpful for them to understand the British and Western culture, to enrich their social and cultural knowledge and to enhance their sensitivity to cultural differences [1].

Our university offers Biblical Literature as optional course for English sophomore in the 4th semester, with the purpose of laying a good foundation for their study of English literature and American literature in the third grade, and Reading the Bible as Literature published by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press is chosen as the textbook. After all, Biblical mottoes and allusions can be found everywhere in British and American writings and the images, structures, concepts from the Bible are also widely cited in British and American literature. A good understanding of the Bible would be very helpful to the comprehension and appreciation of British and American literary works. While I have been engaged in the teaching of this course in these years, I find that students do not attach enough importance to the study of this course, which is a big pity for the English teaching in our university. The reason may be found in these aspects: first, most of the students just regard the Bible as fairy tales. One or two stories may arouse great interests, but to read more would make them feel boring. Secondly, the outdated teaching method which guides students to read the biblical text sentence by sentence leads to dissatisfying teaching results. The English sophomore will soon take TEM4 and its requirement for vocabulary is 7000 to 8000, which means they can read the biblical text by themselves without much difficulty. Thirdly, if the teacher explains the biblical text one sentence after another for students, the teaching progress will be very slow. The limits of the class hour make it's hard to finish the study of *Genesis* and *Exodus* in one semester, which makes it's impossible for students to realize the importance of this course in English major teaching.

II. TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING (TBLT)

TBLT, put forward by Prabhu, the British Indian scholar in 1980s, is a new teaching method based on linguistics, anthropology, psychology and sociology. It means that the teacher designs specific and practical tasks according to specific communication methods and language items while students try to accomplish the tasks through various forms of language activities such as expression, communication, negotiation, explanation and inquiry, in order to achieve the purpose of learning and mastering the language [2]. TBLT

stimulates students' learning interest by using their achievement motivation when fulfilling the tasks, which is beneficial to the development of student initiative and innovation. Therefore, in the past few decades, TBLT has already become the core content of curriculum reform held by educational institutions in many countries and regions worldwide. The investigation conducted by David Nunan in five countries in Asia-Pacific region shows that TBLT has already been the central principle for language teaching syllabus [3]. In recent years, many scholars and teachers in China have made a lot of practice and exploration in College English TBLT, for example, Yang Mei put forth the construction of task-based teaching model in network environment in her book *Task-oriented E+ College English Teaching* [4] and Wu Qian and Chen Xi propose the application of TBLT in college English listening teaching in *Innovation and Practice of College English Teaching* [5], etc. Up to now, a survey of the domestic published articles about TBLT shows that it is still rare to apply task-based language teaching method to the teaching of English majors.

III. A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO THE EFFECTIVE APPLICATION OF TBLT IN BIBLICAL LITERATURE COURSE

I believe that English majors who have studied the language for a number of years have the ability to fulfil the tasks since they have a high level of language skills, certain metacognition ability and the ability to acquire information by using the network [6]. Based on the current situation of students in our university and the requirements of the new curriculum reform, I apply TBLT in biblical literature course by designing appropriate teaching tasks. In this way, the students can read the biblical text, grasp the basic content, and appreciate the cultural connotation and linguistic charms of the Bible while fulfilling the tasks. Meanwhile, taking advantage of the attraction of the network to the students, we can cultivate their ability of independent learning and critical thinking, inspire their creativity and responsibility, enliven the classroom atmosphere and develop a more intimate relationship between the teacher and students.

Now, I will demonstrate the practical application of TBLT in biblical literature course and its effects by taking task-design of the "ten plagues" in *Exodus* as an example.

A. The Task-design in Biblical Literature Course

We must take the classification, arrangement and combination of tasks into consideration in the organization of class, so the teacher should first determine the members of each group based on the different language proficiency of each student.

According to the six principles of task-based teaching proposed by David Nunan, i.e. the principles of authenticity, level, interests, enlightenment, challenge and the highlight of student's subjectivity participation [3], I design the tasks in the forms of topic or theme or task chains in the teaching process of "ten plagues". Of course, the difficulty of the task is the focus of the task design. Jody Willis believes that generally, tasks can be classified into six types, namely, tasks of list tasks, comparison, information gap, compilation, problem solving and sharing personal experience [7]. Gong Ya-fu and Luo

Shao-qian point out that Task-designing should go step by step, from simple to complicated and form a cycle from the primary task to the senior task and the senior task covers the primary task [8]. Based on the above theories, and closely focused on the textbook and syllabus, I divide the tasks of this lesson into six steps.

Step 1: to be familiar with the background knowledge of the learning task, that is, to encourage students to learn the background information of "ten plagues" in advance by using book resources and the network.

Step 2: Reading practice and training of related abilities. Students are required to read the biblical text within the required time and they should grasp the core information and content.

Step 3: focusing on language components. Students are required to mark the new words, grammar points, idiomatic expressions while reading and try to master these components by themselves.

All the students are required to finish these three steps in the preview stage before class. I encourage them to use various supplementary learning methods, to help each other among group members and to keep a record of their study. The results of the tasks will be presented in the forms of retelling or summarizing the content of the "ten plagues" in class.

Step 4: to provide more flexible exercises. Students are encouraged to think divergently and give their own explanation and comment on "ten plagues".

Step 5: to introduce pedagogical tasks and guide students to expand their research. Starting from cultural knowledge linking, special research, story collection and allusions, combining with examples, they try to explain in detail the quotations of the Bible in western literature, political and economic discourse and the purposes, thus activating student's knowledge reserve and training their critical thinking ability.

Step 6: Integration and reflection. I try to make the students realize that language is integrated, which emphasizes the form, communicative function and the combination of meaning. I try to guide them to make comparison and contrast between Chinese and western literature and culture, so as to reflect on what they have learned. I also try to lead students to seek relevant materials after class, and carry out extended autonomous learning.

The teacher will assign the tasks of these three steps to different groups according to the language proficiency and self-study ability of group members. The results of the tasks will be presented in the forms of presentation in class and submission of written report. Moreover, I will prepare several questions for class discussion, which will lead the students to free discussion, aiming to integrate the knowledge they have learned, and stimulate their interest, thus setting the stage for their extended independent learning.

When assigning teaching tasks, I try to make sure that each student has equal chance, equal task and has the opportunity to show himself. At the same time, I would pay attention to the principles of level and scale based on the difference among

students in order to ensure that underachieving students have the opportunity to present themselves and top students can reach their full potentials. I will give detailed instruction after task-designing, print it on paper and distribute it to each student. The instructions include: 1, name lists of group members and the deadline for each step; 2, the assigned thematic topics for each group and the problems to be solved; 3, the length, format of written report and the time for presentation; 4, the printing and distribution of outlines before presentation; 5. evaluation standard.

B. The Development of TBLT in Biblical Literature Class

TBLT changes the teaching model which dominates the class by teacher lecturing and improves students' participation in class activities. It emphasizes students' acquisition process and knowledge construction process, and requires them to change from the passive receivers of external stimuli and the objects of knowledge indoctrination to the subjects of information processing and the active constructors of learning [2]. Therefore, the ultimate goal of it is to give full play to students' subjective initiatives.

Although the class is the place for students to show their achievements and report their tasks, the teacher is always the organizer and instructor who ensures that all tasks are carried out properly. Each group will choose its member to present the results of their tasks to all the class, while the teacher serves as organizer to evaluate the completion of the tasks with the whole class. I always encourage the students to combine the traditional learning methods with modern teaching facilities, to use appropriate teaching methods creatively to make their presentation vivid and easy to understand, so many students show their achievements in the forms of Word document, PPT, DV video, etc. When presenting the fulfillment of the tasks, they enjoy the joy of success, the influence of English culture, and the teacher grasps the facilitating role of evaluation to enhance the competitive spirit among groups, arouse their enthusiasm and promote continuous progress. Moreover, involving students who are still in a state of excitement in the evaluation of their achievements, carrying out self-evaluation and mutual evaluation among groups, pointing out the strong-point and weakness of each group can enable students to learn how to evaluate oneself and others rationally, thus learning both knowledge and personhood's truth.

Then, the teacher can choose a hot topic appears in the class and combine it with the questions prepared in advance to guide the students to carry out free talk, aiming to integrate the knowledge they have learned, to stimulate their interests and to set the stage for their autonomous extended learning after class.

It should be noted that the role conflict between teacher and students is one of the problems we should pay much attention to in TBLT class. If not, students are likely to become passive recipients.

C. The Consolidation of TBLT in Biblical Literature Class

TBLT changes the managed in traditional teaching into the managers who shoulder a lot of learning tasks. This method does not end up with the task completed in class but expand the extension of study. The class leaves many students to want more. Strong interests and thirst for knowledge urge them to

expand the learning space greatly after class. Starting from the plague of blood, they begin to explore the red tide of the Nile; from the plague of locusts, they try to learn the joint management of locust plague in the near East countries; and some even try to study the geographical features of Goshen and the infection of livestock with anthrax. I encourage them to carry out these of studies and explorations, and to present the results of their study in forms of written report, which would be included into the final assessment. Of course, the ultimate goal is not just for score assessment but to encourage them to study independently, actively and initiatively.

In line with TBLT, I adjust the academic performance evaluation of this course accordingly. The ratio of students' fulfillment of assigned tasks in class is greatly increased. Their performance in class account for 50%, and the final exam accounts for 50% in the hundred-mark system. Moreover, the ratio of objective knowledge questions in the test paper is reduced, while subjective analysis questions are increased. Take "the ten plagues" as an example, the focal point is not to test whether students memorize the ten kinds of plagues, but their understanding of the significance, revelation of the ten plagues, the related allusions appear in western literary works, and the manifestation of them in western culture, aiming to test students' analytical ability and development space.

IV. THE EFFECT ANALYSIS OF THE APPLICATION OF TBLT

I began to teach the Biblical literature course from the year of 2016. When I found that the effects of traditional teaching methods were not ideal, I began to apply task-based teaching method and traditional teaching method to the undergraduates of class 1 and 2 of grade 2016, and the junior college students of class 1, 2, 3 and 4 of grade 2017 respectively in order to make a comparison. The experiment results show that students are more likely to accept TBLT. Most students said that the classroom atmosphere was more active and they were not simply confined to the study of textbook knowledge and became more interested in learning. In the classes to which TBLT was applied, the progress of the course was apparently accelerated, and students paid more attention to team work. I found that students' oral expression ability, analytical ability, strain capacity, active inquiry spirit and the use of multimedia assisted teaching methods have been significantly improved. Facts show that this teaching method is effective.

V. CONCLUSION

In many colleges and universities, we have noticed that the English proficiency of students varies greatly and TBLT provides a good foundation and space for individualized teaching. In the process of task fulfillment, students turn from passive recipients into active explorers and constructors of knowledge. They explore related information and materials actively, make bold assumptions about complex and difficult tasks and test them and find ways to solve the problems. By observing, analyzing and reflecting on language, which are helpful to the systematization of language, they are trained on their observation and analysis capabilities and they have learned not only the language but the way to learn [5]. In my future teaching, I will continue my practice and exploration especially in designing of more appropriate tasks and in helping underachievers to overcome the fear of difficulties, etc.

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