

Arguments for and Against Using Task-based Approach to Foreign Language Teaching The Appropriation of TBLT Adapt in the Chinese Context

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ABSTRACT

The need to enhance students' communicative competence has grown in recent years, and instructional strategies like conventional pedagogy aren't meeting learner's needs. Thus, English school introduced and implemented Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). This article is going to define the concepts 'task' and 'task-based language teaching' and analyse the benefits and drawbacks of implementing the strategy, particularly its applicability in Chinese contexts. We have discovered three results and will discuss them in this paper: (1) tasks provide sufficient input for learners to achieve the communicative outcome through interaction with others; (2) authentic contexts and practices instil motivation and confidence for language learners, as the teacher makes overt corrections without intervening with the conversation. (3) TBLT assists learners in developing their communicative abilities and cognitive processes, enabling them to communicate fluently with others. These findings add to the growing body of research demonstrating the potential of TBLT for language learning. However, the results also indicate that TBLT is not universally adopted in Chinese contexts, as the Chinese teaching concept is exam-oriented, form-focused, and grammar-centred. As a result, teachers must incorporate traditional language-based approaches with the TBLT approach to ensure that learners succeed in their language learning.

Keywords: TBLT, pedagogy, communicative competence, Chinese context.

1. INTRODUCTION

Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) a learner-centred teaching method has become more prevalent in syllabus design, classroom teaching, and learner assessment worldwide [1]. This paper discusses the application of the TBLT method in the Chinese language teaching context. Firstly, the paper addresses the terms "task" and "task-based language instruction", then examines the efficacy and challenges of introducing TBLT in English language teaching in China. In the end, the paper concludes that TBLT is not entirely acceptable for the Chinese environment and recommending an alternative solution.

2. WHAT IS A 'TASK'?

To better describe TBLT, we need to clarify the concept of the 'task' to have a firm grasp of the concept. Willis defines the task as a means that students exercise target language to achieve communicative outcomes in

the classroom through collaborating, discussing and engaging with their peers [2]. Additionally, Skehan identified five characteristics of activities [3]. To begin, it is a meaning-based approach that emphasizes the semantic and pragmatic levels of discourse. Moreover, such communication issues involve completing assignments, which requires students to have active communication with their partners to complete the set task. For instance, one student can inquire about the location of the school library and during the exercise session, they must communicate and receive information to demonstrate the direction, thus increasing their communicative competence. Furthermore, tasks are designed to be analogous to real-world events, and the success of completing the task can motivate students to perform in real situations more confidently. A communicative activity entails bridging a gap, such as an information gap, a reasoning gap, or an opinion gap. learners must seek and interpret information from the provided knowledge and conversation to achieve the

goals. Ordering food, scheduling an appointment, or resolving an issue are both examples of tasks.

Additionally, Ellis expands on Skehan's description by listing six characteristics of tasks [4]. To simplify those features, a task is a work plan that emphasizes the means of expression. Also, it aims for a communicative result that incorporates all four language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) and learners' cognitive processes. In brief, the job is oriented towards expressing meaning rather than rote memorisation of a language's form and structure. Students develop a variety of communicative skills when they practise classroom tasks, allowing them to communicate their thoughts and strengthen their cognitive processes.

3. DEFINITION OF 'TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING' (TBLT)

At its core, TBLT is a meaning-centred approach to teach students how to use the target language to have a meaningful and authentic conversation. Prabhu pioneered the introduction of TBLT in the 1980s, describing language learning as an implicit mechanism that is best encouraged by the preoccupation with meaning, saying, and doing [5]. He suggests that tasks in a classroom can stimulate learners' cognitive processes and natural mechanisms in second language learning. He classified the mission into three categories: information-gap activity, and reasoning-gap activity, and opinion-gap activity. An information gap occurs as one partner exchanges information with another in communication. To accomplish the goals, students must be capable of communicating accurate information. During the problem-solving process, students need to use their reasoning skills to determine the existence of an event from existing knowledge or to infer new information to bridge reasoning gaps. For instance, the teacher might ask students to schedule a trip and justify their choice. Opinion-gap activities often begin with a subject with learners articulating their interests, beliefs, opinions, or attitudes. Language learners usually have reached a certain level of proficiency at this point. The objective is to develop learners' capacity for logical thought.

TBLT is a cutting-edge pedagogy that places a premium on achieving positive communicative outcomes, emphasising verbal abilities and cognitive processes [2]. The tasks aim to encourage learners to utilise the target language in real-world scenarios [4]. TBLT is a learner-centred and experiential pedagogical approach, as described by East [6]. TBLT tasks can accelerate language learning by engaging learners in authentic communicative contexts. As stated previously, TBLT is a pedagogical technique that balances fluency and complexity in communicative experiences, thus increasing learners' confidence in learning and implementing the target language. Keeping in mind that

the meanings of TBLT may slightly vary from different scholars, the following parts of this article will rely on Willis's version of TBLT.

4. TBLT TEACHING PROCEDURES

When planning courses based on the TBLT principle, teachers need to consider the procedures of the tasks. Numerous researchers have suggested a variety of different designs [2][3][5], however, they all share a similar principle that the TBLT teaching method should divide into three phases: 'pre-task, task cycle, and post-task', which emphasise on interpretation, rather than on linguistic shape or structure. Teachers need to have clear goals for the outcomes to plan and assign tasks to students.

Willis popularised the TBL paradigm by dividing tasks into three components: pre-task, task cycle, and language focus [2]. The pre-task stage involves subject-related lexical resources preparations and the explanation of the desired goals to assist learners to develop an understanding of the learning process. The second stage - task cycle consists of three aspects as well. They are the task component, the preparation phase, and the reporting phase. Learners will share their learning experience through written essays or presentations with their classmates on their learning process and the linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge and skills they have acquired. During the learning process, teachers mainly focus on monitoring and assisting the students instead of directing or obstructing students' activities. The final stage focuses on language study and instruction, where learners explore basic aspects of the text and practice new vocabulary, sentences, and forms. These three phases result in students with adequate linguistic resources, for example, A2 or B1 level students (see appendix1), are more capable of expressing more complicated thoughts in the target language, which is extremely difficult to accommodate in mixed proficiency or all-aged groups' teaching contexts.

5. ADVANTAGES OF TBLT

There are three primary benefits of TBLT as a regular English teaching pedagogy in school environments. According to Prabhu, language acquisition is an implicit mechanism that involves accidental learning [5]. Since TBLT encourages engagements among learners during the study, it creates implicit learning opportunities, specifically in the context of teamwork, collaboration, and conversation.

Second, the three-phase approach of the TBLT method exposes students to an abundance of linguistic content, creating meaningful language outcomes [2]. These environments are essential for language learning/acquisition. Throughout the task, students can

obtain topic-related materials in a variety of formats, including posts, video clips, messages, and audio. It exposes them to four main language skills (listening, hearing, communicating, and writing), thus providing them with the language resources needed to construct their linguistic reserves [7].

Thirdly, tasks provide a more conducive environment for language learning than conventional pedagogies such as grammar-translation and audio-lingual approaches, in which the tutor is seen as the authoritative figure and doesn't encourage learners to communicate with classmates during the learning process. Thus, the benefit of TBLT from a pedagogical standpoint is that learners are inspired to utilise their linguistic skills to express their opinions freely while applying the target language, which fosters constructive collaboration opportunities during the task's completion.

Correspondingly, there is significant support for TBLT concepts in SLA research. Luo and Gong note that students who exposed to efficient team activities during language learning, tend to excel more in their target language performance [8]. Furthermore, TBLT is consistent with studies on second language learning, which demonstrates that language acquisition requires intelligible input and substantive output [9].

Besides this, authentic tasks recreate real-world scenarios in the classroom, allowing and inspiring students to foster an interest in language learning [10]. As Richards points out, TBLT emphasises developing learners' communicative capacity to accomplish the goals in communication [11]. The challenge creates a real need for students to express themselves in the conversation using the target language in a genuine situation. Therefore, TBLT based on SLA study has shown great benefits on language learning. However, there are some challenges while adapting the method in classroom teaching. The following segment addresses these objections.

6. CRITICISMS OF TBLT

While TBLT has been introduced decades ago, many teachers still use conventional pedagogy as their main teaching approach and may even reject TBLT. For instance, Foster points out some disadvantages that regard to TBLT and its implementation in second/foreign language classes may create potential problems due to its emphasis on fluency over accuracy [12]. Occasionally, non-verbal cues such as eye contact, intonation, and body expression are overemphasised and precise utterance is considered less important in some situations. As a result, learners would be discouraged from speaking in the target language using well-formed sentences.

Additionally, TBLT can be inadequate for learners to acquire correct language forms because clear

grammatical information is not adequately developed. Another criticism is that TBLT is that students at the beginning of their language learning journey would lack sufficient vocabulary to complete communicative activities [13]. Teachers, on the other hand, might have issues over devising a task-oriented syllabus, as they don't always have the freedom to choose their own materials based on the needs of creating task-based programs, especially in certain countries where the syllabus is predetermined [9].

Another critique is the assessment, as TBLT does not emphasise language proficiency improvement [14]. Avoiding English and placing limited demands on language competence can pose difficulties in exam-oriented teaching contexts where linguistic elements such as grammatical rules and lexical variety are critical. Additionally, as the communicative result can be assessed and improved, it is beneficial for students to review their study progress, comprehension and language skills [15].

7. APPROPRIATENESS OF TBLT IN THE CHINESE CONTEXT

While some educators and educational authorities in China started implementing TBLT in the 1990s, TBLT has not been applied universally and accepted by schools in China for a variety of reasons [16].

One potential issue with applying TBLT in Chinese contexts is that the method was originally intended for second language teaching rather than foreign language instruction [17]. Thus, fully adapting the TBLT approach in the classroom may not provide sufficient linguistic resources for learners to interact efficiently with other students due to mispronunciation, lack of vocabulary, and wrong grammar.

Additionally, Chinese students lack faith in their ability to participate in communicative practices [18]. TBLT, on the other hand, allows learners to take the lead in communicative interaction to make use of prior language capital. Furthermore, teachers' poor language proficiency limit the potential of the TBLT and contribute to the failure of this language teaching method [19]. For instance, Zhang conducted a qualitative case study with Guangdong primary school teachers and witnessed teachers' adaption of TBLT in the classroom [20]. Teachers, it turned out, did not conflate assignments and goals in their language teaching. One of the issues contributing to this widespread misunderstanding is the absence of an authoritative manual and instructions on the use of TBLT in school settings [21]. As a result, teachers have trouble grasping the concept and implementing communicative practices in the language classroom.

To better implement TBLT in language teaching, some local educational authorities in China have

attempted to conduct a series of training seminars in numerous provinces to address the challenges with tutorial classes, teaching practice, TBLT content, textbook instruction, and presentations on TBLT. However, the results are little as these training sessions lack follow-up practice and further support [16]. Thus, teachers are likely to stick to the practice instructional strategies such as Present-Practice-Produce (PPP) and the Grammar-translation process (GTM).

Additionally, integrating TBLT in countries with a different educational culture than Western countries can be challenging. English education in Asia is characterised as an examination-driven educational culture. Chinese examinations focus on language proficiency and translating abilities, and the Gaokao (college entrance examination) does not measure communicative competence [21]. As a result, both teachers and students are driven by the success of achieving high scores in Gaokao instead of developing communicative competence.

In terms of learning philosophy, some students, especially those at the beginner level, may find it difficult to follow TBLT. In standard English classes, students are not required to achieve communicative results, instead of focusing on the language feedback provided by instructors, textbooks, and other resources. TBLT, on the other hand, is learner-centred and requires students to interact, discuss, and debate with one another and share their thoughts and opinions; in comparison, traditional Chinese education requires students to be obedient and follow their teachers' instructions.

According to Carless's study, many teachers continue to favour conventional approaches as a realistic teaching method for exam-oriented outcomes [17]. For instance, the PPP approach is more valid in China because it is more effective in the exam-driven environment.

To improve the adaption of the TBLT in Chinese contexts, teachers and educators need to focus on creativity and combine it with conventional teaching techniques during the teaching process, since traditional methods are relatively easy to apply in a language class to assist learners in improving their exam scores. Additionally, they need their capabilities, values, and experiences to link school environments to the wider sociocultural world, where the four skills are required concurrently or in conjunction with one another in authentic contexts (Carless, 2004).

8. CONCLUSION

The essay aims to define the mission and the task-based language teaching process. Besides that, the advantages and disadvantages of TBLT were addressed, with an emphasis on its applicability in Chinese

contexts. As discussed previously, tasks provide enough feedback for learners to achieve communicative results by interacting with others. Second, authentic contexts and activities increase language learners' enthusiasm and confidence in using the target language, as the tutor provides corrections implicitly without interfering with the students' learnings and discussions. Thirdly, TBLT helps to strengthen learners' communicative skills and cognitive mechanisms for them to interact fluently with others. It is not widely accepted in Chinese contexts, however, since the teaching concept is based on exam-oriented, form-focused, and grammar-centred teaching concepts. As a result, teachers must combine conventional language-based techniques with the TBLT approach to aid learners' language acquisition success.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Xiang Ji conceived of the presented idea and performed the results. Lu Li encouraged Xiang Ji to investigate the appropriateness of TBLT in the Chinese context and supervised the findings of this work. All authors discussed the results and contributed to the final manuscript.

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