



A Cases Study of the Application of TBLT in English Teaching in Chinese Secondary Schools

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Abstract. Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) has been proved as an efficient pedagogy in English Language Teaching (ELT) and is generally applied by Chinese secondary school teachers in order to cultivate students' comprehensive English ability. The mainstream studies of TBLT are conducted from teachers' perspectives including lesson design and teaching assessments, while students' feedback and experiences are seldom considered as a main evaluation of TBLT. This research presents that as the main body of TBLT, students expose that TBLT has limitations in efficiency, which are ignored by teachers and scholars. This paper interviewed three Chinese secondary students who have experienced the TBLT English lessons, and collected the data by using thematic analysis to study the students' subjective feedback on TBLT. The research has shown that the "Tasks" are inappropriate for most of secondary students in terms of difficulty and complexity. Also, secondary students had low learning effectiveness to this teaching method. As a result, teachers should design the "Tasks" in consideration of their students' competence and interests, and provide more support to average students in the task process.

Keywords: TBLT · ELT · Secondary school student

1 Introduction

Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) is one of the derivative communicative teaching methods. It promotes student-centred classrooms and communication in daily environments, which is distinct from the traditional language teaching methodologies as it abandons the overemphasis on grammar structures [1]. In the last thirty years, TBLT has been analysed as an advanced teaching method in the second language acquisition area and has had a huge impact on Chinese language education theories, teachers and learners [2]. In recent years, TBLT has been considered an innovation of English education in China since the previous English Language Teaching (ELT) in China was teacher-centred, text-oriented and rote-memorised, which is always criticised by Chinese education scholars [3]. Compared with classic Chinese ELT methods, TBLT concentrates on the utilization of the second language and conducting lectures by organizing conversational group

activities. When engaging in the activities, students can acquire and train language skills without passively listening to their lecturers and reciting textbooks. In 2011, TBLT was recommended by the Chinese Ministry of Education in the National Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards as an advantageous language teaching method and a demonstrative method of English teaching in secondary schools [4].

However, when TBLT is applied in Chinese English classes, the teaching results are not always ideal as the traditional teaching methods. Despite that TBLT was favoured by educational departments and school managers, front-line teachers and students were not widely acclaimed as a regular teaching pattern, especially in secondary schools [3]. Secondary school students were more adapted to teacher-centred lesson style because their teachers could directly teach exam-oriented knowledge, so they can easily recite words and vocabulary and write on the test papers [5]. In contrast, plenty of teachers and students recognise TBLT as an “ineffective” strategy after implementing it in junior high schools [5]. Many research present that Chinese teachers seldom design appropriate tasks for their students since their classes are mixed-proficiency classrooms [6]. Some researchers indicate that many Chinese teachers cannot arrange suitable tasks according to realistic environments because they are poor-trained and lack living experiences in English countries [7]. Additionally, most secondary students were educated to pursue greater results in English exams and language certificates rather than learning English as a communicative tool, so they do not acclimate well to TBLT [8].

Nevertheless, the gaps in the application of TBLT in China still exist. Firstly, the TBLT implementation in secondary schools still requires further studies. The majority of the current research is completed in higher education institutions such as colleges and universities, while secondary education is quite dissimilar to higher education in China. Secondly, compared with educational policy and teachers, students’ opinions of TBLT are ignored to some extent. As TBLT is a student-centred teaching approach [9], learners’ reflection on the teaching activities should have certain research value. Thus, this research interviewed three secondary students who have experienced TBLT in their schools and analysed their feedback, which can directly reflect the effect of TBLT from students’ perspectives. This study aims to provide detailed results about TBLT from students’ aspects and figure out the factors that reduce the efficiency of TBLT, and make suggestions to improve the application of TBLT in Chinese secondary schools.

2 Method

Since this research focuses on students’ feedback on TBLT to describe and analyse their reaction to this certain teaching method, the researcher applies a qualitative method in this research [10]. The researcher designs a semi-structured interview with students who have personal experience of TBLT in their English curriculum, which are abstract descriptions of school-relevant information [10]. The method indicated that the epistemology of the research is interpretivism for its focus on individual experiences to discover as much information as possible from participants’ perspectives [11]. There are four interview questions which can support participants in comprehensively present their opinions to TBLT:

1. Are any tasks given by your teachers in the English classes? Could you describe them?
2. If there are tasks in your English lessons, do you like joining them or not? What are the reasons?
3. What are your feelings and thoughts on the tasks?
4. If you are the teachers, how will you modify or change the tasks? (Reasons?).

The participants of this research are three secondary school students: A, B and C. The researcher has confirmed that they have experienced the TBLT lessons which are conducted by their English teachers by connecting with those teachers. All these participants are average students in the class, which can certainly represent the majority of secondary school students in language skills. The participants are from different grades and have different genders. A is from grade seven, while B and C are grade eight students. A and B are female students, while C is a male student. Since those participants were teenagers, the researcher invited their teachers as gatekeepers to supervise the interview progress in consideration of research ethics.

As the semi-structured interview contains plentiful detailed data, this research uses thematic analysis as a data analysis method to study a vast amount of detailed descriptions of participants' own experiences [12]. The data was coded and generated into two themes: "Misunderstandings and inappropriate tasks" and "Low learning effectiveness: competence and awareness".

3 Results

3.1 Misunderstandings and Inappropriate Tasks

The first theme of the interview content is the misconception to "tasks" in TBLT cause teachers to set unsuitable tasks for students. All the interviewees were asked to describe the tasks given by their teachers, and there were two forms of the tasks were mentioned: Presentation and grammar teaching. The presentation task has a general structure: students are divided into groups, and each group has four to six students, and they have to work together to complete a presentation at the beginning of every English class. Each group would have 3–5 min to make the presentation, and the content should be relevant to the lesson theme and textbooks. After they finished the presentation, teachers would comment according to their power points, fluency, pronunciation and collaboration. Another form of task is grammar teaching, which means that students should teach grammar instead of teachers in the class. The grammar teaching task would not happen in every class but only in grammar class, and B introduced the task briefly:

"For example, when we are having grammar classes about the different tenses, teachers will randomly separate us into many groups, and we have 6 or 8 groups. Our mission is to prepare to prepare a grammar lesson for our classmates. I think our task is to explain the grammar knowledge and give sample exercises to other classmates."

In this task, students are ordered to preview the grammar knowledge by themselves and design a lecture for their classmates in order to teach grammars without teachers. Before the class, students need to search teaching materials, do self-studies and coordinate with their group members to prepare their “lesson”. Then they give their lesson to their classmates in twenty minutes, which is half of the class time. After that, teachers will re-teach the grammar to ensure no key grammar points are missed. The structure of the grammar teaching tasks is similar to the “Flipped Class Model”, which was popular in China ten years ago. It seems that students should get comprehensive practice in these two tasks, but interviewees hold opposite opinions.

In the interviews, all interviewees expressed their dissatisfaction to some extent with both tasks, which they considered to be inappropriate and formalistic. A, B and C all said the presentation is “useless” because most students just conclude the content in the textbooks and read them in class to complete the mission given by teachers. Although teachers sometimes encourage students to discuss the content of the presentation, but A thought it is meaningless:

“Most of the time, teachers present some questions and we answer them after discussing them, but discussions are Worthless. [PAUSE] We have already known the conclusions or answers even before the discussion.”

“We only make brief conclusions about the text, and teachers will explain the text, including words, meanings and vocabulary. I don’t think it is useful because we are just paraphrasing the text in bullet points.”

It is confirmed that the presentation tasks do not include communicative sections, and there are no opportunities for students to communicate and finish the task with group mates to practice their English abilities. Otherwise, the presentation was more likely to play a role of a lead-in section of the lesson, while it should be the main teaching activity of the whole English lesson.[5]. The presentation task was not the central activity of a student-centred classroom but an inessential beginning of the teacher’s lecture.

On the other hand, another task introduced by interviewees is grammar teaching, and it has a structure accorded with the principle of TBLT since it includes the two core progresses: communication with group work and the aim of completing language tasks. Interviewees and their groupmates need to work together to give a grammar lesson to other students, so the communication about grammar knowledge can enhance their language competence. Since students have to teach the grammar, they have to completely understand the grammar to conclude the important and difficult points, and design in-class practices. However, the grammar teaching task still confuses the “tasks” in TBLT and general “exercises”. In practice, the teaching task conveyed by students cannot be ensured by teachers since the pre-task is finished by students without the guidance of teachers. In TBLT, although teachers are not the center of teaching, they should still focus on students’ processes during the task to make sure students are actively engaged in the task. In contrast, A and B presented that their English teachers seldom guided them in the preparation of the grammar teaching task:

“My teacher only told us to teach the grammar and better prepare some exercises. Then she never interferes with our preparation... Maybe she doesn’t know our work at all.”

“Every time we have trouble, we turn to top students for help...Our teacher? No, she said we should do self-learning in the task.”

The lack of teachers’ guidance causes the quality of pre-task to be limited by students’ existing competence. The top students may get trained by finishing the task, while average students probably make mistakes or have problems that negatively affect their learning. As a result, top students in the group always get more learning chances in the task because only they can finish the tasks. All interviewees mention this problem since they are all average students, and B describes this phenomenon in detail:

“...in our group, there are two top students. They prepared most of the tasks every time.

So average students like us only need to go through their design, follow their lead, and type some sentences and copy some exercises to the power points. Those top students can deal with all intellectual things. So I feel boring those useless tasks...”

Besides, the reflection of interviewees exposed that there is no post-task in the grammar teaching task, and teachers seldom evaluate their teaching and acquisition of knowledge. Instead, teachers always re-teach the grammar in twenty minutes, and other students prefer to listen to teachers’ explanations rather than their teaching task, which reduces the communicative chances between task-doers and other students. As group leaders, A describes the teaching task as “embarrassing”, and B also have the same feeling:

“... Nobody will listen to our students’ teaching, of course. Everybody chose to listen to teachers so they ignored our teaching. It was absolutely embarrassing when you tried to ask questions to your ‘students’, but there was no response..”

To solve the problem, C and his group members decided to change the task as a performance by pre-setting the communicative sessions. They told the answers to their friends before their teaching and asked them to pretend to answer questions in the class so that to “escape from the embarrassment. Nevertheless, the nature of the “TBLT” becomes a formality and students do not really learn the language in the task, the centre of the lesson remains the part of the teacher’s teaching rather than the task in TBLT. To sum up, because of the misunderstanding of the “task” in TBLT, teachers cannot design the proper tasks with complete structures to meet TBLT teaching standard. Worse still, these futile “TBLT” tasks occupy normal teaching time and force students to adapt to a new learning method, which is not productive and leads to even less effective learning for students.

3.2 Low Learning Effectiveness: Competence and Awareness

Another theme of the interview content is the inefficient learning of students in TBLT. Interviewees exposed that most secondary school students lack language competence

and learning awareness, so they cannot actively adapt to TBLT. All the interviewees mentioned that there is a significant difference in the English competence of their classmates, and only top students can engage in TBLT. In presentation tasks, the groups always select those top students to present in class since they are advanced in oral English and giving speeches. Intermediate students such as A, B and C prefer to make power points or posters instead of attending the speaking presentation because they consider that their English skills are insufficient for them to complete the presentation.

“To be honest, speaking English is too hard for me, especially in the front of the classroom to so many people...”

“It is quite hard for me (to make a presentation), but making power points, you know, typing and writing, is acceptable...”

In the grammar teaching task, which has been mentioned in the first theme, top students have more opportunities to practice in the TBLT task, while most students did not fully participate in the task process. Most secondary school students still rely on teachers' presentation of the grammar, and they cannot master new grammar points entirely by self-learning and peer-teaching. Since grammar teaching made by students cannot explain the grammar clearly and promptly answer their classmates' questions, many students choose to ignore the grammar teaching task and concentrate on the second half of the class, which is the teachers' presentation. Nonetheless, the valid learning time of students was reduced by almost fifty percent, and they reported that their learning was negatively affected by the TBLT task, because they neither learned from the grammar teaching task nor from teachers' lectures as teachers did not have enough time to go over the new content.

“I remember that when we were learning Subjunctive Mood, the grammar teaching task was in a mess. I think they can't understand Subjunctive Mood at all. When they stop teaching, we only have fifteen minutes and teachers can only conclude the points very briefly...”

In this theme, B and C present their opinions on the limited effectiveness of learning by TBLT, which is that Chinese students cannot adapt to TBLT in learning awareness and lack confidence. A large number of students still rely on traditional teaching methods rather than independent learning, so they do not pay enough attention to the TBLT tasks set by the teacher, which require independent learning. Thus, they underestimate the importance of the task and are unwilling to do the tasks.

“...Most of us don't treat the presentation and grammar teaching as learning; it means no works for us...”

“... (tasks) they are interesting, but we really hope teachers can cancel them, they are useless. Teachers' presentation is the best support for our learning.”

When asked why they did not value the parts of the task that required self-learning, interviewees expressed, to varying degrees, a lack of confidence in their own abilities. They felt that in TBLT, the quality of their own learning would be reduced by their lack of English competence. During the same period, teachers did not have primary roles in

TBLT, so they were not able to guide students' learning. Therefore, many students have to give up participating in the TBLT and look to the teacher-centred pedagogy.

In conclusion, the research results indicate that secondary school students cannot make adequate progress from their experiences of having TBLT English courses. On the one hand, the tasks are contrary to the rationale of TBLT since they are less communicative, teacher-centred and not problem-solving, because teachers misunderstand those concepts of TBLT. On the other hand, it has been exposed that average students have less acceptance of TBLT because they prefer directly receiving knowledge from their teachers, and the main sections of those tasks are over-difficult for average students so they cannot practice their English skills. The thematic analysis of the interviews reflects that the utilization of TBLT is not able to be beneficial to average secondary students, and the learning effectiveness of students are weakened by the existing inefficient TBLT. Hence, the current application of TBLT requires some adaptation to meet the actual learning needs of students.

4 Discussion

To solve the problems which are exposed by the case study about the application of TBLT in Chinese secondary schools English classes, teachers and researchers should focus on three factors: teachers' efforts, tasks and students. These factors are directly relevant to students' perspectives as "experiencers" of TBLT. In order to make comprehensive and actionable suggestions for the implementation of TBLT, the discussion will combine the findings of this research with other relevant studies.

4.1 Emphasizing the Role of Teachers in TBLT

According to students' feedback, the common problem is that in TBLT, teachers seem not so important as the traditional teaching since they are no longer the "leaders" of the class. This phenomenon is in line with most studies that convey from teachers' perspectives. In fact, teachers are very important in TBLT as they ensure effective teaching and learning outcomes by designing tasks and facilitating the task process [13], and the understanding and design of the task is the key to the teachers' success in implementing TBLT. Although it is important for Chinese English teachers to be decentralized in TBLT classrooms [14], it does not mean that the teachers cease to be essential in language teaching. On the contrary, TBLT requires teachers to have a broader understanding of TBLT and another language context to design communicative, student-centred and problem-solving tasks, and they need to know their students well, such as their competence, interests, needs and characters [15]. Furthermore, teachers should spend more time and effort on lesson observation and after-class evaluation. During the TBLT lesson, teachers should focus on measuring the process of tasks and support students when they have questions or problems with doing the tasks. If teachers cannot participate in TBLT lessons actively as supporters, the procedure of tasks would be out of teachers' control and be completely led by students, which is more likely to happen in Chinese English classrooms because of their large class sizes and low competence of students [6]. Meanwhile, teachers should make the assessment to the TBLT lesson after class to modify the sections of tasks

instead of only focusing on the students' production. The result-based assessment does not provide available feedback on students' performance because the product is made by group work, while teachers cannot ensure the involvement of every student. The research present that without teachers' supervision, top students are more willing to take part in the task. If top students in the groups take up all the practice opportunities and complete the tasks, the other students get few learning opportunities in TBLT, resulting in less effective teaching in practice. In order to provide a more detailed understanding of each students' learning to teachers, teachers need to design more assessment measures like student's evaluation or feedback. It is necessary for teachers to convey various assessment methods [14], focusing on students' performance in the process of completing tasks such as their English skills and cooperation with others, in order to provide a comprehensive assessment of TBLT, and better implement TBLT with proper modifications. In all these sections, teachers' role in TBLT lessons should be refocused as one of the decisive factors in the application of TBLT.

4.2 Optimizing Structures and Adjusting Contents of “Tasks”

The current “tasks” in secondary school English classes have some similar problems: the tasks are incomplete in structure, and they are not authentic to students' language context. The research found that the general structure of those “tasks” implement a pre-task section before the class and seldom includes the post-task phase. However, both of pre-task and post-task are essential in the TBLT lesson. In pre-task section, teachers should introduce the task and indicate instructions clearly on what students should do during the task which may help students to recall some language knowledge that may be useful for the task. This provides students with a clear understanding of what is expected of them, so students can take notes and spend time preparing for the task. The post-task phase is also critical as it can let teachers and students reflect on the tasks and do supplementary exercises to enhance the learning results [16]. If teachers can totally apply TBLT in their classes and add pre-task and post-task into the lesson plan, the tasks would be more completed and effective. Furthermore, the content of tasks should be relevant to students' language context and daily lives. “Tasks” in TBLT are different from “exercises” since they should be based on real-life situations, using the target language (English) for language output, while exercise is simply the consolidation of knowledge and the mechanical repetition of language knowledge in order to achieve proficiency in sentence pattern [17]. The task in TBLT is a communicative activity that requires students to use the target language, which is a dynamic communication between different actual people. By understanding the principles of the task, teachers can design authentic tasks by understanding their students' motivation, demands and behaviour.

4.3 Designing and Conducting Tasks According to Students' Level

Since TBLT originated abroad in a western educational context, Chinese teachers should design the tasks in consideration of students' average English competence. The application of TBLT has certain requirements for students' language knowledge, expression skills with the target language and independent learning abilities. Based on the case study, it has been proved that plenty of Chinese secondary students are insufficient to adapt to

TBLT. Although TBLT provides students with more opportunities for language output, only students who are capable of and dare to speak can occur benefit from the teaching method since the tasks are completed in groups and communications. In this situation, the majority of students cannot engage in TBLT and even lose interest in learning by tasks. Consequently, when implementing TBLT in secondary schools, teachers should not only adjust it according to students' English skills but also their interests. Tasks should be designed to cover content and topics that are attractive to students, and also be challenging to most of the students. The task forms can be flexible and can include common teaching activities such as dialogue scenarios and role play. It is also important that tasks are designed to give students a sense of achievement when they are completed, to encourage them to actively participate in TBLT lessons. At the same time, teachers should design the TBLT lesson in a student-centred pattern, giving consideration and careful attention to the sequencing and difficulty of tasks and the interface between different tasks. In addition, teachers need to be flexible in adjusting the difficulty of tasks according to students' circumstances. For example, if students give feedback that a task is too easy, teachers can increase the complexity of student activities and tasks; while for tasks that are relatively difficult, teachers should organize the task from easy to difficult as stairs, so that tasks can be stepped up and thus increase the participation of students at all levels. In specific situations, teachers can be more frequently involved in group tasks to guide and support unadvanced students in their process of doing tasks, such as guiding them to take on simpler communication tasks or answering questions which related to the tasks.

5 Conclusion

This research finds that although TBLT is implemented in English teaching in secondary schools, there are two obstacles which limit the teaching effectiveness of TBLT. Firstly, teachers have some misunderstandings of the concept of TBLT, especially the meaning of "Task", which causes that teachers cannot design proper tasks for their students. As the core of TBLT, improper tasks directly decrease the teaching results and students' learning motivation. Most of these tasks are incomplete, and the main part of the task is not conducted in class, which prevents the teacher from providing timely guidance and supervision for the students. As a result, students are unable to complete these tasks to high quality, and they finally present their production of tasks as performances instead of their learning outcomes. On the other hand, as young second language learners of English, most secondary school students have less competence to complete the tasks without teachers' guidance. Though some top students can do those tasks can support their group mates, most of the average students have fewer chances to attend to the tasks since their lack English skills. Therefore, teachers should pay more attention to the design of tasks when they are implementing TBLT in secondary students. They should evaluate their students' level and supervise the task process. Once students have difficulties running the task, teachers should offer more support to them. Besides, the task should include a full post-task session to assess the result of the tasks and teachers can adjust the task according to students' feedback. As a student-centred teaching method, teachers should value student feedback when adapting their teaching, while many teachers should improve their application of TBLT in this way.

The research supports language educators who plan to use TBLT as their regular teaching approach, especially middle and secondary school teachers. By referring to this research, lecturers can conduct similar interviews to collect data from learners who are attending TBLT lessons and designing or adjusting their teaching plans to create effective and students-based teaching. Those suggestions can also popularize the implementation of TBLT and encourage more teachers and students to accept TBLT. Otherwise, although the study presents students' perceptions of TBLT in some detail, it is limited by the case study that the number of participants was not sufficient to form generalizable conclusions. The study can only give a one-sided picture of the problems of TBLT in average students' perspectives, while it cannot represent most Chinese secondary school students. To further studies, researchers can generalize the case study to more students to expose more problems of the implementation of TBLT in practice, and design more appropriate tasks for TBLT in Chinese secondary schools.

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