



English Language Teachers' Beliefs and Practices on Using Tasks Online in Improving EFL Students' English Speaking Ability in a Chinese University

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Abstract. This study aimed to explore beliefs and actual classroom practices of EFL teachers in using tasks online to improve the speaking ability of students in a Chinese university, and provide suggestions to EFL teachers who use tasks to improve the speaking ability of students in online teaching. The study used a questionnaire as a pre-study, and based on the results of the questionnaire, a semi-structured interview was used to further investigate the situation and experiences of teachers and students about the use of tasks. Some suggestions are provided for EFL teachers who are involved in online classrooms in task design, task implementation and students' evaluation, such as effectively integrating of multiple teaching resources, actively updating task modes and willingly to accepting students' diverse forms of assignment (videos, voice-covers, role plays, etc.). It is expected that the findings will be an effective reference for EFL teachers for using tasks to improve students' speaking ability in online classrooms in the future.

Keywords: Teachers' Beliefs; Teachers' Practices; EFL Teachers; Speaking Ability; Online Teaching

1 Introduction

Teachers improve students' speaking ability by using a series of approaches, and in order to emphasize the communicative purpose of language, task-based language teaching (TBLT) has been widely recognized and received more and more attention. The use of tasks can increase the participation of students in class significantly. Since the mid-1980s, when people began to turn to TBLT and become interested in its tasks, relevant research on TBLT, such as curriculum construction and task research, began to attract wide attention in the research field of second language acquisition [1]. This

approach also promotes English language development through process-oriented guidance for meaningful communicative tasks [2].

When people talk about how to design and use tasks in the classroom, they tend to think about certain practices and beliefs. The study of teachers' beliefs is also an important part of studying and understanding how teachers organize and carry out teaching activities [3]. Teachers' beliefs will determine the fulfillment of their intentions directly and adjust their practices as well [4], and teachers' beliefs are identified to influence teachers' judgment and behavior in the classroom [5]. Besides, teachers' beliefs always play a key role for teachers' own development [6], teachers' self-growth and choices on the development also have an impact on the design and organization of the classroom. Teachers' practices, behaviors, and decisions all affect the process of classroom teaching and even affect the establishment and development of learners' language competence. At the same time, the study of teachers' beliefs is an important part of the research on what teachers do or want to promote change [7].

Meanwhile, this study focuses on teachers' beliefs and practices about using tasks to improve students' speaking ability online. In spring and summer of 2020, due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a huge shift in teaching throughout China, with teachers entering a teaching space that was suddenly new for most of them without any preparation. Almost all the teachers and students have started online teaching and learning, and their communication and interaction are also achieved through the network. Online teaching and learning are not a completely new field in China, and some schools were already using online classes for some of their courses before this special period began. However, not all teachers and students are familiar with the use of this approach. Such a change is a challenge for any teacher. And when EFL teachers try to use tasks in a new teaching space to improve their students' speaking ability, their beliefs will be confirmed or changed in the new experience. At the same time, the change of teaching methods will not only work at this stage, their use will change the thinking and the way of education to a certain extent, and the good teaching methods found in this process will be able to play an important role in future education.

2 Methods

2.1 Participants in the Study

Participants in the study are teachers of English at the target university, and all the teachers have obtained university teacher qualification certificate. This study was conducted based on a questionnaire survey, in the questionnaire survey stage, the author used the intact selection to send the questionnaire to each related course teacher in the university (30 teachers). There were 30 valid responses.

The participants of the semi-structured interview were selected by using purposive sampling from the same group of teachers who participated in the questionnaire part. The criteria for the purposive sampling are gender, age and questionnaire results. For example, teachers who show some significant features in beliefs and practices in the questionnaire part could be given preference, and they were included three males and

three females. As far as possible, the selection of the participants involved different age groups, so as to find the beliefs, understandings, designs, management and also feelings of using tasks by different age groups, employment period, gender and other factors.

2.2 Procedures

First, the pre-study was conducted beforehand. After receiving the teachers' replies, the author made a preliminary analysis of the data. After the data had been obtained, participants in the interview were selected using a purposive sampling method, because part of the criteria of purposive sampling was related to the results of the questionnaire survey. While conducting the interview, the author recorded the entire content with the author's iPad, after that, the author made transcripts according to the recording files. Some key points were reflected in the text of the transcripts, and according to these key points, the study got the answers to the interview questions.

3 Findings

3.1 Tasks and TBLT

The change of teaching environment and teaching methods is a new experience for all teachers, and teachers do need a period of time to adapt, especially when using tasks in online teaching. All sessions need to be considered and designed again, and teachers need to have a positive attitude to solve all difficulties and problems encountered in the new experience, which also further promote the improvement of teachers' overall online teaching skills.

There are some challenges in task design and operation.

Four teachers said that the biggest challenge for them in the online teaching was using a variety of online platforms, regardless of what kind of teaching content was being taught. (Teacher E: "At the very beginning of the online teaching, our school hadn't decided on which platform was better to use, so sometimes we would use 3-4 online platforms at the same time, which was not easy for me, because my eyesight is not very good and facing the computer screen for a long time made me very uncomfortable.....Then it seemed to get better, but I still needed to use 2 platforms, and then I got used to it and didn't feel inconvenient.")

The teachers also mentioned that since they were not particularly good at using electronic devices before, they were flustered when they suddenly had to learn to use so many platforms and software. (Teacher D: "For me, some of the new features on the platform are interesting to me, but I'm not sure I'm using them correctly when using the tasks in the online teaching, because I'm not very good at using electronic devices all the time.")

Three teachers also mentioned that the biggest challenge for them was to move the tasks online and make sure they worked properly. (Teacher B: "I'm always not sure

that my tasks are effective, or I need another way to make sure my tasks are effective, because after the group is separated, I have difficulty making sure everyone is focused on the class and the tasks”). Teacher C also mentioned that the biggest challenge for her is the timing. In many cases she needs to control the time of each session precisely, because in the virtual space, it is easy to spend too much time in a certain section of the task.

There are some problems in carrying out tasks.

All teachers described many real problems they had encountered with online teaching. Among them, unexpected problems related to online teaching were: network problems for both teachers and students, complicated learning environment for students, sudden breakdown of equipment, unable to open the teaching resources folder in time, etc. Unexpected problems related to the tasks use in the online classroom were: students cannot understand the rules of the task accurately (especially in classes with a large number of students), and the type of task and the way it is presented can sometimes be limited.

3.2 Interaction and Communication Patterns

Teachers are exploring a variety of teaching methods centered on their own styles. Interaction and communication play a vital role in improving students' speaking ability. In online teaching, the way these activities are carried out has fundamentally been changed. Meanwhile teachers are still exploring ways to teach that are more appropriate for themselves. Making the classroom have more detailed groups and organizing tasks in advance can be a very useful approach. Students have clear behavioral requirements for carrying out the task based on more detailed instructions and will be better able to complete the task because of the advanced preparation required.

There are some different task patterns in designing tasks.

There were six teachers described different teaching methods and teaching styles. First, they all said that it is possible to achieve interaction and communication in online teaching, and second, there is actually no particular difference in the way to carry out the tasks, only a little difference in the operation method.

First, many teachers mentioned that working in a group would give students more opportunities to practice, “work in small groups of two to perform a five-minute performance based on the class content” (Teacher A). Second, presentations in the classroom are also an effective way to carry out tasks, “I usually put the students in small groups to discuss the class content and put them in different rooms and after a period of time, invite representatives to give presentations to all of us” (Teacher B). “I like to let students present in class” (Teacher E). “Rehearsing a short conversation to present in class” (Teacher F). Meanwhile, the teachers also mentioned that the necessary preparation of the students in advance would make the task proceed more successfully, “I will let the students prepare in advance to practice the dialogues contained in the class content” (Teacher C), “I usually tell my students to prepare in advance” (Teacher D).

The new technologies that have emerged in the classroom have led to a new direction in teacher-student communication. Not only teachers, but also students are adapting to this new change, because teachers are constantly summarizing in the online classroom, gaining new ways of interacting that suit their course teaching and their own style. And to a certain extent, it also places new demands on students, and that is to emphasize the importance of pre-reading and preparing well in advance once again.

3.3 Evaluation

Changes in the teaching environment and teaching methods have created more possibilities for student assignments and tasks, teachers have provided more solutions to the problems they face while evaluating student performance, and teachers have used a variety of tasks in online teaching to reduce student errors due to external factors.

Teachers adopt multiple evaluation criteria.

Four teachers said that their grades do not depend on one or two tasks, only one mark does not affect a student's final score, and there are also a lot of opportunities for students to correct a single mistake. However, teachers also said that if it is a long-term problem, such as Internet problems, they will also advise students to improve it, because the problem does have an impact on their scores if it exists for a long time. (Teacher C: "I understand that there are all kinds of problems with online teaching, both for teachers and, of course, for students. So, I certainly don't judge a student because of one bad performance due to external factors".)

Also, three teachers said they would evaluate the students based on their performance right on the spot because of the fairness. However, they will give these students a clear comment and suggestion for them to make improvement next time. (Teacher E: "I usually evaluate the performance based on the received work or what I hear because other students also make efforts, but at the same time, for external factors, I don't deduct too many points because I know that it is not what they expect".)

Teachers accept different forms of assignments.

In addition to classroom records, other teachers mentioned several other ways to collect student completion of tasks, such as forms for evaluating each other, audio or video sent by students, and student learning reports. The emergence of these learning records is closely linked to the new teaching methods and technology, because teachers use abundant resources to innovate their teaching methods. Thus, students have some new and exciting experiences. (Teacher A: "Nowadays, almost all the online classes are recorded, so every video becomes a record of student performance".)

3.4 Teachers' and Students' Roles

Teachers' participation in the task varies from person to person, and different teachers' styles lead them to play different roles in the classroom. In the online classroom, teachers may face many difficult problems, and these problems also affect their per-

formance in the task to some extent. The online classroom has created new challenges for students' engagement in tasks, as it is difficult for teachers to ensure that students are seriously engaged behind the screen, which is much harder than in a real classroom.

Teachers provide space for students to fully express themselves in the task design and operation process.

Five teachers said they would not generally be involved in their students' tasks, and only one teacher said he would add some elements of his involvement in designing the task. (Teacher D: "I love doing tasks with my students and I enjoy being involved in their communication, I don't think it takes away from their opportunity to talk, it's a learning experience for them when we do tasks together.....I can also make sure that everything goes well according to the teaching plan during the tasks.")

At the same time, four teachers said they would intervene in the task when there were obvious errors in the conduct of the task, such as wrong answers to questions, obvious errors in the content of the performance, etc. And two teachers indicated that they would not intervene in the task for the time being until it is completely finished, and the correction and evaluation of the task would focus on the stage after the completion of the task. (Teacher E: "Sometimes I'm not sure if they can continue as planned after I intervene in their tasks, so I usually don't intervene in their tasks, no matter what the error is, I wait until the task is completed.")

Teachers focus on students' learning conditions in the process of task implementation.

Teachers said they found that students who were usually active in class would still be active in online class, and students who were inactive in class would still be inactive in online class. Online teaching does make it more difficult for everyone, but it also makes the classroom, to a certain extent, more interesting and convenient. (Teacher A: "The students were not less active, but I'm not so sure they were as attentive behind the screen as they were in the real classroom".)

The degree of student engagement in tasks and classroom activities is a topic that teachers need to consider in both offline and online classrooms, but online classrooms make this topic more difficult. However, teachers are still actively searching for ways to ensure as much students' participation as possible in classroom tasks, which is always a big test for task design and classroom control.

3.5 Teaching Materials

In the interviews, teachers said that providing students with as much knowledge as possible is one of their goals, no matter whether it's in offline or online classes. The content of textbooks may not seem to be enough to accomplish the overall improvement of students' abilities, but along with the requirements of the teaching plan for the teaching content, teachers have a stricter challenge in the selection of teaching

materials, because the completion of the teaching plan is one of the most important goals for teachers.

All the teachers said that they would add appropriate content outside the textbook, but the content and level of addition would vary from person to person. Although teachers did not teach exactly the same courses and had different textbooks, they all felt that if they used the textbooks only to design tasks, especially in online teaching, the format of the tasks might be rather simple. Regarding the content added, the teachers all said that there was a lot of materials in the real life that could be used as teaching content, especially in improving students' speaking ability. Some conversations that happened in the daily life might become a topic for a task.

At the same time, teachers also said that they all try to provide as much new ideas and tasks as possible to expand students' horizons in front of limited time and limited teaching methods, but this was not always successful. Sometimes because the class needed to achieve a certain teaching objective or there were some assignments that had to be completed, they could only teach according to the content of the textbook. (Teacher A: "It is important to teach the lesson based on the content of the textbook because we need to accomplish some teaching objectives and the textbook is our standard. But at the same time, some new content is added to the task because I don't feel that relying entirely on textbook content can make the class interesting and attractive".)

Teaching materials are also one of the effective measures to enhance the interest in the classroom. By selecting teaching materials, teachers can enhance students' motivation to participate in the task to a certain extent, but at the same time, the amount of teaching materials and the selection of content need to be based on the premise of completing the teaching plan.

3.6 Study Goals and Content

Improving students' ability is one of the main purposes of teaching, and some teachers will follow this purpose and achieve the goals, while some teachers will also make some efforts to enhance the interest of the classroom in the process of achieving the goals, although this is not easy work.

Teachers focus on students' learning needs and interests in task design and implementation.

Most teachers believed that making tasks interesting was one of the most important methods to capture students' attention, but three teachers said that sometimes it was difficult for them to balance importance and interest because designing tasks that were interesting enough was not an easy thing, and sometimes a busy schedule might not allow them to pay much attention to designing interesting tasks. (Teacher A: "It's not easy for me to design interesting tasks, I need to think a lot to decide how to do a task, even if I know that an interesting task will improve my teaching". Teacher E: "I hope my tasks are interesting, but I'm not always sure which kind of tasks are interesting enough".)

The other three teachers argued that they always added some interesting elements to the design of the task, and that it might be possible to make the task interesting by

simply changing the implementation of the original task, and these changes would not take much time and energy. (Teacher B: “For me, I often change the way the task will be carried out, for example, if I use a simple group task to explain their views on new energy, I will let them argue against each other in the group, while trying to convincing each other that their views are the best and proving that the new energy they mentioned is the most beneficial, so that the students have more fun in a competitive way”.)

New teaching technologies seem to provide teachers with some new ideas, and teachers are trying to motivate students and create a classroom that they enjoy by assigning different kinds of online assignments and tasks that are close enough to real life to increase student engagement. But to a certain extent, not all classrooms or all teachers are good at doing this.

3.7 Teaching and Learning Procedures

In the new teaching environment, feedback is given in a variety of forms, and students are able to gain a more intuitive sense of task completion through these different forms of feedback.

All the teachers said that giving feedback is an important part of the teaching process, but the way they give feedback varies slightly depending on their personal teaching styles. Some teachers used to give feedback in the class and then give feedback based on the students’ performance after the group presentation. Some teachers prefer to give individual feedback to students after class, but this is also related to the type of the task, if it is a group task, the teacher may not give feedback to each student, but to the group as a whole. (Teacher C: “I give more verbal feedback and talk directly to the students after they have performed, which is very efficient”. Teacher D: “I will give both written and verbal feedback to the students. The written feedback will be simpler, but I will explain to the students, and the written feedback is mainly for me to give a summary evaluation to the students at the end of the semester”.)

The teachers showed their different personalities and teaching styles in the interviews, and these differences were reflected in the use of tasks that produced significant differences. All of the approaches and strategies used by the teachers at this stage were the result of their continuous exploration in the classroom, in terms of designing tasks and implementing them in ways that were appropriate for themselves.

4 Suggestions for EFL Teachers Who are Involved in Online Teaching

This study can provide us with some relevant implications on three areas.

The first part is designing part. Reasonable design and sufficient perpetration can make the tasks run more smoothly. Teachers need to arrange the time of each session carefully, because time flows quickly in the virtual space and some details may be missed if teachers do not pay attention to the time schedule and enforce the schedule strictly. And also, teachers should always have a plan B, because teachers will never

know what will happen in the next minute in the online classroom. Although most of the problems that occur in the teaching process are not difficult for teachers to solve, due to the unique features of the online classroom, being prepared in advance can save a lot of time for everyone.

The second part is operating part. (1) The use of multiple online resources and different task formats enables teachers to manage the classroom better. If teaching conditions permitted, the pair work tasks are far more effective than the group work tasks. And while using multiple resources, it is also important to identify the authority and reliability of these resources, for example, using online resources that are certified by the university is much more reliable. The vast number of online resources can also be mixed with much incorrect content, so teachers need to investigate and research well in advance to avoid teaching incorrect content in the classroom. (2) Focus on students' learning habits and needs. Students can get familiar with the textbook content by submitting group work assignments in advance, so that they can participate in the online classroom tasks more actively, such as the so-called flipped classroom. Meanwhile, if a task is complex or completely new, teachers can design the task by showing examples, especially in online teaching, a suitable example can help students turn in better work. When there are some students in the class who are not good at speaking in front of others, designing some tasks that are suitable for them, such as having a discussion in a small chat room, paying attention to the performance of these students during the task, and encouraging them to use different ways to express themselves, are always effectively including them in the task. At the same time, teachers can also allow these students to submit some of their assignments as private messages to the teacher, so that they feel more comfortable to complete the assignment better. Another thing to do is to keep updating the students' learning needs and learning interests, and trying to meet as many of their needs as possible by adding content outside of the textbook. Finally, teacher must make good use of the various functions of the teaching software and use them as a basis to communicate more with students, such as chat rooms, forums and message boards.

The third part is post-class part. Accept and provide diverse evaluation criteria, forms, methods and systems. When evaluating students' performance, it is better to use diverse evaluation criteria instead of focusing on one characteristic, such as using the completeness, clarity, fluency, and accuracy of the work. As teacher must allow students' work to have space for improvement, and focused on encouragement to stimulate students' motivation and interest. Teachers need to accept different types of student assignments in the online classroom, not only traditional forms of work should be recognized as student academic performance, but videos, voice-overs, musicals, role plays, presentations are also acceptable. Teachers need to renew themselves and to accept more and more new elements faster and faster. Clearly define the evaluation criteria for task completion before the task, provide explanations and use reasonable evaluation methods for different situations. It's not easy for teachers to know each student's performance each time, so allowing group members to evaluate each other in small groups is acceptable.

5 Conclusion

In general, teachers always use tasks online. They believe that tasks provide students with the opportunity to become qualified language users [8], but the changes in the teaching space have given them some challenges, and these challenges may have caused some inconvenience for the teachers. But in any case, the use of tasks in improving students' speaking ability is still approved by teachers. The semi-structured interviews clarified the teachers' perceptions of their attitude towards the tasks, as well as their implementation of the tasks in online teaching.

It is clear from the interview that teachers use tasks in their online classrooms frequently. At the same time, however, tasks are not as easy to control in the online classroom as they are in the physical classroom. This transition is challenging for both teachers and students, and affects the normal teaching and learning process to some extent [9]. Many of the problems that arise due to the Internet can limit the use of tasks.

Some of the teachers' teaching habits change because of the shift in teaching space, they need to pay more attention to time allocation in online teaching, and they also need to design tasks more compactly. In terms of improving students' speaking ability, the tasks need to give each student the opportunity to do so, because individual performance is more difficult to be seen in the online classroom.

At the same time, modern education and teaching technology have added more possibilities for learning [10], the online classroom provides more potential for students to improve their speaking ability. And some teaching resources and tasks that were not given much attention before are being used now, and the development of these new elements is also an opportunity for teachers to challenge themselves and for students to discover their infinite possibilities.

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