

Considering the Efficacy and Suitability of Task-Based Learning in a Chinese High School English Class

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Abstract: Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) refers to the use of tasks as the essential component of planning and instruction in language teaching. In TBLT, language learning becomes a process that provides many communicative opportunities for learners and primarily focuses on making meaning. Additionally, TBLT is a form of learner-centered teaching approach, in which learners learn the target language with self-motivated and task-based pair work or group work. Although TBLT have influenced English languages teaching throughout the world, with a number of Asian countries widely promoting TBLT in their English education policies, many difficulties have emerged with respect to implementing these methods in practice. In China, the ministry of national education proposed the new curriculum standard (2001), which clearly required application of task-based language teaching in to basic language teaching. However, many Chinese scholar argue that it is inadvisable to directly import and use Task-based language teaching in China, as this should be localized and teaching methods should be chosen flexibly. It is therefore important to apply these modern teaching methods with an exact and careful consideration of the cultural values and realistic environments.

Keywords: TBLT; Efficacy; Suitability; Chinese high school; English class

This essay aims to explore the extent to which TBLT is a both suitable and effective approach to English language teaching (ELT) in Chinese high school context and seeks to identify implications for further advancement of using TBLT in China and other similar contexts.

1. Context

The chosen context for this analysis is a public high school located in a medium-sized city, Loudi in Hunan province, central China. In this high school, there are three grades, with approximately 20 classes for every grade. Class size is approximately around 55 students per class, from different areas of the Hunan province. In summary, as proportional representation of the students, 50% originate from cities, 30% from towns and 20% villages. In general, over 80% of students will go to the university and among them, around 15% of students will be admitted to the key universities in China; only a few will look to study at overseas universities such as in the UK and USA.

In this school, from Monday to Saturday, seven forty-five minutes classes are conducted with ten-minute intervals between every class. Students with a total of ten English classes per week. Apart from that, teachers encourage students to take part in after-school self-study for a further three hours, and almost 97% of students will attend this. Teaching resources include both multimedia technologies and the blackboard. In terms of the teaching method, PPP is mainly used in this high school. About two thirds of teachers were very experienced with an average age of around 47, while the remainders were younger without significant teaching experience prior to their employment at this school. As regards the English lessons, teaching objectives focused on teaching students the knowledge of grammar and developing language skills that will be examined, namely reading, listening, and writing. The context was very much exam-oriented, with two important written assessments both at mid-term and the end of the semester. The English exams were designed to assessed three specific skills, namely, listening (20%), reading (30%), grammar and writing (50%).

2. Challenges in specific learning environment and broader context

In this specific study, one significant challenge was the lack of superior language environment and broader learning context and conditions as Chinese second language learners, with an absence of opportunities in any natural environment beyond the language learning classroom. Major proponents of and studies conducted into TBLT originate or are focused in countries where English is the official language, specifically, Nunan (Australia initially, then Hong Kong); Prabhu (India and Singapore); in contrast to the Chinese L2 learners in this study, learners are learning the target language through engaging in cultural integration. However, many primary and secondary school English teachers in China may lack professional competence, which leads them to being able to offer only limited help to their students. Furthermore, in China, high school students' motivation to learn English is mainly to succeed in exams in order to progress further in education, especially university entrance exams, so they principally focus on grammar learning rather than natural communicative purposes.

A further issue in the suitability and potential successful implementation of TBLT in China is the conceptual constraint between

the principal concepts of TBL and traditional language teaching methods used in China. Foreign language learning usually requires more formal instruction and other measures to make up for the lack of environmental support. In contrast, task-based language teaching emphasizes the meaning and fluency of language expressiveness which means focusing on acquisition of implicit knowledge while reducing the proportion of the literary education during the teaching process. Such a discrepancy in cultural values regarding teaching and learning makes it challenging in China to apply communicative approach in their classrooms.

Finally, large class sizes is much debated barriers to the effective application of TBL in China. The large classes are common, and teachers find it difficult to carry out some communicative activities whilst feeling confident in managing the whole class during the group work, thus, opting rather for a more traditional grammar-based teaching method. Furthermore, there is the challenge in introducing communicative activities and encouraging every student to participate in tasks actively. Moreover, TBLT is related to the performance-based assessments tend to be very time-consuming in such large size classrooms, therefore, teachers often feel powerless over management and assessment-related decisions, when implementing TBL in the classroom.

3. Pedagogical recommendations

One solution may be to develop communicative learning outside as well as inside the classroom. In many Chinese cities, English clubs can be often found. Such spaces not only offer students opportunities to practice English in a more natural environment, but further, serve as a means of granting participants greater autonomy and motivation in their learning. Moreover, multimedia and network resources have tremendous potential in education in task-based language teaching approach. Consequently, making full use of new technologies such as computer-mediated communication(CMC) in TBLT may be conducive to creating a better language learning environment for students.

The second recommendation is to shape a more flexible conceptualization of TBLT for teachers. TBLT was introduced as counter-approaches to the traditional language teaching methods in Asia. However, it may be feasible to effectively combine PPP with TBL in such a way that the teachers can minimize the limitations of PPP, instead of totally abandoning it. Communicative teaching methods do not exclude the role of explicit knowledge of language such like grammar structure. In fact, in many Asian countries, TBL were integrated into the curricula and education policies prior to teachers receiving sufficient training therein. So in order to effectively apply TBL in China, it is necessary to give teachers sufficient initial training so that they may acquire a real understanding of the nature of TBLT and be more confident before implementing it into practical situation.

Lastly, a scientific evaluation system is an important guarantee to achieve course objectives (Ministry of education of the People's Republic of China, 2001). For TBLT to be successfully and more effectively implemented in China, it should be noted that the evaluation content should be comprehensive, and the evaluation methods should also be diversified. Both the testable evaluation methods and the non-testable evaluation methods could be used, such as observation, question, discussion and the construction of learning files for learners. The current language evaluation system is too focused on knowledge and results while ignoring the humanistic perspective, thus a form of teaching rigidly centered on the exam has developed and as such this impedes the development of physical and mental abilities of students. Therefore, it is necessary to re-establish a more comprehensive and objective evaluation system in China.

4. Conclusion

This essay has described the teaching context by taking my class as an example. It can be seen clearly that TBL was helpful for students' future life, because of their authentic language using context, high motivation learning environment and cultivating comprehensive language ability of learners. However, there were many obstacles when implement TBL in the context, namely, lack of a real language environment, teacher's incomplete understanding of TBLT, cultural and contextual constraints. Consequently, some useful proposals are put forwards. The first is to create communicative language learning context outside as well as inside the classroom. The next suggestion is to shape a right and more flexible conceptualization of TBLT for teachers. The third is to build a comprehensive and scientific evaluation system. There seems to be no single golden method that could works very well for every learner regardless of context. Similarly, whether TBL could works in China or not depends on how flexibly these approaches can be conceptualized and localized.

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