

Benefits and Implementation Challenges of Task-Based Language Teaching in the Chinese EFL Context

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Abstract

With the recent high-profile and frequent use of tasks in language teaching, there exists a trend in the English as foreign language (EFL) classrooms in China that the long-established traditional teaching methods based on the presentation-practice-production (PPP) model are now being replaced by task-based language teaching (TBLT). Much research has been done concerning the application of TBLT, but less is known about its challenges for implementing TBLT in Chinese EFL context. Based on the analysis of the existing pedagogical problems caused by the traditional English teaching methods, this paper aims to identify benefits and challenges in TBLT implementation in Chinese EFL context. It concludes by suggesting that a contextual adaptation to TBLT in Chinese EFL setting should be made and TBLT can be best feasible and useful if a context-sensitive TBLT approach in which Chinese traditional values, examination demands, teachers' teaching beliefs and practices interact best with the principles of TBLT.

Key words: task; task-based language teaching; effectiveness; implementation challenges.

1. Introduction and background

In the last few years, China has designed and promoted the New Curriculum Standards (NCS) (Wang, Q., 2007) in which communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based language teaching (TBLT) have been strongly advocated. In order to improve English learners' ability to do things with English, NCS suggested that English teachers create real life situations and contexts in teaching and use various language teaching approaches that emphasize both process and product. TBLT seems to begin to form a part of an agenda for change of teaching methods across the school curriculum and it has been widely used in English classrooms from then on. Researchers and English teachers in China also began to do research on theories and practices of TBLT from different perspectives and much has been achieved since then. As a learner-centered approach to language teaching, TBLT is considered to be of great benefits in achieving communicative competence and increasing the motivation of language learners because it allows for more meaningful communication and often offers a practical extra-linguistic skill building. However, there is still considerable skepticism concerning its effectiveness in the Chinese EFL learning context. Therefore, the implementation challenges of TBLT need to be further explored so that English teachers can better understand how they can best carry out TBLT to improve English language teaching (ELT) in the Chinese EFL context.

2. Pedagogical problems in the traditional English classes in China

English has long been considered as one of the most important subjects in school syllabus and curriculum in China and great efforts have been made to improve ELT. The past three decades have seen a great progress achieved in ELT field ever since China has carried out its reform and opening-up policy to the

outside world at the very beginning in the 1980s. Many factors have contributed to this progress and the teaching methods are generally regarded as a very important one. In Chinese EFL teaching context, the pursuit of more effective teaching methods is an important job for English teachers and researchers. The traditional approach to ELT has long been the grammar-translation and audio-lingual methods within the PPP model, namely, the presentation-practice-production model, which is based on a view of learning as linear process of understanding, internalizing and activating language knowledge. This is a form-based instruction which usually comprises three stages. Presentation often focuses on grammar points usually explicitly presented in a context or without a context to develop learners' understanding of the language points. Presentation is followed by practice done to enable learners to use and automatize newly grasped language points. Production is the last stage in which the learners are expected to reproduce the target language. PPP model has long been carried out in English classrooms in China because it has been proved to be useful and effective for English learners to develop their linguistic competence, especially the abilities of English reading and writing. PPP model in language teaching has received criticism recently mainly for placing language learners at a very passive role in learning because in this teaching model, classroom teachers focus on grammar and structure, which produces unsatisfactory results. Students have little ability to speak and understand English (Ng & Tang, 1997). "As a logical development of CLT" (Richards & Rodgers, 2001:223) and a realization form of CLT, TBLT is believed to provide a better solution to the problems in the traditional English classrooms in China by placing learners at the center of the class teaching and learning. Much research even argues that TBLT is taking the place of the long-established traditional teaching methods within the PPP model in second language acquisition (SLA) (e.g., Skehan, 1996, 1998a; Willis, 1996, 2004).

3. Defining 'task' and the characteristics of TBLT

The term "Task-based" was developed in the 1980s and 1990s as an approach which was considered as an innovation in teaching when people became aware that the learner needed to be at the centre of attention. TBLT has become an important topic in the field of SLA in terms of fostering process-focused syllabi and devising communicative tasks to enhance learners' real language use through the emergence of the CLT approach in the early 1980s and much places emphasis on learners' communicative abilities during the past two decades (Jeon & Hahn, 2000). Task holds a central place both in current SLA research and in language pedagogy (Ellis, 2003). This is evident in the large number of recent publications that are related to TBLT (e.g., Willis, 1996; Skehan, 1998b; Ellis, 2003). So what is a task?

The term task has been defined by many researchers and it certainly covers different interpretations. As the first significant person whose main contributions have been raising the EFL world awareness to TBLT, Prabhu (1987:24) defines a task as "an activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process". Ellis (2003) defines task in the following dimensions: (1) the scope of a task; (2) the perspective from which a task is viewed; (3) the authenticity of a task; (4) the linguistic skills to perform a task; (5) the psychological processes involved in task performance, and (6) the outcome of a task. Long (1985: 89) defines task as "a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward. Thus examples of tasks include painting a fence, dressing a child, filling out a form, buying a pair of shoes..."

When those tasks are transformed from the real world to the classroom, they become pedagogical tasks, which Willis (1996:53) defines as "a goal-oriented activity in which learners use language to achieve a

real outcome”. The most comprehensible pedagogical definition is provided by Nunan (2004:4) who emphasized that

“a pedagogical task is a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, in which the attention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning, a middle and an end”.

These definitions share something in common in the following criteria as indicated by Ellis (2009):

- 1). The primary focus should be on ‘meaning’ (by which is meant that learners should be mainly concerned with processing the semantic and pragmatic meaning of utterances).
- 2). There should be some kind of ‘gap’ (i.e. a need to convey information, to express an opinion or to infer meaning).
- 3). Learners should largely have to rely on their own resources (linguistic and non-linguistic) in order to complete the activity.
- 4). There is a clearly defined outcome other than the use of language (i.e. the language serves as the means for achieving the outcome, not as an end in its own right).

Breen defines task-based language learning as ‘any structured language learning endeavor which has a particular objective, appropriate content, a specified working procedure, and a range of outcomes for those who undertake the task’ (Breen, 1987:23). ‘task’ in this sense is assumed to refer to all kinds of work plans that have the overall purpose of facilitating language learning, from the simple and brief exercise type to more complex and lengthy activities such as group problem solving or simulations and decision making (Wesche & Skehan, 2002).

The TBLT approach toward language teaching has emerged in response to some constraints of the traditional PPP approach. It means that language learning is a developmental process enhancing communication and social interaction rather than a product internalized by practicing language items, and that learners master the target language more effectively when being exposing to meaningful task-based activities in a natural way. TBLT is characterized by the following features (Nunan, 1991):

- 1). An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language
- 2). The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation
- 3). The provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language, but also on the learning process itself
- 4). An enhancement of the learner’s own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning
- 5). An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activation outside the classroom

4. Benefits of TBLT in Chinese EFL setting

As a pedagogical innovation that aims at solving the problems existing in the traditional language classrooms, TBLT provides many benefits to ELT and Ellis (2009) lists these benefits as follows:

- 1) TBLT provides the opportunity for ‘natural’ learning within the classroom context
- 2) It stresses meaning over form; however, it can also emphasize learning form
- 3) It offers learners a fertile input of target language

- 4) It is intrinsically motivating
- 5) It is consistent with a learner-focused educational philosophy but also gives permission for teacher input and guidance
- 6) It contributes to the improvement of communicative fluency while not disregarding accuracy
- 7) It can be deployed together with a more traditional approach

Ellis points out that the overall purpose of a task-based approach is to create opportunities for language learning and skill development through collaborative knowledge building (Ellis, 2003), which is especially true in Chinese EFL context. In contrast to the traditional language teaching in which the grammar-translation method or the audiolingual method are often used and learners are usually passive participants, TBLT emphasizes learners' active participation in pair and/or group work and suggests that teachers support students with meaningful classroom tasks and help them to finish those tasks through modeling, experiencing, participating, cooperating and communicating (Klapper, 2003; Nunam, 2004; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Therefore, TBLT is a student-centered and teacher-facilitated teaching approach. Teachers are no longer the authority; instead, teachers begin to take the roles of being facilitators, participants, advisers and source providers in TBLT classrooms. Students assume the roles of group participants, monitors, risk-takers and innovators by doing the authentic tasks introduced into the learning materials. What is more important is that TBLT aims at enhancing learners' communicative competence which is, to a great extent, ignored in the traditional English classrooms in China.

5. Implementation challenges of TBLT in Chinese EFL context

Hatip (2005) (cited in Hismanoglu, M &, S. Hismanoglu, 2011) summarizes a long list of challenges for implementing TBLT as listed below:

- 1) The drawbacks of task-based learning rely not so much on the potential powerfulness of this type of instructional content but on problems of concluding the instruction.
- 2) Task-based learning involves a high level of creativity and dynamism on the part of the teacher. If the teachers are restricted to more traditional roles or do not possess time and resources to provide task-based teaching; this type of teaching may be impracticable.
- 3) Task-based learning necessities resources beyond the textbooks and related materials generally available in foreign language classrooms.
- 4) Students may, at first, refuse or reject to task-based language learning in that this type of instruction is not what many students expect and want from a language class.
- 5) Some learners employ the mother tongue when they face with a difficulty or if the group feels intolerant.
- 6) Some individuals enhance superior communication strategies, e.g. miming and employing gestures, but get by employing just uncommon words and phrases and let others provide the more challenging language they need. This may give rise to the fossilization of those individuals prior to improving very far in the syntax of the target language.
- 7) Some learners are inclined to get caught up in making an effort to find the appropriate word, and not worry about how it is placed into the discourse.
- 8) There is a danger for learners to attain fluency at the expense of accuracy.

Many studies have been done concerning TBLT in mainland China (Zheng, 2008). These studies (e.g. Wu, 2011; Deng & Carless, 2010), mostly investigating the application of TBLT at tertiary level and in public school classrooms, have emphasized the factors that constrained the implementation of TBLT in

classrooms, including teachers' belief and some contextual factors in China, such as the examination system of English subject, the availability of resources, students' different needs and language proficiency levels. But besides these constraining factors, some other factors specific in Chinese EFL context tend to be more important and need to be explored as follows.

5.1 Conflicting with the Chinese traditional values and traditions

As a communicative approach to language teaching, TBLT is rooted in the western culture. Many teachers and researchers have questioned whether the communicative approach is appropriate in countries with 'cultures of learning' (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996) different from Western settings, where the approach was developed. Chinese Confucian-heritage teaching and learning tradition emphasizes a hierarchical relation between teachers and students and the class teaching tends to be teacher-centered. Hu (2005: 653) describes the traditional Chinese culture of learning as one in which 'education is conceived more as a process of knowledge for immediate purpose, and the preferred model of teaching is a mimetic or epistemic one that emphasizes knowledge transmission'. This cultural tradition may pose great challenges on a learner-centered approach, such as TBLT, which may lead to noise and indiscipline not welcome by teachers (Carless, 2004, Li, 1998).

5.2 Focus on meaning being incompatible with examination demands

Chinese learners learn English mainly for two goals: a practical goal relating to examinations and another goal for communication, and the former one being more important for learners' educational future because the present Chinese examination system focuses mainly on testing learners' accurate language knowledge. This orientation of examination system exerts a great influence on the teaching and learning of English in China. As a result, in Chinese settings language teaching is generally seen as the delivery of knowledge rather than the development of communicative skills (Hu, 2005). As a meaning-focused approach to teaching language, it is sufficient to acknowledge that task-based approaches emphasize communication of meaning rather than study of grammatical form as the starting point for learning activities (Carless, 2009). Willis and Willis (2007) argue that TBLT is not designed with examination in mind and that it is designed to produce learners who can use their English outside the classroom, even they make grammatical mistakes. But obviously, Chinese learners cannot afford that price because they are still being given the traditional tests such as end-term tests or tests for entrance examinations, which focus on language knowledge and mainly include reading, writing and even listening, but not speaking. TBLT does not sufficiently well prepare learners for the traditional and form-focused examinations. There is therefore a mismatch between examinations and TBLT. Ignorance of language form in TBLT becomes a big problem for Chinese learners to learn English which makes TBLT, to some extent, incompatible with examination demands.

5.3 Lacking language context

English can be best learned in English language environment. TBLT provides a good language environment for learning. Willis & Willis (2007: 220) argue that generally it is best to do all the classroom organization and instruction giving in English, as this creates a very real context and purpose for listening". But in many cases Chinese teachers themselves lack confidence to conduct communicative tasks in English because they feel that their own proficiency is not sufficient to engage in communication or deal with students' unforeseen needs (Littlewood, 2006). It may be safely concluded that TBLT is applicable for advanced learners but not quite useful for those younger learners whose English is not so good because Li's study (2003:690) suggests that some Chinese teachers considered their students' low

English proficiency as the key factor which prevented them from using English in communication activities. English is a foreign language in China; as a result, most of the English learners do not have chances to use English outside the classrooms. Learners frequently use their mother tongue and avoid using English in classrooms, which often causes noise and indiscipline in classes, especially in big classes that are now commonly seen in today's Chinese schools across the whole country. Lack of English context becomes a language barrier to hinder Chinese learners' English learning.

6. Suggestion: a contextual adaptation to TBLT in Chinese EFL context

The goal of foreign language teaching in Chinese EFL context is to extend the range of communication situations in which the learner can perform with focus on meaning, but without being hindered by the attention he/she must pay to linguistic form. In other words, language form and language meaning are equally important. As an official pedagogical recommendation to teaching of English by NCS, TBLT is different from other more traditional methods of language teaching. In TBLT classes, lessons are constructed according to the language required to perform specific tasks rather than according to the aspects of language such as structures and vocabulary, which results in the different levels of challenges of TBLT when it is implemented in Chinese EFL context. The key problem is where the linguistic input comes from and how new knowledge is developed.

In order to solve the problems of TBLT, besides the improvement of teachers' understandings about it, a contextual adaptation to TBLT in Chinese EFL setting is necessary. Form-based and meaning-based approaches need not be in opposition to each other but can operate synergistically. TBLT can integrate meaning-focused activities with form-focused activities through learners' performance of communicative tasks. Two ways are suggested here addressing the problems in TBLT. First, a revised version of TBLT is recommended. Willis (1996) provides a three-staged model of TBLT in which a pre-task stage introduces the topic and helps students to activate relevant vocabulary without seeking to teach new language points or one particular grammatical structure. Focus on form occurs instead after the task in the post-task stage, an opportunity for explicit language instruction to counter the danger that learners develop fluency at the expense of accuracy. The revised version of TBLT is to explain the language points, especially those very difficult language points at the pre-task stage and leave most of the easy language points to be explained at the post-task stage. TBLT in this way becomes a teacher-led interaction. That is to say, the mastery of correct language points takes priority over the communicative language use, which is a quite familiar sequence of teaching procedure to most Chinese teachers who teach English.

Another form-focused option to implement TBLT which is possibly more suitable for school-aged students is the focused task, and this is offered by Ellis (2003). According to Ellis (2003), focused tasks have two objectives: to stimulate communicative language use and to target a pre-determined grammatical structure. This option aims to induce learners to use a particular grammatical structure productively or to process it receptively in the context of a communicative task.

7. Conclusion

In the Chinese EFL context, where there is little or no practical need to use English outside the classroom, most students study English as a school subject rather than as a practical language, and their aim is just to obtain high scores in high-stakes tests. There seems to be a mismatch between this situation and the communicative activities carried out in TBLT. The pedagogical benefits of TBLT are numerous, but there also exist many challenges in implementing TBLT in the Chinese EFL context which hinders it to be

firmly embedded in the classroom practices. What the Chinese teachers should do is reconcile the traditional pedagogy with the innovative methodology that is mostly rooted in Western culture, such as TBLT, in the Chinese context that is constrained by examination requirements. TBLT can be best feasible and useful if it can be adapted to be a context-sensitive teaching approach in which Chinese culture of learning, context, teachers' teaching beliefs, values and practices interact best with the principles of TBLT.

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