

Original Paper

Online Instruction Based on Task-based Language Teaching

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Abstract

The outbreak of the COVID-19 caused many Chinese universities to initiate online teaching. This paper aimed to develop Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) practices in online courses to enable teachers and students in China to employ TBLT appropriately and effectively. This research made a case study which was conducted as an online English class with a total of 28 undergraduate students at a university in Guangdong, China. The findings show that the transition from the traditional classroom to online education was successful. This innovative teaching mode promotes students to become the initiator of learning. Besides, the switched roles between students and teachers, advantages as well as problems of this approach have been pointed out. This case study could provide pedagogical implicatures for online English teaching and learning practically and theoretically, which helps to develop new forms that could assist teachers and students to adopt TBLT in class.

Keywords

language teaching, online education, task-based language teaching, Covid-19

1. Introduction

At the end of 2019, the outbreak of the new coronavirus pneumonia (COVID-19) severely threatened human health and safety. It has made a serious impact on people's work, life, and learning. In response to the Ministry of Education's call for "nonstop teaching and learning", most Chinese universities have started online education. In a short time, millions of teachers have to sit in front of a computer, and their students have to stay at home and take online courses.

However, in the environment of online teaching, students often have problems, such as a lack of self-discipline, suitable learning materials, or a good learning environment when they are self-isolated at home. Some teachers also felt frustrated during live online teaching because of little interaction with

students. The present case study focused on those problems presented above and discussed how teachers can implement Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) method to prevent negative learning attitudes of students and better improve the effectiveness of online education. The research analyzed the English teaching requirements under the background of online teaching and some theories of TBLT to explore a new way of English writing teaching in higher education as well as verify its feasibility and necessity. Therefore, it could contribute to pedagogical implicatures for online English teaching and research in the future.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Online Education

At the beginning of the 21st century, Chinese universities have launched online education reforms to form an open education network based on information and network technologies. With the rapid development of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC), the number of these online courses offered by Chinese universities has exceeded 500, and nearly 3 million people have participated in these courses (Shang & Cao, 2017).

2012 is the first year of MOOC, a new online education model. However, this online education model has some shortcomings, such as insufficient interaction, students' distraction, and lack of sense of presence. In 2013, Professor Armando Fox promoted a small-scale online course called SPOC to combine high-quality MOOC resources with face-to-face classroom teaching, and improved the teaching quality with the help of flipped classroom teaching model (He & Cao, 2015). Compared with MOOCs, SPOC has a new function of small class management and learning, which makes data analysis possible.

2016 was known as the first year of the Chinese network broadcast. "Live", as a means of information dissemination introduced into the field of education, has brought the rapid development of "live plus education".

In 2020, due to the outbreak of COVID-19, the Ministry of Education announced that all schools and universities in the spring should be postponed. In a short period, online teaching has been widely used in China, which further promotes the development of live online education.

Live online teaching is a novel teaching method that uses live broadcasting technology to connect teachers and students. Students are not only viewers but also participants. Compared with former online courses, live online teaching has the characteristics of a strong sense of presence and interaction, which can promote the deep learning of students. It could meet the diversity and personalized needs of students and promote the construction and sharing of educational resources.

In general, a complete online course requires an elaborate lesson plan design, teaching materials such as audio and video content, as well as technology support teams. However, due to the sudden emergence of the COVID-19, most faculty members are facing the challenges of lacking online

teaching experience, insufficient preparation, and suitable teaching approaches. Therefore, improving the quality of online classes is an urgent problem. It is instrumental in exploring integrated online and offline teaching modes in the future.

2.2 Task-based Language Teaching

Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) is based on the idea of “learning by doing” or “experiential learning” (Dewey, 1997), which means we learn a language by doing something with it rather than knowing about it. The goal of TBLT is to achieve communicative competence that is accurate, complex, and fluent through tasks that require engagement with that target language. TBLT has a weak version and a strong version. Weak TBLT (also referred to as task-supported language teaching) allows learners to use tasks as a means of analyzing language, whereas strong TBLT advocates subconscious learning only through tasks. It has reached an agreement that tasks are the building blocks of a TBLT curriculum.

Long (1985) defined tasks as obligatory or remunerative work and developed a theoretical model of task-based language teaching from the perspective of second language acquisition, later known as interactive revision theory. After the 21st century, Ellis (2003) conducted theoretical research on task-based language teaching and learning. Nunan, D (2004) wrote a book *Task-Based Language Teaching*, which comprehensively shows task-based language teaching. Tavakir and Foster (2008) published a paper in support of the current research conclusions on the combination of tight task structure and improved accuracy.

The general ideas of foreign researches about tasks are that the purpose of completing tasks is to require the information rather than to practice syntax structures.

TBLT became popular in China in the late 1990s. As Van den Branden (2009) points out, tasks are not blueprinting for action. Ruan Zhoulin (2001), Cheng Kela (2003), Qin Xiugui (2004) mainly conducted researches on the theoretical background of TBLT. From the aspect of task design, Cheng Kela (2003) believed that multimedia technology could help design tasks. Jia Zhigao (2005) designed the communicative task.

Considering the benefits of TBLT, many kinds of empirical researches on TBLT have also been flourishing. Ruan Zhoulin (2001) noticed the influence of the pre-task stage on interlanguage development. Zhang Jin (2014), Liu Yu (2017), and Gao Hang (2017) respectively conducted empirical researches on task-based language teaching in hotel English, medical English, and foreign nursing English. Jin Jiao (2017) proved that TBLT can be used to improve students' oral English skills by creating a learning atmosphere. Yu Na (2018) discussed the application of TBLT in vocational English teaching with the help of information technology.

To sum up, task-based language teaching has been proved to be an effective way of helping students stay motivated in learning English. It also works in developing the overall language skills. Therefore, it is of great significance to study the application of the task-based language teaching approach into

online courses. But few scholars combine the latest live broadcast and TBLT. Therefore, this research aims to redress this gap by analyzing pedagogical practices that could enable teachers in China to implement TBLT online.

The study aims to answer the following questions:

- (1) What are the disparities between the TBLT approach and the traditional teaching practices in Chinese online classrooms during the quarantine?
- (2) How can TBLT practices be adjusted to promote speaking instruction in online English classes in China, and what are the potential problems?

3. A Case Study

In this part, a case study will be used to show how to implement TBLT to teach English speaking in the current online teaching.

It was conducted in English as a Foreign Language classes at one university in Guangdong, China. A total of 28 undergraduate students were invited as the participants. The students were from different regions of the country and had different levels of English competencies, which could guarantee diversity in social and cultural backgrounds and proficiency levels of English.

According to the framework initiated by Willis (1996), there are three stages, respectively pre-task stage, task cycle stage, and language focus stage.

3.1 Pre-Task Stage

Firstly, it is of great necessity to set up a WeChat group for communication among students and teachers. The topic of this oral English class is job interviews. Before class, the instructor sent some background knowledge, keywords to help students get familiar with this topic.

This class chose the Tencent Meeting platform as the online classroom. At the beginning of this lesson, students were shown a video with several job interview examples. Then, students were asked to brainstorm a list of expressions related to jobs. Next, they were instructed to use sentences to describe their dreaming jobs.

3.2 Task Cycle Stage

The students were divided into groups of four, and they were delivered into sub-classrooms to work in pairs on some specific topics related to job interviews like “How can contemporary college students improve competitiveness in the job market?”, “What are your short- and long-term goals?”, “As a graduate, what should be paid attention to in an interview?”

After a twenty-minute discussion, one group firstly gave a job interview demo. Three students were chosen as employers, and the left one played the role of a job hunter. They need to imitate the real situation as best as they can. The interviewee firstly sent an e-resume to the interviewer by the former WeChat group. Then the interviewers asked some questions according to the e-resume. Every group was required to give a role play like that. When one group is acting, the other students should listen to

the dialogue and take notes to give feedback and comments for their performance.

3.3 Language Focus Stage

The students discussed each group's performance and then gave suggestions to others. The teacher summarized the whole class and gave feedback to students' performance and finally reviewed the main points such as keywords, main sentence structures for students. After that, all the students were required to revise their dialogues.

4. Case Analysis

This case study shows that the quick transition to online courses went smoothly and successfully. The experience gained can be used in the future. The related researches could be useful to other countries that have not found a way of transition yet.

4.1 The Roles of Teachers and Students

There was a pervasive perception among the teachers that English teaching in most schools was rather teacher-centered and characterized by a didactic style. It is also the reason why some teachers found it is much harder to have online classes than offline courses and often felt awkward when there is no response or interaction in a virtual classroom. The traditional classroom teaching cannot meet the requirements of students at present. Under the online learning mode, students are organized to learn by themselves before and after class. The teachers are responsible for specifying the main teaching points, conducting collaborative learning, classroom discussion, public speech, etc.

The role of teachers has greatly changed. It is said that "Teachers must have a bucket of water before giving students a bowl of water", which shows that the main task of teachers is to impart knowledge, and students' knowledge is a subset of teachers. While on the Internet, the update of knowledge is speeding up. Time does not allow teachers to teach students after they are filled with "a bucket of water". Even when the "bucket of water" is full, a lot of knowledge may be out of date. Thus, the role of present teachers as a single knowledge imparter has been greatly weakened. Instead, they have become the designer of teaching, the organizer of teaching activities, and the guide of the learning process.

More specifically, the role of teachers has changed as follows:

- (1) Teachers become the organizers and helpers of learning rather than the absolute authority of knowledge and the only source of information. The main work of teachers is to design and make preparations for learning resources and help students conduct cooperative learning.
- (2) Teachers' help plays the role of a scaffold in the process of students' learning. When students gradually learn to handle their learning independently, the scaffold can gradually disappear.
- (3) The teacher is not only an imparter of knowledge, a guide, and a helper of learning, but also a researcher, supporter, participant, and explorer of education and teaching reform.

Students, who were the passive recipient of knowledge, now become the master of learning. They should take full responsibility for their study. Under the guidance of teachers, students should learn to plan, organize and evaluate their learning. From the perspective of the relationship between teachers and students, they should be equal in personality. The teaching process is a process of mutual interaction between teachers and students. Students are the main body of tasks, and teachers are the leading role in teaching activities.

Among the different theories related to distance education, Sangrà (2002) affirms that the student is the essential element in any educational system. Their specific needs and characteristics are the elements that allow the technology to be implemented in distance education. This study also shares the view that English teaching should be student-centered or responsive to the abilities and interests of the students.

In a word, learning goal makers change from educators to learners, and educators become the evaluated person of learning activities so that online learning develops into interactive learning.

4.2 Advantages of Task-based Language Teaching Online

This practice not only guarantees the teaching progress and teaching quality during the epidemic but achieves equivalence between online learning and offline classroom teaching. It breaks the time limit of face-to-face learning since the learning process is not only in class, but also happens before and after class. It could meet the individual needs, expand the influence of teachers to promote educational equity. Moreover, after the epidemic, it can still be developed into a mixed-mode that combines online and offline teaching, laying the foundation for creating a more effective and better curriculum.

In daily life, there are various activities such as speech, presentation, report, conversation, discussion, and debate. The Internet provides a new way for oral English learning. In the classroom teaching, oral English practice opportunities are relatively few. With TBLT implemented into online classes, every learner has the opportunity to express himself with group members in isolated virtual classrooms without others' disturbance. In addition, among the factors that affect oral English, linguistic factors and non-verbal factors occupy an equally important position. There are many examples in our life that some students wish to speak English but dare not speak English. Various multimedia materials can promote learners' imaginative thinking, enhance their language ability, at the same time provide a relatively safe psychological environment for some learners with social anxiety. This communicative ability is also what TBLT emphasizes. In the case mentioned above, learners are encouraged to utilize their language strategies to handle situations that are very likely to happen in the future. They are also encouraged to work with their peers to complete the task. This pattern has been conducted and analyzed by Ellis (2003). Various scholars have claimed that TBLT is an ideal pedagogical tool in language teaching and learning because it facilitates learners to learn language through communicative tasks effectively (Ellis, 2009; Robinson, 2011). Those benefits of TBLT have also been claimed and evidenced by lots of researchers (Kim, 2011; Benson 2015; Sasayama, 2016).

4.3 Problems When TBLT was Applied Online

After that teaching practice, an interview was conducted to find out students' feelings and reactions to this new learning mode. Findings showed that almost all the participants expressed their request for teacher's more explanation of some oral expressions and the way to organize and express opinions. Although the teacher could provide some feedback in the final language focus stage, students prefer to seek the teacher's help during their task performance stage. Students were afraid of making mistakes and failed to express themselves fluently mainly because they had been so familiar with the teacher-centered teaching tradition in China. This teaching tradition had made them become passive receivers of knowledge rather than active ones in expressing ideas.

Another observation showed that students were reluctant in group work which was evidenced by their engagement in group discussions. Group discussions were discontinued at various places because the group members did not contribute their ideas, leading to long silences. The students did not value group work and interactions because they had not been provided with opportunities to have constant interactions with the teacher and their peers in class. When they were asked to do so, Chinese students usually feel too timid to share their ideas or find it difficult in interactions.

Some early studies show that even some teachers often do not like group work and are unwilling to adopt it in their classrooms because learners are disorganized and it usually causes low proficiency since students are reluctant to participate. Other reasons might be that teachers do not like to give up control. (Van den Branden, 2006)

Problems emerging from the researches and interviews above allude to a range of factors that allow us to solve the problems that arise in the implementation of TBLT and that need attention in future teacher training.

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