

Applicability Analysis of Task-Based Language Teaching Approach in the Context of College English Education in China

Chen Yang^{1*}

¹ International Education College, Henan Polytechnic University, Jiaozuo, P. R. China

* Chen Yang, E-mail: jessey@qq.com

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Abstract

As a widely-used language teaching approach, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has become increasingly popular in the field of second language acquisition, which can be applied in a wide range of different ages learners. The practice of TBLT in College English in China seems to be comparatively successful these years. The author starts his essay with a systematic literature review which addresses the theoretical bases of TBLT as well as the background information of College English Education in China. The essay then looks into the different practical situations in different learning contexts in Chinese colleges in terms of four English skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and tries to confirm which context is best suited to. Finally, the essay argues that it is difficult to define a specific section TBLT has obviously better effects than the other three in College English education, through comparing the strengths and limitations of application to each skill. In summary, TBLT can be favorably practiced in College English by narrowing down the drawbacks of the application to each skill.

Keywords

Task-based Language Teaching, College English Education, Teaching Context

1. Introduction

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), which is a kind of derivative that is originated from Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the 1980s (Willis, 1996), becomes increasingly popular nowadays in terms of the application on language learning especially English as a lingua franca. With the rise of CLT in the 1970s, the focus of language teaching has been shifted from “how to teach” to “how to learn”, therefore linguists and scholars begin to pay more attention on the process of learning so that TBLT emerges with a label of “learner-centred”.

The most distinguished feature of TBLT is “the use of tasks” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001), to be more detailed, language learners will make use of all sorts of materials under the guidance of task objects,

and employ various means to accomplish tasks, so as to improve their abilities to use the language in a comprehensive development (Skehan, 1998). As a branch of CLT, TBLT also holds the belief that exposure to authentic or natural language is an important element for language learners in the progress of language acquisition. Through TBLT has been developed for many years, it was introduced into China (Note 1) in the last decade in the twentieth century, also it has been strongly recommended in the College English Education (Note 2) reform in China (Wei, 2004).

The goal of this essay is to illustrate the characteristics of TBLT in College English Education in China, examine the effectiveness of TBLT applied in the four primary language skills learning, and also find out the learning context that TBLT is best suited to through analysing the merits and drawbacks of every single skill.

This essay starts with a systematic literature review which addresses the theoretical bases of TBLT as well as the background information of College English Education in China. Then, look into the different practical situations in different learning contexts in Chinese universities in terms of four English skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Lastly the essay argues that it is hard to say TBLT has obviously better effects in College English Education in one specific skill than the rest of four, by comparing the strengths and limitations of application to each and every skill.

2. Literature Review

2.1 General Research of “Task” in TBLT

Previous research concerning TBLT fall into two categories: theoretical explorations (Ellis, 1990; Kumaravadivelu, 1993; Littlewood, 2002) and practical operation (Nunan, 1989; Prabhu, 1987; Willis, 1996). The former one focuses on TBLT’s relevant concepts and the latter probes into its actual classroom practice. However, the precondition and key factor to have those studies conducted is to give a comprehensive explanation the meaning of “task”. With regards to the understanding of “task”, many educators and scholars have done a lot of research dealing with this problem in the end of twentieth century (for example: Breen & Nunan, 1989; Prabhu, 1987).

Breen (1989) defined “task” from a language learning perspective. His understanding of task not only makes special mention of the language learning behaviors, but also highlights the purpose, content, process and the outcome of task. In that case, task is a basic unit for classroom language learning, and by assigning objective and purpose to task or by specifying content and a working procedure concerning task. However, Prabhu’s (1987) definition of task seems to be quite abstract and vague. It is said that, “an activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, at which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process, was regarded as a task (Prabhu, 1987)”. In other words, he tends to conclude it towards cognition as well as process. Nunan (1989) made his contributions on defining “task” from the perspective of communication. His point of view bears much resemblance to communicative activity in a traditional sense, and tasks in this sense refer to those that use language to acquire, process, convey message so as to achieve a particular

purpose. No matter how each linguist clarify their standpoint about “task”, they all reach a consensus that a task is a kind of purposeful, meaningful classroom activity which involves the learners in interacting and producing the target language to achieve a certain academic object.

Based on the literature above, the author formulates his own understanding about TBLT in a language classroom as follows: As far as TBLT is concerned, its implementation is based on the tasks which can be fulfilled either individually or in group, and whether the TBLT works or not, it all depends on the successful completion of tasks. In different learning context, the forms or types of tasks will also differ accordingly. For example, teachers may not adapt activities which are very popular and effective in speaking field into the teaching of writing, like brainstorming or warming-up group Q&A. Therefore among the teaching of four language skills, there is a great need to explore which one is the best suited learning context.

2.2 Specific Background of TBLT in China

In 1996, Hong Kong Education Council recommended TBLT in a document called *English Syllabus* (Note 3). In the syllabus, it is said that TBLT was to act as one of the leading approaches in English teaching for primary schools, junior schools, and senior schools. Probably influenced by the measure enforced by Hong Kong government and its distinguished achievements, in 2007 the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China issued *College English Curriculum Requirements (CECR)* (Note 4) which mentioned that “the objective of College English Education is to develop the students’ ability to use English in an all-round way”, to some extent it admits that TBLT is the best choice to boost students’ English proficiency in the future. In CECR, teachers are required to make efforts to employ TBLT in their teaching by designing real-life like tasks according to the course goal and the course content. Meanwhile, learners are able to gain different language skills by means of task completion in terms of interaction and cooperation. Also, suggestions and advices on the task design were provided for teachers to implement TBLT:

Tasks should have explicit goals and operational procedures; the learners’ life experience and interest should serve as task’s point of departure, and task input should be as authentic as possible; tasks are not solely confined to classroom teaching, but extend as far as to the learning activities and life experience in the real world; and tasks are aimed at promoting the learners’ abilities to acquire, process, transmit information, to communicate in English, and to use English to solve practical problems, etc. (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2007).

The publication of this document marks a big challenge to College English in China, but TBLT tends to meet all the basic needs of CECR. However, it is widely acknowledged that whatever the students’ English level is, they still are required to learn English into the four basic skills. Usually listening and reading are called “receptive skills” as the listener or reader receives information but does not produce it. Meanwhile, speaking and writing are the so-called “productive skills”. The four skills have different characteristics and features so that the approaches to acquire them will also be different. As a result, if TBLT do help students to achieve better performance in using English or get higher marks in

examinations than before, it is a crucial question that whether the improvement is in any particular aspects or enhancement is just general without placing extra emphasis on one skill. Therefore practice of TBLT in College English in China in terms of four language skills will be discussed individually and contrastively in the following section.

3. Practice of TBLT in College English in China: Four Skills

3.1 Application of TBLT to Listening

3.1.1 Pre-Listening, While-Listening, and Post-Listening

Listening has often been called a passive skill because when a language learner is listening she or he tends to be forced to receive information. To some extent this is misleading, hence listening comprehension demands active involvement from the listeners. That is to say, learners should be encouraged to engage in an initiative process of listening. A framework for TBLT which is publicly known and accepted is from Willis (1996). The structure constitutes of three phases: pre-task, task cycle, and language focus. In that case, the three listening stages: pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening, seem to be adapted perfectly into the above model.

The pre-listening stage is a kind of preparatory work, and it aims at helping students find out the goal of listening and provide some necessary background information. Generally speaking, at the beginning of a College English listening class, the teacher usually introduces a task designed like a relevant discussion about the topic in which the students can communicate their predictions about what they are going to listen as well as what they will take notice. According to Schmidt-Rinehart (1994), these tasks tend to help students focus their minds on the topic and also activate the knowledge they have already known about this. Additionally, sometimes students will be offered some messages to gain so as to follow the recording easily. In that way, students may also develop their confidence to tackle the listening questions. As a result, it seems that it is not a difficult challenge for TBLT in terms of organising the pre-listening stage.

The original purpose of while-listening stage is to assist students in learning how to listen for meanings and implications, and also to offer them opportunities to apply existing background knowledge. In this stage, the fulfillment of tasks require students to use specific structures and make them familiarize the language that need to be employed. For instance, students may be asked to listen to a recording, then remember or retell the relevant mainline, and after that if they do not catch the key points very clearly they will be given a chance to listen to the recording at a second time. Through the task learners may realize the usefulness of the language they have learned before. However, the teacher plays a very crucial role which is like an advisor and guide them to the correct answers or directions (Van Den Branden, 2006). Without teachers' hints and support, students could get lost in while-listening stage.

At the last but not least stage, tasks also should be carefully designed and choosed. After listening to a text, the teacher who applies TBLT may set some tasks based on what students have heard and focusing on language such as answering multiple-choice questions, true or false questions, and fill-in the blanks.

These tasks are designed for the purpose of knowing students' extent of understanding the text as well as their comprehension of messages. Students have to filter the information and select the messages they want in order to solve the relevant questions.

3.1.2 Teachers' Quality and Materials' Authenticity

Tasks designed by the teacher in pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening stages are dependent on the one that has gone before, therefore the three stages are connected closely through the tasks. As a result, the success of the teaching of College English listening which is guided by TBLT is decided by the effects of tasks. Though TBLT is a learner-centered teaching approach, teachers indeed play a decisive role in the whole teaching process. So to some extent, teachers' teaching quality has much to do with TBLT. If a teacher cannot do what they should do at each guiding point nevertheless tasks are designed favorably, for example giving students proper hints to carry on their listening comprehension, TBLT will not tell its functions and merits.

The authenticity of listening materials has been emphasized by some famous scholars and educators such as Brown (1990), Harmer (1998), Nunan (1999), Widdowson (1978), etc., even though it seems that real-life like recordings are too difficult to handle for language learners. Meanwhile, TBLT also regards real-life communication as a very significant element in task design. Those proponents claim that in that way learners can experience and master language in a real or simulated situation. However, one of the most criticized problems in terms of teaching College English in China is the authenticity of English study materials. So if TBLT is expected to have impacts to the greatest extent when implementing into College English listening classroom, the first position that needs to be improved is the quality of listening materials.

3.2 Application of TBLT to Speaking

3.2.1 Types and Feasibility of Oral Task Activities

Krashen (1982) says that, "language is best taught when it is being used to transmit messages, not when it is explicitly taught for conscious learning". As most of the solution to the questions in TBLT English speaking classroom depend on cooperation between the members of the class, it is essential to stress teamwork and using English all the time in classroom communication.

Work in pairs, which is often employed by the teacher in the speaking classroom, simply involves two students and can be easily controlled. It is more efficient than individual doing teacher's essay because in this way students can share their opinions and answers with their partner. Students may find it less nervous as both of them are talking and giving points of view, it is just like a real-life conversation to some extent.

Small group work is a kind of discussion activity that can be used to debate something controversial or having obvious merits and drawbacks at the same time. Students are usually given a topic that needs their existing knowledge and further brainstorming. The key point of this task is to give comments as well as listen up. After that, the students from each group are going to reach a consensus, and elect a representative to share their solution or review to the problem. Thus further discussion can be

conducted if the views between each group vary greatly.

Group-to-group interaction can be seen as an extension or a development of the small group discussion activity. It is also an important measure to enhance students' speaking skill and communicative ability, because group-to-group activities can motivate learners' team spirit, and also enable students exchange their information to each other (Nunan, 1991). Meanwhile, it provides the teacher a platform to act as a "middleman" which seems to be a commander in the classroom discussion. In that way, the teacher can easily control the communication status between the teacher and students, or group-to-group. However, under the TBLT group activities, classes which are quite large (for example, 80 students) seem to be too difficult to control as it is impossible for the teacher walk around the classroom and listen to every group's opinions.

3.2.2 Task Selection and Classroom Silence

It is generally acknowledged that oral task is an interface not only between teachers and learners but also among the students, and different oral task activities can lead to different outcomes, so that different difficulty can result in different output (Nunan, 1991). So this asks teachers to design and select speaking task activities very carefully because the tasks which can interest students will not always be the one which can mostly enhance learners' communicative competence and English proficiency. If the tasks are so easy for the students, they will feel bored and tend to ignore what the teacher ask them to do. While if the tasks are too difficult for learners, they even will have no interest to finish them.

In spite of college students may have comparatively high degree of English, there is a common fault among them which is called "silence classroom" (Zhou, Knoke, & Sakamoto, 2005) that perplexes Chinese university English teachers. For instance, sometimes the students know the answer to the question that the teacher asks, but due to the shyness and being afraid of losing face, they choose to be silent until the teacher calls a student randomly to reply the question. Probably in another situation, students may start chatting with each other in Chinese instead of using English to communicate. In that case, a well-designed task may turn all the previous labour to nothing just because of students' in-active attitudes. As a result, how to arouse students' enthusiasm to answer questions or have group discussion, is a quite serious and tough problem in terms of teaching College English speaking.

3.3 *Application of TBLT to Reading*

3.3.1 Designing Reading Tasks from a Purposeful Perspective

Either the previous or current theories (Carrell, Devine, & Eskey, 1988; Ruddell & Unrau, 2004) mostly regard reading as an "interactive process". An excellent reader should have skills to recognize words and phrases, understand sentence structure, and acquire general knowledge about the world. Based on these understanding, TBLT in College English reading classroom can be also implemented into the following three stages accordingly which is quite similar with the process of listening: pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading.

Pre-reading tasks refer to the activities that will be conducted before learners start to read the main body of the text. Such tasks can be seen as a tool to call out students' existing background knowledge about the main topic, make them to predict the contents of the text, and also inform learners to read the text purposefully with skimming or scanning. The function of pre-reading activities is naturally to facilitate while-reading tasks. Harmer (2007) calls this stage of reading "lead-in".

Unlike the traditional means and activities in College English reading classes which usually employs "one fits all" disregarding types of text, such as multiple choice questions, or T/F questions, in TBLT different texts should be assigned with different tasks reaching different academic purposes. In that case, students are expected to finish the tasks in pairs or in groups with a lot of time communicating, hence TBLT treats communication as a genuine purpose. However, reading is not like speaking, because learners are receiving information not outputting information. In a similar way, the teaching of reading cannot be seen as the treatment of listening, though both of them are in a process of input, discussion in the intensive reading procedure seems to be impractical and difficult to operate. Additionally when doing reading comprehension, students would expect to see some visual aids in the text, for example pictures, diagrams, maps etc. Because research has shown that visualization can help language learners to comprehend the meaning of the text (Tomlinson, 1998). That asks the teacher to select the texts carefully and considerately.

The implementation of TBLT in College English reading acquisition usually not only treats improvement of students' reading ability as a target, but also aims at supporting students to explore some other forms of language based on the reading materials through the tasks. This is just what the functions of post-reading stage are. Post-reading tasks should be designed to integrate the different skills such as summarizing the main idea which may help students' writing improvement, or highlight the useful words and phrases which can be used in students' spoken English. However the main focus of post-reading tasks is leading students to a deep analysis of the text, because the goal of most real world reading is not to memorize the author's point of view or to conclude the text content, but rather to see into another angle (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). Therefore post-reading activities should provide students with opportunities to relate what they have read to what they already know.

3.3.2 Limitations of Autonomy and Absent-Minded Discussion

Through the enforcement of pre-reading, while-reading, post-reading stages, the teacher should pay more attention on helping learners develop their reading strategies and to a broad way increasing their English proficiency in general. That is also why reading has been emphasized by many well-known scholars around the world. However, if students are often asked to take part in pair work or group discussion, they tend to easily form a habit of relying on one other when they do not quite catch the point of the text. As a result, whenever they encounter a problem, they are apt to discuss with each other. To some extent, students' independent thinking ability becomes weaker, and their autonomy of learning language accordingly will be influenced.

Another problem in the practice of TBLT to College English reading classroom is that students may not follow the instruction which is given by the teacher in the reading tasks, in other words, the success of tasks completion depends on students' consciousness. For example, sometimes learners probably have no interest on the text being discussed, thus they tend to chat with each other on the recent gossip instead of the topic of the reading class. Such a situation to any teacher is a big and tough problem because in China the capacity of a non-English major College English class is usually approximately from 50 to 100. If students indeed begin to do the tasks absent-mindedly, teachers tend to lose control of the whole class and the pace of class processing.

3.4 Application of TBLT to Writing

3.4.1 Preparing, Writing, and Revising

In the writing classroom of TBLT instruction, students are encouraged to take different tasks to develop different writing skills, like collocation and cohesion (Rohman, 1965). Before students do a piece of writing, they may get started with some reading materials such as some newspaper or journals which are related to the writing topic introduced by the teacher, and such an activity can be regarded as the preparation for writing. Compared with TBLT, traditional College English writing classes usually ask students to write an essay directly without any pre-tasks like brainstorming or group discussion. In that case, students' desire for writing on the topic cannot be aroused. In this phase, the teacher can also show a model essay to students, and enable them to learn the positive aspects and useful expressions from the text.

When students are given a topic and asked to write a draft, they will be encouraged to do their utmost to collect all the possible ideas and data in mind to build a systematic essay according to the instructions. In that case, students often pay more attention on the written content but not the language forms (Graham & Harris, 1999). And in the process of writing, students will indeed realize that the materials and model essays they look at before are necessary and helpful for them to accomplish the writing task. Usually the model essay will be provided after students finish their writing so as to make them correct and improve their works according to the sample. In TBLT, it reverses the traditional approach which makes students feel tired and boring.

After finishing the writing task, group work like peer editing or peer feedback can be conducted in order to revising students' writing as well as remedying the lack of language attention in their process of writing (Rollinson, 2005). Students can learn much from other's feedback, as it leads them to review the essays and find out the mistakes in the essays. As a result, learners will be more careful when they do writing because they do not want to be fell behind by others due to self-respect. Likewise, students will pay more attention to find language errors for his or her partner. From another perspective, such an activity is not only cooperation but also a competition between each other.

3.4.2 Chinglish and Language Accuracy

The teacher may find a critical problem that students in TBLT writing classes usually try to use English to express their thoughts and ideas very hard, but they sometimes use it in a wrong way, in other words they just depend on their mother tongue to translate them into English in which people call it “Chinglish”. It is a common fault from primary schools, junior schools, senior schools, to universities throughout the Chinese English education. To some extent, that is inevitable because the core concept of TBLT is communicative tasks, and students are the tasks executor while teachers can only be a introducer to lead them to do the tasks. Aiming at this problem, the teacher should go around the classroom and make sure that everyone is clear about the topic and use the words and phrases correctly. But a problem which has been mentioned in the previous section will rise. A teacher cannot see and comment each and every student’s essay at the lesson.

Additionally, due to the features of TBLT, when learners are required to complete an essay they tend to pay more attention to the way they express themselves, and the language especially grammar and sentence structure, in other words “language accuracy”, tends to be ignored rather. In TBLT application, the teacher is not permitted to interrupt the communication among students, so students can only receive hints or tips from the teacher in order to carrying on their learning process. As a result, students may do not care about the correctness and accuracy of their language. To some extent, it is quite dangerous for students to cultivate such a harmful writing habit.

3.5 Comparison: No One Perfectly Suitable

Based on the above discussion on the application of TBLT to College English Education in terms of the four English skills, it tends to be not difficult to find that there is no a single skill absolutely exceeding the other three in the practice of TBLT as different drawbacks can be identified in different aspect. Meanwhile, in fact the problems and limitations in one skill’s application may be found in another skill’s field correspondingly. For example, how to deal with the roles of teachers in TBLT seem to be a common problem in each teaching area. Richards and Rodgers (2001) mentioned possible task roles for teachers, including selector of tasks, strategy instructor, assistance provider, or guide. However it is actually quite hard for teachers to fulfil their responsibility perfectly due to the teaching environment or students’ incoordination. In the College English classroom of TBLT, the process of learning is student-centered regardless of which specific English skill is taught. Students’ attitudes toward tasks are very important, and learners should participate the tasks actively and seek the topic and language content being discussed. As a result, teachers and students should commit themselves to exert TBLT at the greatest extent by tackling those problems.

4. Conclusion

In TBLT classroom, the use of tasks is the core of instruction in language, and learners are the center of language learning process which motivated them to learn more actively and autonomously. However, TBLT demands a quite high capability of teachers in the progress of designing tasks, selecting tasks, implementing tasks, guiding students to complete the tasks, etc. To some extent, it is certain that TBLT indeed has some difficulties to integrate into the special context of College English Education in China in terms of the treatment of four language skills due to some unavoidable reasons. But the advocates of TBLT never give up popularizing this effective language teaching approach. For example, Nunan (1991) firstly applied TBLT in Australia and then came to Hong Kong to conduct this approach; Prabhu spread it in India and Singapore (Long & Crookes, 1992). In China, the government takes the responsibilities to popularize TBLT in Chinese universities in terms of teaching English as a lingua franca upon itself. All of those facts prove that the advantages of TBLT outweigh its disadvantages. In summary, TBLT can be favorably practiced in College English into the following skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing, by narrowing down the drawbacks of the application to each skill, such as improving the general quality of teachers by specific training, simulating listening materials to be more “authentic”, cultivating students’ confidence to answer questions without being afraid of making mistakes, or simply combining some other teaching methods with TBLT as some scholars even mention to convert TBLT into TBLA (Task-Based Language Assessment) which seems work better than the former.

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Notes

Note 1. “China” refers only to mainland China, excluding Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan.

Note 2. “College English Education” refers to English education for non-English major undergraduate students in China, excluding students majoring in arts and sports.

Note 3. In 1996, Hong Kong Education Council issued the official document Yingyu jiaoxue dagang [English Syllabus].

Note 4. In 2007, Ministry of Education, P. R. China issued the official notice Jiaoyubu bangongting guanyu yinfa daxue yingyu kecheng jiaoxue yaoqiu de tongzhi [Notice on issuing College English Curriculum Requirements by General Office, Ministry of Education].