

Chinese college EFL teachers' perceptions and practices towards Task-based language teaching

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Abstract: *The concept of Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) has been introduced into various educational programs worldwide since the 20th century. However, challenges and difficulties tend to arise when Chinese college English teachers accept TBLT as an innovation in curriculum. Therefore, this paper attempts to conduct a small case study in one Chinese regular university to explore English teachers' beliefs, attitudes and challenges towards TBLT. The data were collected through class observation and semi-structured interviews. Study findings showed that participants have a clear understanding of TBLT concepts. However, they displayed both similar and different views towards problems and solutions in TBLT class. Based on the findings, some pedagogical suggestions have been offered which can provide some insights into the effective design and implementations of TBLT in Chinese context.*

Keywords: *teaching practices; teacher perceptions; TBLT*

1. Introduction

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) has been recognized as a productive teaching approach with its major emphasis on real-world language use and meanings exchange. It works as an effective and efficient approach to boost learners' participation and develop communicative abilities (East, 2012). However, there is often a distinction between the official rhetoric and the actual classroom practices of teachers because of teachers' limited knowledge, the influence of their long-established teaching habits and local educational contexts. As Littlewood (2004, p. 319) points out the fact that "although teachers in a wide range of settings are being told by curriculum leaders that this is how they should teach ...teachers are often not at all certain as to what a task-based approach really does mean." And this is especially true for college EFL (English as a foreign language) teachers who are faced with more advanced English learners. Those college students need to be well prepared in terms of English proficiency in order to have a promising career future. Therefore, to effectively assist college language teachers in integrating TBLT into local educational context, it is of great importance to identify some main issues related to teachers' attitudes and understanding of TBLT, and also the implementation of some principles of TBLT.

2. Literature review

Task-based language teaching (TBLT), as a strong version of communicative language teaching (CLL), has attracted considerable attention from second language acquisition (SLA) educators, curriculum developers, teacher trainers and language teachers. As the task-based approach featured in improving language communicative skills has become a widespread approach and been adopted officially by the China as a part of their national curriculum innovation process, some teachers might confront with various difficulties when trying to implement this unfamiliar classroom practices. As Littlewood (2004, p. 319) points out the fact that "although teachers in a wide range of settings are being told by curriculum leaders that this is how they should teach ...teachers are often not at all certain as to what a task-based approach really does mean." For example, Liu and Xiong (2016) reveal the fact that English language teachers from Chinese college had been struggling with time pressure and classroom discipline problems when using TBLT. This is because teachers has to deal with a large size class, a competitive examination system and insufficient teaching materials. Other factors that might have an impact on the successful implementation of TBLT, such as the noise, discipline, curriculum policy, traditional examination-based syllabus, and mother tongue use and time pressure (Zheng and Borg, 2014). Most EFL teachers experienced frustration when confronting the noisy, inappropriate classroom

behavior and the use of mother tongue among students when they fulfil the task in TBLT (Liu and Guo, 2020).

3. Methodology

Two participants involved in this preliminary study are current English teachers in the foreign language department of one Chinese regular university. To protect anonymity, both two teachers here are given a pseudonym. One is a 38-year-old teacher A, working as an English language teacher for 14 years. Another one is a 27-year-old teacher B with 3 years English teaching experience. With the aim to find out how teachers perceive the task-based approach and what happens during actual teaching practices that might influence teachers' instruction decisions, research questions are designed as follows: (1) What are the teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards task-based teaching? (2) What factors or issues impact on teachers' implementation of task-based teaching? The main data was collected through as follows: (1) 90-minutes video-recorded TBLT classroom observation of each teacher: one English listening class and one English reading class. (2) Teachers' reflective commentaries, copies of teaching resources and lesson plans. (3). Two semi-structured interviews including a stimulated recall with a focus on identified issues.

4. Findings and discussions

After systematically analyzing the data from lesson observation and interview transcript, two teachers' beliefs and understandings of TBLT have been identified and categorized into two major themes (see Appendix 1). Generally, both teachers hold a positive attitude towards TBLT and they also give their own interpretation of it.

4.1. Teachers' belief and understanding towards TBLT

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4.1.1 Tasks in TBLT involving more than the speaking skill

One significant thing that emerged from lesson observation and semi-structured interviews was the extensive use of communicative tasks in both teachers' classes. Strictly following Skehan's (1996) proposal for the TBLT task cycle (pre-task, while-task and post-task), both teachers designed their lesson integrating various pair activities, group activities and whole-class work. In class observation, students were encouraged to share their opinions and feeling towards the "Technology communication" (topic for class A) and "Stress" (topic for class B). Most of lesson time was devoted to student talk and active engagement rather than teacher explanation and form-focused exercise. Therefore, it could be seen that both teachers attached much importance to boost learners' communicative abilities and language proficiency in TBLT class:

"They (students) talk in their own organized language and interact with their peers... I mean if you want to correct their grammar mistakes all the time, that's not you gonna do in TBLT class, here we need to pay attention to the meaning... (Teacher A, Interview Excerpt1)"

It is apparent that Teacher A has well recognized the fact that the task-based approach calls on a focus on meaning exchange. Besides, her understanding of the importance of peer interaction and negotiation well illustrates Nunan's (2004, p.1) belief that "learners learn to communicative by communicating". As when students are challenged and this kind of "pushed output" would encourage them to actively draw on all their inter-language resources.

4.1.2 The authenticity need for the task in TBLT class

Authenticity has been considered as a critical part in defining a task. It refers to 'some sort of relationship to comparative real-world activities' and it contains two types, namely interactional authenticity and situational authenticity (Ellis, 2009). Therefore, in task-based classroom, students' language use should be relevant to real world situation or different social contexts, which means tasks are supposed to provide students with opportunities to practice various types of extended discourse. These tasks could be for instance, asking for direction, booking a hotel and online shopping. In the

interview, both teachers stressed the importance of language authenticity when designing a task in TBLT class, which well reflected on the task topic they chose. Data showed that Teacher A gave an English reading class with the topic on the advantages and disadvantage of technological communication. Teacher B, she gave an English listening class about how to cope with life stress. Obviously, both teachers' task topics were closely related to the real-world situation. Although both teachers express the similar view that the ultimate goal of language teaching is to prepare students to address a variety of language encounters they might experience outside the classroom, Teacher A is concerned about the limitation of situational authenticity in classroom:

"...but things I teach and they practice with peers are too limited, I mean the real language use, and you will never know what gonna happen in a 100% real situation...It's impossible to prepare them all these (Interview Excerpt 2)."

Indeed, it is hard to have learners exposed to all those natural language use in a TBLT classroom. But, it is more important to achieve interactional authenticity than situational authenticity. And this is due to the fact that skills such like collaborating, negotiating of meaning, scaffolding, exchanging information and clarifying are suitable for any situation and thus will benefit learners in a long run.

4.2 Factors that influence the successful implementation of TBLT

Two teachers mentioned several factors that might have an impact on the successful implementation of TBLT, such as the noise, discipline, large classroom size, curriculum policy, traditional examination-based syllabus, and mother tongue use and time pressure. It is worth noting that there is an overlap between those different issues, such as the mother tongue use might result in noise. Therefore, in this study, only two main factors, namely classroom management and the use of mother tongue will be discussed in details.

4.2.1 Classroom management

The discipline challenge is the most frequently voiced concern by both two teachers. Both of them find it quite challenging to strike a balance between maintaining good discipline and engaging students' full participation in TBLT class. Teacher B shares her problem with retaining appropriate discipline in TBLT class:

"I kind of nervous when they discuss for a long time, it was very noise because it's a large class. And I have no idea whether they are talking something related to the lesson. They would talk something else when you walk away. (Interview Excerpt 5)."

Teacher B points out the fact that due to the communicative characteristic of task, it is unavoidable to motivate students to talk and interact with peers. However, it is noted that the noise might also result from other factors. As Han (2018) identify, various reasons behind classroom noise could be learners' unclear idea of the instructions and task contend, and the difficult level of task. This is because if the task was too easy for them, students might finish it quickly and move to something unrelated to the task. If the task was too demanding for them, students might feel demotivated and shift their attention to other things that might attract their more interests. Compared with Teacher B, Teacher A shows more tolerance when she faced with classroom noise and heightens teachers' ability to deal with it:

"I am quite OK with their noise, if there is no noise I might think they are not paying attention to. I often walk around to listen and observe their discussion and answer their questions, so I could get to know what they are actually doing (Interview Excerpt 3)."

Certainly, in TBLT class, teachers' main role is to motivate students' willingness to communicate. However, it is worth mentioning that teachers are also responsible for ensuring the reasonable classroom noises by adopting several skills.

4.2.2 The use of mother tongue

According to both two teachers, another major factor that might pose a threat to the success of the implementation of TBLT is the use of mother tongue (MT). Although both teachers express similar worry about it, they strongly believe that a reasonable amount of the use of mother tongue would have a beneficial impact on student's language performance. Teacher A explains:

"Mother tongue is a common thing in class, especially for beginners, their English is not good and need the mother tongue to help them complete the task. It is not a criminal to use mother tongue, right? As long as this helps them to get mutual understandings. (Interview Excerpt 3)."

It could be seen from the interview that in TBLT class, various students' spontaneous interaction occurs during the process of operating the communicative task. Thus, the code-switching is a natural phenomenon and an inevitable part of second language acquisition. Instead of banning the MT, teachers should recognize the benefits of students using a short MT to help themselves produce more smooth and comprehensible conversation. This would in turn create a 'foreign language friendly' atmosphere and boost their confidence in L2 use. Teacher B also places value on teacher using the MT expressions to explain grammatical functions, meanings and structures:

"We eventually would do some form-focused tasks in TBLT, like grammar practices at the end. You need to explain to them, but it's hard sometimes, maybe because the language level of teachers is not good or maybe students they would just feel confused about those complicated rules...mother tongue helps teachers do their job easier and students understand quicker (Interview Excerpt 6).

From teacher A and B's comments, we know that mother tongue can display various cognitive and pedagogical functions in class. With the help of mother tongue, both the teacher and students can operate tasks more effectively, especially in a traditional examination-oriented educational context with the emphasis on grammar.

5. Conclusion and significance

This study carried out with the aim to explore language teachers' perceptions towards TBLT as a curriculum innovation. Both observation and interview data shows that teachers seem to have made a good start in understanding the main principles of TBLT, such as meaning-focused and being related to real-world situation. However, it is worth noting that different teachers interpret the task in different ways. Teachers should employ the task-based approach critically, which means they need to consider students' language proficiency, learning needs and their own educational system contexts. Besides, teachers' mentioned concerns towards TBLT reveal the fact that more teacher support and guidance are urgently needed in order to help them operate TBLT effectively and systematically in a more localized way. Because teacher actions are closely associated with teachers' cognition. And teachers' beliefs and perceptions can exert a profound influence on their decision-making and general performance in TBLT classroom. Thus, in the future study, I would like to suggest that a further contextualized, detailed ethnographic research on finding out learners' perspective on task-based approach and whether there exist mismatched opinions between learners and teachers.

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