The design of an ESL curriculum for senior secondary schools in China with task-based teaching approach

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Abstract: *Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is one of the most frequent used teaching methods adopted in language class. This paper serves as an ESL curriculum design framework based on task-based approach for teaching a unit about festivals and celebrations to senior secondary school students in China. It will first introduce the teaching and learning context, then presents the key stages for curriculum design, which contains conducting needs analysis, determining goals, selecting teaching approach, selecting content and materials, assessing learning and evaluating curriculum. Finally, critical reflection on the curriculum design will be examined to give critique of the curriculum design.*

Keywords: *ESL curriculum design, task-based approach*

1. The current teaching and learning context

The English level of target students is mostly ranging from intermediate-lower to intermediate. All of them are going to take the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) while a small number of students are also considering studying abroad for undergraduate study. This article presents a cycle of curriculum design on Unit X Festivals and Celebrations which contains 10 sessions (45 minutes per session) for two weeks.

On the one hand, the test score has become the most important measurement of effectiveness of teaching and learning, which contributes to the examination-oriented in daily teaching and learning to a large extent (Li, 2005). It could be seen that there is too much emphasis on language form and accuracy but less emphasis on its meaning and communicative purpose. On the other hand, Ministry of Education (MOE) has addressed in New English Curriculum Reformation: English teaching should be learner-centered, advocating cooperation and communication, aiming to 'develop students' comprehensive ability of language using and communicating' (MOE, 2004, p. 4). [1]The writer works in an experimental school under new curriculum reformation, aiming to present a curriculum design framework to integrate the demands of improving test results and the requirements of New English Curriculum Reformation.

2. Key stages in curriculum design

2.1. Conducting needs analysis with target students

Christison and Murray (2014) believes that the curriculum design should start from   the target students' learning needs in their specific context to ensure the effectiveness. According to the target context, survey in English version is a good choice to conduct needs analysis. Except from hard-copy questionnaire, Computer-mediated Communication tools (e.g., Khoot) is also recommended to collect information in the classroom. In addition, three main parts need to be addressed in the survey which contains learner's identity, experience and goals (Christison & Murray, 2014).[2]Sample questions are given in Appendix.

2.2. Determining goals

Having a comprehensive understanding of the current context and learner's needs could provide impetus for determine the specific goals for this unit's teaching and learning (Christison & Murray, 2014). This curriculum design adpats Clark's (1987) recommended goals type and proposes the sample specified

goals and related objectives that are presented in Table1.

Table 1: Sample goals and objectives – Unit X Festivals and Celebrations

Goals	Related Objectives
Language knowledge	• *Students can talk about the festivals that have experienced with people in daily life.* • *Students can write a passage about the festivals with newly learned words and expressions.*
Skills and strategies	• *Students can evaluate and reorganize the information.* • *Students can use the context to infer some unknown vocabulary.*
Sociocultural	• *Students will be more proud of Chinese traditional festivals and celebrations.* • *Students will be more interested in diverse festivals around the world.*

2.3. Selecting approach to curriculum design

In New English Curriculum Reformation (2004), it put forward clearly that advocating task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach in ESL classroom. This curriculum design would also focus on TBLT, aiming to provide a bridge to 'link the classroom language learning with language use outside the classroom' (Nunan, 2004, p. 1). Another major rationale for choosing TBLT is catering for target students' needs and interests. TBLT is a more compelling choice for target students than the traditional teacher-centered method (Christison & Murray, 2014). Since students were accustomed to the examination-oriented teaching and learning which primarily focuses on linguistic form and skills of testing, they could be less motivated to use the language for communicative purpose (Li, 2005). The application of TBLT approach in daily classroom teaching could provide students a more natural, authentic context to process English through interaction and communication (Ellis, 2013).

2.4. Selecting and sequencing appropriate content and materials

From determined sample goals and related objectives shown in table 2.2.1, this curriculum design chose one of them which is 'students can talk about the festivals that have experienced with people in daily life' as a sample pedagogical task. How could students get better prepared to carry out this task? Nunan's recommended pedagogical sequence (2004, p.34) provides a framework to link up the learning activities with a pedagogical task as the ultimate objective. As detailed explanation shown in Appendix A, it could be seen that step 1 to step 6 are modeled from Nunan's recommended pedagogical sequence and step 7 is added additionally in order to encourage learners to be responsible for their own learning and offer constructive feedback to students through self-evaluation (Coniam, 2014).[3] If we look closer to this table, two noticeable points could be observed. Firstly, the learning activities are mostly arranged and sequenced from less-demanding to more-demanding, more teacher-guided to more learner-centered (e.g., step 2: practice the conversation to step 3: summarize the opinions to step 5: information gap role-play), which moves in a way to scaffold students as they gradually make progress in second language acquisition. Another special design is the writer set the same task form which is group discussion in both step 1 and step 6. In this way, the progress on group discussion about festivals and celebrations made between the pre-task and during-task stage could be observed more directly. Such progress could always highly motivate students that they are able to carry out the group discussion on the same topic more or less successfully through working such sequence (Nunan, 2004).

The source of learning content and materials could from the textbook, the internet and the daily life. The most important principle of selection is content and materials need to be aligned to the ultimate objective 'students can talk about the festivals that have experienced with people in daily life'. In addition, in response to the task-based principle of authenticity of texts suggested by Nunan (2004), more authentic materials will be introduced to the learning activities to achieve the communicative purpose. [4]For example, the writer chose one authentic interview between two native speakers (step 2) and one authentic group discussion from Youtube (step 3) as authentic input. Furthermore, both form-focused (step 4, 5, 6) and meaning-focused (step 1, 2, 3) tasks will be used in the learning activities. Overall, these learning activities are selected and sequenced to facilitate the learning and help students achieve the determined goals and objectives (Christison & Murray, 2014).

2.5. Assessing learning

Ongoing formative assessment of students' learning will take place throughout the delivery of whole unit's teaching and learning, aiming to provide meaning feedback for teachers, students and curriculum developers (Byrnes, 2002), enhance experiential learning and motivate the students by give them a clear target (Noris, 2009). Task-based formative assessment focuses on learner's performance on varied tasks (Noris, 2009). Examples of assessment involve but not confine the followings: information gap role-play (step 5), decision-making group task (step 3) and opinion exchange group discussion (step 1 and step 6). [5]Task-based formative assessment can be conducted by the teacher through classroom observation and rating scale (needs further develop for assessing performance on different tasks). In addition, self-assessment (e.g. step 7) and peer-assessment can also be considered which foster learner's learning autonomy and focus on learning process and outcome as well (Nunan, 2004).

2.6. Evaluating the curriculum

In order to examine the effectiveness of the curriculum for continuously improvement, task, instruction and learning evaluation will be conduct accordingly. Due to teacher's work pressure and time constrains, task evaluation is solely suggested to use when teachers find it uncertainty about the effectiveness of new tasks (Nunan, 2004). Nunan's (2004) recommended checklist (pp. 174-175) provides a solid framework for teachers or curriculum developers to evaluate the new task through audio or video classroom recordings. As for instruction evaluation, students' questionnaire and colleague's classroom observation are two useful tools to gather information. In addition, learning evaluation can be achieved through teacher's observation, students' performance on tasks and the quality of home assignments.

3. Critique of curriculum design

3.1. Strengths

3.1.1. Engagement with varied input resources and tasks

In this curriculum design, it attempts to cover varied types of tasks which involves information gap (step 5), decision-making (3) and opinion exchange (step 1 and step 6) tasks in order to achieve one sample ultimate objective (Richards, 2001). Students are involved in diverse learning methods including experience, practice, communicate, explore and cooperate. The diverse tasks and learning methods creates varied learning contexts for students to use the language to interact and communicate and simultaneously addresses and foster the different skills and strategies (Nunan, 2004). In addition, the flexibility of task design allows the adjustments of learning activities to better response to students' needs (Ellis, 2003). [6]Using the learning activity in step 5 as an example, teacher can set higher requirements for higher proficiency level students through increase the complexity of sentence structure, the difficulty of words and expressions for student to choose and use when acting his or her own role.

Furthermore, students obtain more opportunities to engage with the rich variety of authentic resources. To introduce one sample pedagogical task, the writer selects three different input resources which contains the photography from magazine, the extract from film and a group discussion from seminar. The major benefit is to prepare students better comprehend and cope the language beyond the classroom settings so that to achieve the communicative goal in daily life (Nunan, 2004).

3.1.2. Benefits of diverse assessment system

Although task-based assessment still has a long way to go, the idea of abandon the simple language-based assessment should be encouraged. In terms of assessment content, it puts emphasis on the students' performance on tasks which includes but not confines the linguistic knowledge, skills and strategies and sociocultural awareness. As for assessment subject, except for teacher-assessment, self-assessment (step 7) is added to help students have a comprehensive understanding of own strengths and weaknesses on performance on group discussion so as to further develop with a focused goal.[7] Such considerations for developing diverse assessment system promotes the individuality development of students, which allow more students to show their strengths at different aspects and further inspire broader learning interests (Coniam, 2014).

3.2. Limitations

3.2.1. Misunderstandings in needs analysis

In task-based curriculum design, needs analysis acts as a point of embarkation for designers, offering triangulated understandings of what target tasks and associated language are most suitable for target students. However, stakeholder and learner's needs analysis has experienced misunderstandings and misrepresentations among curriculum developers and teachers. One of the common claims is the survey results could not accurately reflect participants' needs (Norris, 2009). The reasons are the learners cannot be expected to identify their actual own needs and they usually report the results in a positive way (Norris, 2009). Long (2005) believed that in order to carry out the effective needs analysis, varied sources of information and instruments of data collections should be employed to elicit insights into language use.

3.2.2. Lack of effective supervision and timely feedback in implementation

Due to the large size of the class (40-50 students), it is difficult to supervise the individual performance on learning activities effectively. Although teacher stresses repeatedly in advance, it has been found that some students would use the mother tongue rather than target language to communicate and interact during the task (Li, 2005). In addition, constructive feedback from teachers of performance on task could not be given timely to the students individually (Zheng & Borg, 2014). In this way, further adjustment and improvement might not go smoothly without a focused goal. Therefore, how to give effective feedback to students needs to be considered further.

3.2.3. High demanding for teachers and students

To begin with, in TBLT classroom, the effective task design and implementation are overly relying on the teacher's teaching ability. The majority of teachers have accustomed to the language-based and teacher-centered teaching approach which spend lots of time doing presentation and explanation in the classroom teaching (Li, 2005).[8] However, TBLT approach sets higher requirements to teachers. They need to make many efforts to have a deeper and more comprehensive of students' needs and select and sequence the pedagogical tasks accordingly. In addition, in TBLT classroom, teacher no longer plays a dominant role, but transforms as an organizer, guider, consultant or even companion. It is not easy to act and balance the diversified roles for teachers, especially at the beginning stage. Another major concern is the relatively large size of class (40-50 students per class), it is difficult to organize and manage the task to be completed within the given time. When facing such situation, teachers usually cut some steps or move some steps to be finished after class (Zheng & Borg, 2014). It is prone to implement the tasks as a mere formality, which has a great impact on the effectiveness of course delivery.

As for students, they were used to the teacher-centered teaching approach that have high dependence on teachers. Therefore, when first introducing the TBLT approach into the classroom, it often shows that students can not adapt to the transition well from a less active role to a student-dominant role (e.g. active participation in cooperative learning and group activities) (Zheng & Borg, 2014). [9]It is very likely that active participation in peer interaction and teacher-student interaction is not usual to be observed, which has a negative effect on second language acquisition (Mackey, 1999). In addition, introverted students who have lower proficiency level tend to seek for help when meeting the difficulties in group activities, which weakens the ability of independent thinking and problem-solving.

Finally, although several limitations are being discussed, TBLT approach in the target context which is Shanghai is still feasible and encouraged to use. However, at current stage, due to extreme imbalance in economy and education development between different areas, it is not realistic to popularize the TBLT approach to the whole China, especially in some rural and poor areas (Li, 2005). The major constraint is the teacher training and development on the transition to task-based teaching approach. The development of systematic training system and effective evaluation mechanism for teachers should be the top priority in the future popularization of TBLT approach. Another realistic concern reported by Li (2005) is the access to the online varied authentic input resources for producing learning activities among practitioners in poor areas due to digital divide.

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