

# Practice and Exploration of College English Teaching Reform-under the Guidance of Task-based Language Teaching

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**Abstract:** *Task-based language teaching refers to a foreign language teaching method that is student-centered and aims to accomplish communicative tasks. In the reform of college English teaching, task-based language teaching is an effective way to stimulate students' interest in learning and improve their communicative competence and autonomous learning ability. This paper tries to explore new ideas of college English teaching under the guidance of task-based language teaching method, so as to further improve students' comprehensive English language ability. While fully affirming this new teaching mode, this paper finally puts forward corresponding countermeasures for its limitations.*

**Keywords:** *college English teaching reform; task-based language teaching; student-centered*

## 1. Introduction

For a long time, most colleges and universities in China have adopted a teacher-centered teaching model in English classroom teaching. Therefore, both in terms of teaching concepts and teaching methods, they still focus on the teaching of language knowledge, and fail to pay enough attention to the teaching mode of "student-centered" to organize classroom teaching and mobilize students' enthusiasm. In view of this situation, many experts and scholars in the field of English teaching advocate the use of task-based language teaching method. For example, Feng Yufang and Tang Xiaoyan (2004) discussed how to infiltrate the concept of task-based language teaching in college English teaching from the aspects of the definition of tasks, types and the design and structure of teaching models.<sup>[1]</sup> Li Guangfeng (2007) believed that the task-based approach will provide new ideas for college English teaching reform, learners' personalized foreign language learning and the formation of new teaching models.<sup>[2]</sup>

## 2. The Relation between Task-based Language Teaching and College English Teaching Reform

Skehan (1999) believed that language learning is not a process of grammatical point superposition, but is necessary for language expression and language communication.<sup>[3]</sup> This view has a great influence on task-based language teaching. The task in task-based language teaching is different from the exercises and activities arranged by teachers in traditional classroom. It pays more attention to the cultivation of students' language communicative ability and has a strong purpose. In the task-based teaching oriented college English classroom, tasks run through the whole classroom teaching and have a real and effective context. Students can achieve a specific goal by completing tasks.

### 2.1 The Theoretical Basis of Task-based Language Teaching

In Task-based language teaching, "task" generally refers to the promotion in classroom teaching, any specific activity that students are required to do in the learning process, which is close to the learners' life, learning experience and social reality and aims to form the meaning of language. Nunan (1989) defined task as a classroom assignment that requires learners to understand, process, generate and interact with the target language.<sup>[4]</sup> When doing such activities, learners' attention is focused on using their grammatical knowledge to express meaning, not just use language form mechanically. Willis (1996) believed that tasks are communicative activities in which learners use the target language to accomplish something.<sup>[5]</sup> Skehan also had his own views on tasks (1) significance is primary; (2)

There is a communication problem to be solved; (3) have a definite relationship with similar activities in the real world; (4) The first consideration is to complete the task; (5) Evaluate the performance of the task according to the results of the task. It is not difficult for us to find some common ground from the above definition: “task” must involve the actual use of language. Under the guidance of teachers, students complete the tasks designed by teachers according to teaching objectives and textbooks through understanding, practice, participation and cooperation, and use the required language in the process of completing the tasks to achieve the purpose of communication and language acquisition.

## ***2.2 The Necessity of the Combination of Task-based Language Teaching and College English Teaching***

In the current college English classroom, the traditional PPP (presentation, practice and production) teaching mode is still visible in many places. Shu Dingfang (2006) commented on this model in his article: “Students are exposed to a very limited amount of foreign language input. To a large extent, it misleads students’ understanding of the nature of language learning. It only regards language as a language system. It believes that classroom teaching can cultivate students’ foreign language communicative competence, and also enable students to place their hopes for successful foreign language learning on classroom teaching.”<sup>[6]</sup> This old and inflexible teaching method runs counter to the practical foreign language learning and is becoming less and less popular. It can adapt to the development of modern education. While emphasizing “learning by doing” and “doing things with the language”, the task-based language teaching method has gradually been widely accepted by middle schools and universities in China. The fundamental difference between task-based language teaching and other teaching methods lies in that it attempts to integrate the outline design and teaching methods, runs through the task in the whole teaching, and reflects the people-oriented educational thought. The core is to take the development of students as the foundation, and reflect the humanism of the teaching process and purpose, the richness of the teaching environment and the complexity of the teaching task. Task-based language teaching can be used in any language field, using various communicative tasks to teach pragmatics, coherence and so on. Since the promulgation of the new English curriculum standard, task-based language teaching has been advocated in the advanced teaching ideas and teaching suggestions.

## **3. The Implementation of Task-based Language Teaching in College English Teaching**

As we know, college English intensive reading is generally divided into three stages: pre-reading, while-reading and post reading. The application of task-based approach in college English teaching can be carried out on this basis. The pre-reading stage is not only the preparation stage for students’ classroom learning, but also the introduction stage for teachers. Its purpose is to shorten the distance between the learning content and students, so that students can better accept and master the knowledge. At this stage, the tasks set by teachers should include asking students to collect background knowledge related to the text and familiarize themselves with the content of the text, so as to pave the way for the smooth development of the reading stage in the classroom. The reading stage is the key of the whole teaching activities, and it is also the focus of teachers’ task-based teaching activities. Teachers carry out some teaching activities and assign corresponding tasks to students to realize the two-way communication between teachers and students, so as to successfully complete the teaching tasks. At this stage, the main tasks assigned to students should include grasping the content of the article from the text structure, mastering the main knowledge points and important information of the article, and deepening students’ understanding and mastery of the learning content through the implementation of these tasks. The third stage is post reading. Teachers should mainly design some expansive tasks (such as discussion and writing tasks related to the text content) to further extend the learning content, so as to consolidate the learning effect of students. Take college English book 2, unit 2 Environmental Protection throughout the World as an example to illustrate the implementation and application of the task-based approach in college English teaching.

### ***3.1 Tasks in the Pre-reading Stage***

According to the content of the text, the tasks that can be preset by the teacher at this stage are: (1) let the students consult and collect relevant background materials through the Internet or other channels, such as the proper terms related to this text: ecostudies, green-house effect, destruction of ozone layer, oxygen bar, etc. (2) guide the students to discuss the current situation of our environment,

recall their childhood environment, and compare it with the current environment, so as to analyze “what causes the increasing destruction of the current human living space”, and preset several questions as the task of each group discussion. For example, what is the problem in the current human living environment, and what is the reason, etc. Teachers start from the topics familiar to students, so as to stimulate students’ interest in learning and enable them to complete the above tasks naturally. Through the completion of these tasks, students can be guided to creatively apply their knowledge to communicate in real situations, reduce their psychological pressure, and make them focus on the meaning of the language in order to guide the students into the study of the text smoothly.

### ***3.2 Tasks in the While-reading Stage***

The subject of the text in this unit is about environmental issues that are closely related to our lives. Although some students have their own unique views on this topic, which can be expressed in Chinese, but once communicating in English, many students will be nervous and have stage fright. Therefore, teachers should, in view of this situation, design some tasks around the text according to the key language points in this unit, which can be easily carried out through reading, so as to improve the operability of the task, and let students make use of these tasks as much as possible to exercise and improve their language application ability and language expression ability. As the organizer of these tasks, teachers should participate in, regulate and evaluate the implementation of these tasks, so as to help students improve their language application ability and language expression ability by completing the tasks. According to the content characteristics of this unit, the tasks that can be preset at this stage are: (1) ask students to summarize the main idea of each part and the author’s writing method by reading the content under each subtitle. (2) on the basis of analyzing the structure and content of each part, summarize the main idea and writing skills of the whole text.

### ***3.3 Tasks in the Post-reading Stage***

The task of this stage should be to expand the content of the text, so as to help students improve their oral English on the basis of further consolidating their mastery of the text to polish their communicating and writing skills. The tasks that can be preset at this stage are: (1) after class discussion: what’s the significance of environment to us? (2) writing: what should we do to cope with the worsening environment? The implementation of tasks in this stage has effectively promoted the improvement of students’ language application ability, further enhanced students’ awareness of environmental protection, and enabled students to apply what they have learned after learning this text to real situations.

## **4. The Limitations of Task-based Language Teaching and Its Countermeasures**

Firstly, the implementation of task-based language teaching method is based on the organization and arrangement of teachers. Teachers’ presupposition of teaching links determines the success of task-based language teaching practice. Based on the requirements of the syllabus and fully expanding the content of teaching practice, this is the demand of cultivating practical talents in the current college English teaching reform. Teachers play the role of designers in the whole teaching practice. For the arrangement and design of tasks, i.e. the topics of teaching forms such as debate and speech, they must closely follow the students’ interests and teaching objectives from multiple angles. Therefore, teachers’ organizational ability, coordination ability and creativity directly affect students’ performance in task-based teaching activities.

Secondly, mobilizing students’ initiative and creativity is the focus of task-based language teaching activities. In the teaching process, it is inevitable that there will be “single’ or “conflict”, which will lead to the disconnection of teaching activities. Teachers should be able to preset this phenomenon in advance and design tasks more interesting, more practical and more communicative. It can easily transfer the teaching arrangement through the way of “learning with reason, moving with emotion”, rather than imposing it on students, so as to achieve twice the effect with half the effort.

Moreover, task-based teaching practice is different in the time to complete tasks due to different levels of students, which affects the smooth development of the whole teaching activities. The limited time in the classroom can not meet the development of teaching activities. Therefore, the connection and communication in the second classroom is the key to ensure the smooth implementation of the teaching activities of task-based language teaching method combined with speech and debate.

## 5. Conclusion

The task-based language teaching approach emphasizes that students should be the center of attention. Teachers should mobilize students' initiative and creativity, improve students' autonomous learning ability, and cultivate students' comprehensive language ability, which meets the requirements of the current college English teaching reform. Task-based teaching method combines writing, debate, speech and other forms, which provides students with a platform for autonomous learning and mutual communication, creates a space for students' individual performance and self-development, and cultivates students' active participation, active thinking and willingness to explore. Students can accumulate and enrich their ability to use language in the process of preparing and completing tasks. The improvement of comprehensive language ability depends on a lot of practices. This teaching model can undoubtedly provide more and better practice opportunities for students. In addition, other teaching concepts, such as emotional education and aesthetic concepts, need to be integrated into the implementation of task-based language teaching. In a nutshell, task-based teaching model can effectively cultivate students' comprehensive English application ability, especially their listening and speaking ability, so as to promote the social development of China and meet the needs of the international exchanges, which are of great significance. But it is not a simple teaching practice, which entails teachers' continuous exploration and accumulation in teaching practice.

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