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How Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) Works in ELT Classrooms:
A Case Study of Grade-8 Students at Junior
Middle Schools in Yunnan, China

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ABSTRACT

This study is qualitative research that aimed to explore opinions and factors affecting Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) instruction in non-native English classrooms. The research was conducted through semi-structured interviews with three Chinese teachers and classroom observation of three English classes at three junior middle schools in Yunnan Province, China. The results revealed that TBLT met requirements of the country's new curriculum standard. The teachers' positive attitudes towards TBLT and their cognition of the instructional method were derived from theoretical knowledge and understanding without systematic training. Factors such as teachers' teaching skills, ability to use teaching materials, unpractical evaluation systems and students' uneven English skills affected the implementation of TBLT in English classes. Some important problems revealed by the findings were discussed and suggested.

Introduction

Human beings use language as the means of communication. English language has spread across the globe. It is not only considered the universal language for business, international communication, amusement, tourism, trade and technology, but also communication among people from different linguistic-cultural backgrounds [1][2]. To meet the growing demand for English, all fields and schools are committed to English teaching and learning [3]. In China's education system, students have to learn English from primary school to university, and there are even Chinese- English bilingual kindergarten schools. English language is one of three national primary courses and tested in the national College Entrance Examination (CEE)[4][5].

Therefore, several methods and approaches have been used for foreign language teaching. In this regard, teaching methods used so far are grammar-translation approach, communicative language teaching (CLT) approach, audio-linguistic approach and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) [6]. Among these, TBLT has been widely advocated and popularized since early 1980s by many leading linguists from all over the world [7][8][9][10]. Regarding its concept, TBLT focuses on learning to communicate aiming at learners to explore and experience, both written and spoken language, through tasks designed to attract learners in the practical authentic use of target language for meaningful purposes. Here, TBLT is an effective way to help students improve their integrated language competence, especially the four basic language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing [11].

In China 2001, the Ministry of Education promulgated the new National Curriculum Standards for English education, suggesting that teachers adopt TBLT in English teaching, and guide students to actively participate and practice in order to achieve the task goal of tasks [12]. In this context, TBLT meets the requirements of the new curriculum standards; not only stimulates and cultivates students' interest in English learning, but also helps students build self-confidence, forms effective learning strategies and develops good learning habits. It is a basic knowledge for students to master certain language, develop basic skills, establish an initial sense of language and acquire fundamental language ability [13].

Nevertheless, at present, China's education resources are unevenly distributed, and the teaching level is uneven. The main reason for the lack of improvement in the quality of English teaching in some schools is the failure to use teaching methods rationally. The implementation and effective implementation of TBLT in English teaching needs to be investigated. As such, this study looked at the implementation of TBLT in junior middle schools by focusing on teachers' views on using TBLT in English classroom and factors affecting the implementation of TBLT through classroom observation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As an extension of communicative teaching method, TBLT is defined as an instruction that requires language learners to complete tasks guided by the teacher in the classroom and focuses on "learning by doing," rather than

cramming students with language knowledge and skills in traditional teaching. It is a development form of communicative language teaching which transforms the basic concept of language application into practical classroom tasks.

TBLT has been studied by many foreign scholars such as Prabhu, Nunan, Skehan, Willis and Ellis. The research field has been gradually expanding from related teaching methods to theories of communicative language teaching, psycholinguistics and second language acquisition [14]. For example, Nunan [15] presents the definition of TBLT as “an approach to the design of language course in which the point of departure is not an ordered list of linguistic items, but a collection of tasks.” Willis [9] supports that TBLT takes full use of authentic learning materials to teach with real-world pedagogical tasks, and defined the task as the activity with clear goal. To Xiao Liquan [16], TBLT emphasizes the procedure that students learn to acquire target language through accepting tasks, implementing tasks and checking tasks. He regards achieving’ tasks as the surface purpose and acquiring the target language as the deep purpose. Meanwhile, it focuses on students’ autonomous and cooperative learning. Samuda and Bygate [17] define a task as an overall activity involving language use, which aims to meet language challenges while achieving language goals, and to promote language learning through processes or products or both. Branden [18] also explained that TBLT requires learners to remain active and play a major role in learning English. Learner have representative roles to discuss application aspects and the evaluation of TBLT and the main role of teachers is to support and to motivate their students during the accomplishment of tasks. Breen [19] suggests that language tasks can be viewed as a series of work plans from simple to complex.

The definitions of larger tasks are listed in Table 1.

Prabhu [7] “The activity of a learner to draw a conclusion or result is based on the information given.” It is a task for teachers to control and regulate the process.
Nunan [8] A task in the classroom involves the process of manipulation, understanding, interaction or production in the target language, and their attention mainly focused on meaning rather than form.
Willis [9] Activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose in order to achieve an outcome.
Skehan [20] Tasks are mainly meaning; Tasks need to be solved through verbal

	communication; Tasks are close to real-world activities; Tasks should be completed first; Tasks evaluation is based on result.
□	Richard [21] An activity or action that a learner completes on the basis of processing or understanding the language.
□ □ □ □	Gong Yafu & Luo Xiaoxia [22] Tasks are all kinds of purposeful activities that people engage in daily life, work and entertainment activities .

Table 1 Definitions of ‘task’ as an educational activity

As the central component of TBLT, its task covers many different interpretations and definitions. In conclusion, TBLT is meaning-focused. TBLT puts an emphasis on “learning by doing” through completing authentic communicative tasks in the target language. After long-term exploration and experiment, TBLT is to learn knowledge and skills related to teaching by completing specific tasks related to teaching [23]. Teachers design specific practical tasks according to language projects and teaching objectives. Students are the center of the task through expression and communication in class.

Therefore, in different historical periods, different scholars will be influenced by current theories. When they define experimental tasks, they form different perspectives and focuses, so their definitions are also different. According to the different teaching objectives and requirements in different periods, teachers design the teaching content that is in line with the classroom situation, and implement and test the results in teaching. It reflects the fact that TBLT is a developing approach and there is a need for a workable definition of task for practitioners in everyday classroom practice. Teacher must follow certain principles in carrying out their tasks. A lot of researchers such as Nunan [15], Willis [9], Skehan [20] and Ellis [10] propose that what they find should be treated as principles of TBLT. Based on their results, six major principles are summarized as follows: Scaffolding; Task Dependency; Recycling; Active learning; Integration; Reproduction to creation; Reflection. In China, two well-known linguists Gong and Luo [22] summarize seven principles of TBLT: 1) Authenticity; 2) Interaction; 3) Form and meaning; 4) Scaffolding; 5) Recycling; 6) Task Dependence; 7) Learning by doing.

Although different people have given different principles about TBLT, they have something in common: classroom learning should be related to real life, the tasks designed in teaching should be real, and teachers should give students enough support and attention at the beginning of the task. These principles are deemed as the guideline for the application of TBLT. The teacher should deeply study and understand these principles in order to apply them to practical teaching activities successfully.

The implementation of TBLT in China

Since the Ministry of Education issued the new National Curriculum Standards for English education and suggested use TBLT in the classroom, TBLT in China has now received much attention in research, and language is seen as a tool of communication. TBLT is a teaching innovation method from teacher-centered to student-centered [24]. In China, although the implementation of TBLT is required by the education department, teaching quality is measured according to students' test scores. Therefore, the conflict of values and serious teacher-student relationship hinder the use of TBLT in the classroom [25].

Problems encountered in implementing TBLT mainly arise from the foreign language (FL) teaching context in China [26]. As exam-oriented teaching is the main education system in China, English as a foreign language, which lacks a natural environment for students' acquisition and usage. This kind of English teaching excessively strengthens the students' knowledge of English and ignores the improvement of students' communication skills in English [27]. Although most teachers have a positive view of TBLT, context limits their ability to design and implement tasks [28].

In China, deeply influenced by thousands of years of Confucius heritage, teachers dominate the classroom. Traditional teaching favors students who are disciplined and submissive. However, TBLT takes language use as a teaching aim while learners pursue knowledge through doing activities and teachers in China focus on the teaching of language knowledge and examination skills [29]. Therefore, when TBLT is applied, it must challenge the classroom culture and redefine the roles of teachers and students in the teaching process.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To explore the situation and views of teachers in the implementation of TBLT in the integrated English classroom and find out the factors affecting the implementation of Task-Based language teaching, the research questions addressed in this study were:

1. What is the teacher's view on using TBLT to improve students' English communicative skills?
2. What are the factors that affect the implementation of TBLT in English class?

Participants

The population of the study were 12 teachers and about 1,200 Grade-8 students at three junior middle school of Yunnan province. In this qualitative study, three teachers and their classrooms were selected for two important reasons:

- 1) They all used the same textbooks to teach students of the same grade;
- 2) Different student groups and teaching environments could help expand the scope of the study and make the research results more universal.

The background of these teachers is shown in Table 2.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Qualification	Experience (years)	Teaching School English
Ms. Liu	Female	38	BA	15	Private School A
Miss Li	Female	26	BA	3	Public Schools B
Mr. Zhou	Male	46	BA	25	Public Schools C

Table 2 Teachers' background

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The data was collected via a classroom observation, and teachers semi-structured interview. Interviews and observation were designed to find out the use of TBLT. This includes: teachers' understanding of TBLT, whether they applied it in the classroom; how effectively TBLT is being utilized in their EFL classrooms; what challenges may need to be overcome; and what changes should be made if TBLT is to be more effective in their own teaching. The interview was conducted in Chinese and then translated into English by the author. Each interview was recorded (with permission).

The observation of the three teachers' classes took one month; each teacher twice a week, each course 45 minutes, a total of 40 times. The author recorded the information about the course through written on-the-spot notes. At the same time, some courses were videotaped, especially the types of teaching activities, and some teaching materials were collected. These observations provide direct evidence for the way teachers implement the curriculum and use tasks.

RESULTS

Classroom Observation

The researcher observed three English language class-rooms at three junior middle schools: one private school and two public schools. The following sections analyze the results obtained from classroom observations. The research mainly focused on the use of TBLT in classroom, participation of students, factors influencing the implementation of TBLT.

- Classroom context

The physical setting of all the classrooms was basically traditional. Because of the large number of classes, the space was limited. There were 45 students in school A, 44 students in school B and 47 students in School C. Three schools had multimedia, but school A's equipment was more advanced, using a new generation of multimedia equipment with touch screen function, and push-pull blackboard.

- Skill Focus and Language Use

As the content of the textbook involved four English skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, the teachers of each school designed the teaching plan according to the content of the textbook. However, due to the different level of students, School B and school C paid more attention to vocabulary, sentence pattern and reading comprehension ability. In addition to reading and writing ability, School A enhanced listening ability and train oral English in tasks.

In the English classes of three schools, teachers designed tasks and activities when teaching new contents, which were mainly student-centered, while explaining test papers or exercises was mainly teacher-centered. At other times, there were also three models: teachers to independent students, teachers to students and students to students. School A was more prominent. In the School A, the mode of instruction was basically half English and half Chinese. Because of the higher level of students in school A, teachers used more target language than their mother tongue in English class, creating a good English learning atmosphere, and students have more opportunities to use English in class. The students in school B and school C had different levels. Teachers only used English when reading words, sentences and texts. Most of the time, they used their mother tongue to explain and ask questions. The teachers' interaction with students was mainly in Chinese.

- Implement TBLT and Class Performance

It was found TBLT was partially used in three classes, and all the teachers followed mix methods in the classroom, for example, the direct method, audio lingual method, grammar translation method and structural approach.

School A used TBLT method more frequently than school B and school C. When completing the task, there were group activities, pair work, cooperative learning and other forms, which increased the chances for students to use the target language in the classroom. The teacher's teaching step by step, from words to phrases to sentences to sentence patterns, was easier for students to understand.

The teachers assigned different tasks to students of different levels so that students can participate in tasks better. Due to the large number of students and limited classroom space, sometimes it caused confusion. Every teacher used multimedia, but the teacher of school A was good at using the new generation of multimedia teaching with both pictures and texts, and the content was richer and more interesting, which increased the interaction with students.

The quality and level of students were also relatively high in school A, so the classroom atmosphere was more pleasant. Students were very active in answering questions, participating in activities and better using the target language to complete the task.

The classroom model of School B and school C was teacher-centered with low participation of students. Teachers also used TBLT method in the classroom. However, due to the different English level of students, only some students with good grades could complete the task. Other students were easily distracted in the classroom with chat or do things not related to study due to the lack of

English knowledge of English vocabulary, and could not keep up with the teacher's teaching students.

Teacher Semi-Structured Interview

There were three teachers interviewed. They expressed their views on the use and understanding of TBLT and the factors affecting its implementation. Below are excerpts taken from the teachers' interviews (The teacher from school A,B,C were coded as T1,T2,T3.):

Q1: Teachers' understanding of TBLT

T1: Teachers teach by guiding language learners to complete tasks in class. The teacher divides each lesson into different tasks. The students complete each task to acquire knowledge. The class is handed over to the students, with the students thinking as the main task.

T2: It is a language teaching method to complete language communication tasks.

T3: The teacher guides the learners to complete the task teaching in the classroom, takes the students as the center, with tasks as the motivation, the means and the goal, to make the English teaching authenticity and the English classroom socialization.

According to their views, every teacher had understanding of the concept of TBLT, and believed that it was a student- centered language teaching method to complete the task of language communication. For middle- aged and old teachers, although they understood the significance of TBLT method, it was difficult to apply it effectively. However, the advantage of TBLT was expressed by the three teachers.

T1: TBLT is formed by absorbing the advantages of various teaching methods in the past, and it does not conflict with other teaching methods.

T2 and T3 (Summarized): TBLT is easy to cultivate students' team spirit and innovation ability. By completing tasks to learn, students can experience the language in a simulated real situation. Students have a natural and real feeling and develop their self- confidence in speaking English so that students' expression ability can be improved. Using TBLT is the requirement of China's new curriculum reform. Every teacher had a positive view on the implementation of TBLT.

Q2: Factors that affect the effective implementation of TBLT

Students' motivation and English proficiency level

T1, T2 and T3 believed that TBLT could increase students' learning motivation. In their view, the teaching method was novel and close to life. When students were able to complete tasks, they got more fun and motivation. However, as T3 said, some students with poor learning were not interested in participation; it is very difficult to learn and cannot complete tasks.

All teachers thought that students' proficiency level was very important when using TBLT. Students' foundation determined whether they could understand teachers' instructions and successfully completed tasks. Students' knowledge level also affected the teachers' design of TBLT and its application in class.

Teachers' teaching skills and training

T1, T2 and T3: The organization, character design and implementation of the classroom depended too much on the ability and level of teachers. The teacher's language ability was not enough to teach in full English in class, and the students had different learning abilities which made it difficult to set tasks and take care of all students. Every teacher needed to receive special training of TBLT. After systematic learning and better understanding and mastering of teaching method, teachers could improve their professional level, and better use TBLT to implement teaching.

Evaluation system

All teachers informed that, although TBLT could stimulate students' interest in learning, due to the examination-oriented education system in China, the evaluation of students and teachers was mainly based on the examination results. Therefore, the focus of teachers' work was on how to improve the examination results. Moreover, there were too many contents and exercises to be explained by teachers. As a result, and the interaction time with students was reduced. Too much teaching knowledge made it difficult to ensure the completion of large-class teaching tasks.

Environment and facilities

The number of 45-50 students in each class caused insufficient classroom space. The use of only one textbook did not target to students at different levels, and there was no English language environment. All these reasons made it difficult to ensure the completion of teaching tasks in large classes.

DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

Discussion

The first question examined teachers' view on using TBLT. The results show that, through observation and teacher interviews, adopting TBLT is the requirement of China's new curriculum reform. Teachers are familiar with the main principles of TBLT. They think that TBLT is student-centered, suitable for group activities, promoting the interaction between students and teachers. The task is to make the classroom more authentic and improve students' communicative skills. However, teachers' understanding of TBLT seems to be narrow because there is no systematic training, and many of them are just theoretical knowledge without a deeper understanding. As a whole, every teacher has a positive attitude towards TBLT and thinks that TBLT has advantages in English teaching and can improve students' communicative skills, especially speaking skills [30].

The second research question asked about Factors that affect the effective implementation of TBL. According to the research and analysis, the factors that affect the effective implementation of TBLT can be divided into five aspects: First, in terms of teachers' own teaching skills, it is found that the teachers' cognition of TBLT was from their theoretical knowledge and understanding without systematic training. This probably made them lack systematic and comprehensive understanding of TBLT. As a result, TBLT cannot be effectively implemented in the actual teaching process, and some teachers' own

ability is not enough to skillfully use the TBLT. There are some deficiencies in dealing with the tasks designed in the teaching materials and the tasks designed independently, some tasks were not suitable for the actual level of students, and it required teachers to adjust and change according to the actual level of students [31].

Second, teachers' traditional teaching concept. Some teachers attach importance to the explanation of language knowledge, ignore the students' language skills, and play the role as a controller in the classroom [25]. This does not develop cultivation of students' comprehensive language communication ability, nor provide the effective implementation of TBLT. Therefore, in the Task-Based English classroom, teachers should change their mentality, role awareness and expectations of students by playing a role as a guide in the teaching process, learn to let go and let students carry out inquiry learning independently.

Third, it was found that the evaluation system was unreasonable. Under the current education system in China, the evaluation system of teachers and students' knowledge level is not conducive to the implementation of TBLT. Both teachers and the current performance evaluation system only focus on students' test-oriented ability, but ignore the development of students' communicative language ability [27]. The current examination is mainly based on grammar and words, but TBLT focuses on students' oral and listening level. As a result, teachers cannot effectively carry out TBLT. It often takes a long time to do tasks in classroom teaching, but the actual classroom time is limited. Finally, students' English level is uneven. Too crowded classroom and other reasons also affect the implementation of TBLT, leading to many limitations when teachers design tasks.

Recommendation

According to the implementation of TBLT, the teacher should pay attention to several points to ensure its smooth progress. First of all, the design of the task should conform to the level and needs of the students. If the difficulty of the task exceeds the level of the students, or the task is not attractive to the students, it cannot stimulate the enthusiasm of the students, but a negative effect.

Second, it is better to make a reasonable use of the textbook and choose proper tasks, not only follow the content of the material to design the task. Teachers can carefully study teaching materials, integrate the parts that can be fully used in teaching materials and combine their own design to create tasks suitable for students. The four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing should be combined in each task.

Third, Schools and education departments should strengthen professional training for teachers, including improving English teaching skills and mastery of new teaching methods.

Finally, the teacher should change the traditional teaching concept and know the role of the teacher as the organizer, guide or helper, and take students as the center. On the other hand, teacher should encourage students by giving positive evaluation and feedback to their achievements in order to make them study in a

relaxing and happy atmosphere, giving joy and achievement of completing tasks.

Through this research, some suggestions for the future TBLT research are as follows:

Firstly, it is recommended to adapt a more comprehensive analysis of the study. This research mainly studied by observation and case interviews. Some experimentation in the later study can be applied to get more feasible and effective data.

Secondly, in the past two years, most top Chinese students in general public schools have entered private schools, resulting in a great gap between the performance of public schools and private schools. It is suggested to find out how teachers use TBLT to improve students' communication ability and English test scores whereas it is difficult to find top students in general public schools, and some students have poor learning habits.

Conclusion

Many teachers think that TBLT meets the requirements of the new curriculum standard, has a positive attitude towards TBLT and thinks that TBLT has advantages in English teaching and can improve students' communicative skills. However, teachers' cognition of TBLT was from their theoretical knowledge and understanding without systematic training. Therefore, they cannot be effectively used in the actual teaching process. In addition, factors such as teachers' teaching skills, their ability to use teaching materials, the unreasonable evaluation system, traditional concept of teaching and students' uneven English skills will affect the implementation of TBLT in English classroom [31][32][33]. Therefore, in order to ensure the effective implementation of the task, teachers need to accept the systematic training of TBLT, improve English teaching skills and master new teaching methods. When teachers use TBLT in English class, they need to use teaching materials reasonably, design tasks that meet the level and needs of students and connect the test with the task, as well as improving students' communicative ability and test scores.

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