The Application and Analysis of Task-based Language Teaching in *English Listening and Speaking Course* for English Majors: A Case Study of Sichuan University of Culture and Arts

Danyang Xu

Sichuan University of Culture and Arts, Mianyang, Sichuan, 621000, China

Abstract: As an educational framework for theory as well as practice, Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) has a significant impact on second language acquisition. This paper analyses the merits and problems of adopting TBLT in *English Listening and Speaking Course* for English majors. To research the topic from a more objective perspective, this paper combines the literature and the author's practical experience in Sichuan University of Culture and Arts to analyse and research. In response to the research results, this paper gives suggestions to the problems and issues questions that need to be studied in the future.

1. Introduction

The grammar-translation method has dominated English teaching in China for a long time and still plays an important role in Chinese higher education; However, since the Chinese Ministry of Education issued *The Ministry of Education on Deepening the Reform of Undergraduate Education and Teaching: Opinions on improving the quality of personnel training in an all-round way* in 2019 and started the curriculum reform in higher education in China, task-based learning has gradually become popular in English education among universities, no matter for college English or Major English. There is a debate about task-based learning among scholars in the literature. Paul Seedhouse (1999, cited in Harmer, 2015, pp62) points out that task-based learning improves students' language use in specific task-solving during the class and fails to contain the language in other kinds of interactions such as debate [17]. Nevertheless, Richards and Rodgers (2001, pp241) suggest that task-based learning offers a more efficient basis for language teaching in theory than many other approaches in language teaching [15]. In this essay, task-based learning (TBL), also known as task-based language teaching (TBLT), refers to a language teaching approach that uses tasks as a tool or vehicle to plan and process language teaching. Jane Willis (2009) suggests that TBL generally contains three primary stages – the pre-task stage, the task cycle stage and the language focus stage [21]. This essay will argue that, to a large extent, TBL can support English teaching in the selected context that has been mentioned above; however, considering the Chinese education system and the education status in Sichuan province, TBL will also cause some problems in various areas such as the students' engagement and in-class management. To demonstrate this argument, this essay will analyse why teachers at Sichuan University of Culture and Arts shall adopt TBL in English courses, especially in *English Listening and Speaking courses, and analyse*, the possible problems that teachers and students may meet when implementing TBL in English classes respectively.

2. Analysis of the Target Students

The selected context of this essay is teaching sophomore English majors, aged from 19 to 21, studying at Sichuan University of Culture and Arts in a class of nearly 30 students. They attend the course *English Listening and Speaking* for two classes per week, for sixteen weeks each semester, and each class lasts for 80 minutes. What is more, they learn the language from different dimensions, such as English Listening and Speaking, English Literature, Academic writing, Comprehensive English and so on. Although English majors in this university have a separate Oral English Course in their freshman year, they

still participate in *English Listening and Speaking Courses* from freshman to sophomore. One noteworthy point is that the English language proficiency of these students is just general or even worse, compared with other English majors in Chinese higher education, because China's undergraduate education is roughly divided into five dimensions: research universities, doctoral universities, master's universities, baccalaureate colleges and associate colleges [9,13]. Sichuan University of Culture and Arts currently belongs to the fourth level – baccalaureate colleges. Thus, this paper deems that most English majors of Sichuan University of Culture and Arts are intermediate English learners, which means most of them could only get 4 to 5 points in IELTS (Common European Framework of Reference, 2020) [3].

3. TBL: Students Engagement

One argument for why task-based learning is becoming increasingly popular in Chinese higher education is that task-based learning requires various in-class activities or tasks during the teaching and learning process, which enables students to learn in a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere. Brown and Atikson (2003) suggest that effective teaching can be achieved by attracting students' learning interest during the class, such as using different kinds of teaching aids and encouraging students frequently [2]. Furthermore, Nader Ofoghi (2016) has conducted an experiment about the relationship between the class atmosphere and the learning quality at the University of Guilan [11]. According to the data (Ofoghi et al., 2016), 64.7 per cent participants (students of the University of Guilan) think that a relaxed class atmosphere can promote effective learning, and 147 out of 231 participants hold the view that the class controlling and planning of teachers can profoundly influence the class atmosphere and their studying quality. Although the form of this experiment is a questionnaire and all the data come from participants' answers which may include participants' cognitive bias, the results of this experiment can, to some degrees, stress the importance of class atmosphere and the environment from the perspective of learners. Moreover, the selected context is teaching students aged from 19 to 21. Young adults learners aged from 19 to 21 generally share the characteristics that they can work with their fellows and learn from each other, know how to plan and carry out the in-class activities well and can understand and acquire the target language through activities without explicit explanation from teachers [12]. A further important feature of young adult learners is that they typically get

bored and distracted more quickly than mature adults [16]. Setting up a task for young adult learners and allowing them to explore the target language through the task is one of the most effective methods to teach young adults language (Scrivener, 2011, pp326). What is more, according to the author's practical research, most English majors in this university are scared or bored with English listening and speaking classes in that they are unwilling to speak English actively in class time. If the teacher only designs individual in-class tasks or activities, it is difficult for the teacher to encourage most students to be engaged. Group-work and pair-work are inevitable in a TBL English classroom. Pyun (2004) points out that group-work in a second language (L2) learning classroom can provide not only L2 learners plenty of opportunities to acquire the target language but also generate unavoidable social interactions among group members, which helps to improve L2 learners' communicative skills.[14] For example, teachers can use a board game which is a task of discussion within small groups in the task cycle stage. Scrivener (2011, pp51) suggests that enabling students to have a discussion in small groups can help students stay focus on the class, as well as explore the target language deeply. Therefore, compared with the far-reaching grammar-translation method in the past Chinese higher education, which let teachers instil knowledge in students, TBL can generally improve students' learning experience and promote learning effects by allowing students to complete different activities with their fellow classmates during the class. Nevertheless, a noteworthy fact is that under the current examination-oriented Chinese education system, students' learning outcomes – scores of examinations are often regarded as a more critical point than students' learning processes [8]. Generally, in order to ensure that students can get a good grade in some crucial examinations such as Test for English Majors Band 4 (TEM-4) or Test for English Majors Band 8 (TEM-8), teachers tend to focus more on the master of grammatical structure and how to do the exercise right when designing and planning the lesson plan [23]. Another possible problem in this context is that the implementation of TBL is time-consuming (Adams, 2009) because each class in the selected context only lasts for 80 minutes [1]. If teachers cannot guide students to finish tasks on time, teachers may leave the target language to the next class or even chose to be formalism. In conclusion, TBL can relieve students, especially young adult learners aged from 19 to 21, from the boringness and pressure of traditional classrooms and guide students to learn actively as well as enjoy the process of learning;

however, in the context, task-based teaching may prevent teachers and students from completing the learning goals required by the examinations, such as TEM-4 or TEM-8.

4. TBL: Student-centred

Another crucial reason which supports the adoption of task-based learning in the selected context is that task-based learning is highly student-centred, which meets the requirement of Chinese curriculum reform in higher education. The Ministry of Education on Deepening the Reform of Undergraduate Education and Teaching: Opinions on improving the quality of personnel training in an all-round way Chinese Ministry of Education states that all the majors in universities, including English major, shall change the current teaching status of curriculum implementation from too much receiving-learning, rote memorisation, and mechanical training into advocating students to take an active part in the learning process as well as cultivating students' ability to acquire new knowledge, solve problems, communicate and cooperate with classmates.[4] To a large degree, TBL has abandoned the presentation method in language teaching and encourages students to pay much more attention to the meaning of the target language rather than the grammatical form [7]. The additional point is that Van den Branden (2016) defines TBL as a 'student-centred approach to language teaching' and the approach which is opposed to the traditional highly 'teacher-centred approaches to language teaching' such as 'Presentation, Practice, Production' and grammar-translation method. What is more, Nunan (2004, pp 119) suggests that in a TBL language class, students are the contributors in completing the task, and they need to participate in every stage of the task [10]. From the above point of view, TBL discards the traditional receiving learning method, allowing students to become the centre of the language classroom, which highly complies with the demand of the Chinese curriculum reform in higher education. However, as each student has an independent mind, teachers cannot guarantee that when carrying out the tasks, students are focusing on what the teachers expect [10]. For example, in a class of 30 students aged from 19 to 21, teachers do not know whether students are thinking about the meaning of the target vocabulary or the grammatical inflexion of the target vocabulary in vocabulary teaching. Additionally, it is possible that students generate misunderstandings or learn some wrong conceptions from their fellow group members about the target language item in that they are young adult learners aged from 19 to 21 and making mistakes is common among students in this age group. To deal with the above problems, teachers need not only English professional skills but also rich experience in classroom management as well as student communication and observation [22]. To conclude, as a highly student-centred language teaching approach, TBL can help English major of Sichuan University of Culture and Arts to respond to the Chinese government's curriculum reform in higher education.

5. TBL: Authentic Learning Environment

A further reason associated with the trend in adopting task-based learning is that task-based learning promotes English learning in an authentic and realistic context which is exceedingly important in *English Listening and Speaking Course*. One crucial feature of TBL is that TBL is highly associated with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Donna, 2019) which shifts the focus on of a language item from the form into the purpose of learning it and emphasises on language use in realistic communication [5]. TBL differs from many traditional language teaching methods mainly because TBL aims to offer an authentic context in language teaching and 'allow language learning occurs naturally' [6]. For example, when the task of the class is to find bus-timetable information and create a dialogue within groups, the bus-timetable need to be realistic and the dialogues are expected to have an authentic and personalised context. If students acquire a language item in an authentic and realistic context, they are typically supposed to use the language item naturally and actively in their daily life. Furthermore, having some interactions with classmates in learning the target language will promote students' social communicative skills and help students build good relationships among classmates [19]. In the past, teachers in *English Listening and Speaking Course* may often instil knowledge into students and make up a less realistic context for students to practice the target language. As a result, students generally had a low interest in learning and unbalanced learning effects and qualities; and students generally lacked opportunities to exercise their social communicative skills. Thus, TBL makes up for the shortcomings of traditional teaching methods which dominated in English language learning in Chinese higher education in the past, such as lack of real context and focus on pragmatic language use.

6. Analysis of Potential Problems

An opposite view to the one above, however, which is ignored by many scholars, is that the good implementation requires students' a degree of English accuracy and fluency [20]. The selected context of this essay is teaching

sophomore English majors at Sichuan University of Culture and Arts, which are mainly mediate English learners. For this reason, students' poor English proficiency in the selected context will reduce the learning effects in a TBL classroom. Another essential problem is that each stage of TBL is viewed as the same between students' first language acquisition (FLA) and second language acquisition (SLA), when considering TBL is the strong form of CLT [18]. As a matter of fact, it is hard for students to study L2 as the same as they study L1 resulting from several barriers such as different thinking patterns, learning habits and levels of proficiency. In conclusion, due to the use of authentic contexts, TBL can, on the one hand, support English learning to process naturally, on the other hand, improve students social-communicative skills; nevertheless, the difference between FLA and SLA and the gap between students' real English proficiency and the required English proficiency of the task are worth teachers in the selected context to think about.

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, TBL can be primarily helpful to teach students aged from 19 to 21 study in Major English at Sichuan University of Culture and Arts, although teachers and students of the University need to cope with several problems such as class management. This essay firstly explains the idea that TBL can improve students' learning by using many in-class activities and creating a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere, and the possible problems in complementing activities. Secondly, this essay analyses how TBL, a highly student-centred language teaching approach, benefits teachers and students in the course *English Listening and Speaking* as well as the pressure on teachers in TBL classrooms. Thirdly, this essay discusses the effects of using authentic contexts in TBL and the difference between adopting TBL in FLA and SLA. Since TBL is the teaching approach promoted by the Chinese government, it is likely for TBL to become the domain language teaching approach in the future. In order to let TBL be more suitable in the selected context and find more practical solutions to cope with the problems mentioned above in this essay, further research from different perspectives of TBL, such as the relationship with CLT and the selection of materials, is needed.

References

[1] Adams, R. (2009) 'TBLT in Asia: constraints and opportunities' *Asian Journal of English Language Teaching,* 19 (2), pp. 1-17.

[2] Brown, G. and Atikon, M. (2003) *Effective teaching in higher education.* Translator: Divanyahi, Molook. Schaloos: Islamic Free University Press.

[3] Common European Framework of Reference ((2020) *The CEFR and EF Set.*

[4] Chinese Ministry of Education (2019) *The Ministry of Education on Deepening the Reform of Undergraduate Education and Teaching: Opinions on improving the quality of personnel training in an all-round way.*

[5] Donna, S. (2019) 'Where do we start as a language teacher' [Lecture]. *LANG42715: Fundamentals of ELT.* Durham University. 1st November.

[6] Ellis, R. (2009) *Task-based language teaching: sorting out the misunderstanding.*

[7] Harmer, J. (2015) *The practice of English language teaching.* Edinburgh: Pearson Education Limited.

[8] Huang, D. (2016) 'A study on the application of TBLT in a comprehensive English class in China', *Journal of Language Teaching and Research,* 7(1), pp 118-127.

[9] Liu, N. C. (2005) 'Classification of Chinese Higher Education Institutions', *Journals of Higher Education.*

[10] Nunan, D. (2004) *Task-based language teaching,* New York: Cambridge University Press.

[11] Ofoghi, N. et al. (2016) 'Impact of class atmosphere on the quality of learning (QoL)', *Scientific Research Publishing,* 5(7), pp. 1645-1657.

[12] Printer, A. (2017) *Teaching young language learners.* London: Oxford University Press.

[13] Pan, M. Y. and Wu, M. (2003) 'The classification and localisation of higher education institutions'*, Fudan Education Forum,* 1(3), p. 5-9.

[14] Pyun, O. (2004) *The role of group work in the second language classroom,* Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press.

[15] Richards, J. C. and Rodgers, T. S. (2001) *Approaches and methods in language teaching,* New York: Cambridge University Press.

[16] Scrivener, J. (2011) *Learning Teaching,* London: Macmillan Education.

[17] Seedhouse, P. (1999) 'Task-based interaction' in Harmer, J. (ed.) *The practice of English language teaching.* Edinburgh: Pearson Education Limited, pp.62.

[18] Skehan, P. (1996) 'A framework for the implementation of task-based instruction', *Applied Linguistics,* 17(1), pp 38-62.

[19] Suo, Y. (2012) 'Task-based learning for teaching middle school English learners in China', *Overseas English,* 15(9), pp 139-142.

[20] Tang, E. (2004) 'Task-based learning in the Asian classroom' *RELC Guidelines,* 26(1), pp 14-18.

[21] Willis, J. (2009) *Task-based language teaching.*

[22] Yang, S. and Fang, Y. (2010) 'Task-based language teaching in Chinese context', Contemporary Education Science, 20(16), pp 61-70.

[23] Yuan, Y. (2016) 'Application of task-based learning in Chinese context', *Theory and Practice in Language Studies,* 6(2), pp 392-397.