

Mini Research Project Proposal

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1. Title

Spreading Chinese culture, telling Chinese tales in English with a multi-modal TBLT approach

2. The aims of the investigation

The project aims to understand the strengths and limitations of Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT in short later) as a pedagogy, to apply TBLT into English speaking teaching in Chinese SLA context, to blend mobile App learning, multi-media teaching, social networking, classroom teaching with Task-based Language Teaching approach and form a multi-modal TBLT approach, to explore how effective this multi-modal TBLT is and in what way it could facilitate speaking and to raise learners' awareness of Chinese culture.

Here are a few research questions:

Q1: How can multi-modal teaching blend with TBLT?

Q2: How can multi-modal Task-based Language Teaching facilitate Chinese students' speaking?

Q3: To what extent does the multi-modal TBLT approach promote students' delivery of Chinese tales?

Q4: What's the instructors' and students' feedback on the multi-modal TBLT approach?

3. The rationale and main conceptual themes for the investigation

3.1 The reasons for choosing the topic

The first reason to choose this topic is to teach in line with the times and national guidance of college English teaching. In 2020, the National College Foreign Language Teaching Advisory Board affiliated with the Ministry of Education of China published the newest version of the *College English Teaching Guidelines* based on a nationwide questionnaire survey(He 2020). The latest version highlighted two major shifts. From the aspect of teaching content, contextualization of teaching materials and ideological education should be included in the course, such as spreading traditional Chinese virtues, integrating the merits of traditional Chinese culture and guiding students to cultivate the right social, ethical and world values. From the aspect of teaching methods, individualization and innovation should be emphasized with the help of modernization and development of technology, and traditional classroom teaching and information technology should be integrated to enrich teaching methods and resources. In conformity to the national guidance, this trial study will be conducted in multi-modal teaching methods, fusing mobile learning, social networking and multi-media into traditional classroom teaching on the one hand, and on the other hand, it's theorized on the task-based language teaching with the theme of Chinese tales to spread Chinese culture.

The second reason is the prevalent deficiency in Chinese students' speaking compared with other specific English skills and the urgent demand for improvement. The deficiency is not only recognized by statistics but also among students, graduates and employers. For instance, Cai (Liu&Hu 2010) released a summative report of CET-SET from Jan.1999 to May. 2001 and uncovered that only around half got B orally among all exam-takers who got excellence in written tests. That means only less than 10% can communicate fluently among two million exam-takers.

To make the case more urgent, Dong's(2019) study over 267 graduates in Chongqing China showed that over 2/3 of them thought they were poor in oral English communication and demand improvement of oral competence; a similar request was made by Liu&Hu(2010) after investigating over 660 graduates, undergraduates and employers among science majors around Shanghai. Further confirmation was assured by Hu and his co-researchers (2011) who interviewed around 900 graduates and employers in middle China. It not only exhibits their inadequacy in English speaking, but also expressed their greatest concern and demand for English speaking. It was accorded with Chen's(2014) research in Inner Mongolia with half interviewees expressing a lack of confidence in English speaking. From east to west, north to middle China, deficiency in English speaking and demand for a solution is shared almost all over China. Thus, an investigation of how to improve students' speaking could to some extent do its bit to the solution of the problem.

3.2 Significance of the topic

When it comes to the importance of speaking, Ur(2012) highlighted that "speaking by intuition seemed the utmost important among listening, reading, speaking and writing: people knowing a language were called speakers of that particular language, which seemed to indicate that speaking covers all other knowledge of the language, and speaking is the primary interest for many foreign language learners". Similar standpoints were taken by Graves and Lazaraton(Khoshsima&Shokri 2016) who claimed that speaking the language almost paralleled knowing the language in most people's belief and speech was considered to be the most principal way in interpersonal communication. Nation(Hinkel 2011) also mentioned that speaking was regarded as a central skill in language utilization. Furthermore, most language learners in the world learn English because of expatiating speaking proficiency, pointed by Richards and Renandya(Khoshsima&Shokri 2016).

To further the issue, it's necessary to bring up the cultural and economic significance of telling Chinese stories in English. Culturally, studies on how to tell Chinese tales in English could enhance Chinese students' cultural confidence and awareness, and at the same time, promotes the cultural exchange between China and the rest of the world. It's noteworthy that many young Chinese don't know about traditional Chinese cultures very profoundly as the past forty years witnessed a tremendous social change in China and many foreign cultural concepts have already been embedded in people's daily life. Some people can't even properly explain our cultural roots, lost in the turbulence of world cultural integration. Therefore, reviewing those Chinese tales could be conducive to finding their self-identity and gaining a deeper understanding of traditional Chinese virtues. Moreover, because of ideological differences, China and Chinese culture have been misunderstood by many Westerners, and those misunderstandings sometimes are over-exaggerated by mass media and somehow manipulated by some separatists, stirring up some stereotyped hatred and prejudice against China, Chinese and even Asians. That certainly intensifies the current international situation and undermines world peace. Telling Chinese tales in English to some degree could clear up the misunderstanding and rectify some false assumptions. The Chinese stories from the mouth of ordinary young people make them more trustworthy and will in turn confer those youth a chance to participate in the further global dialogue. Economically, the competence in speaking would certainly earn more job opportunities, not only given the current *One Belt One Road* Proposal in Asia, but also confirmed by Hu and his partners'

investigation(2011). Their finding revealed that competence in English speaking and listening was specifically stated as most needed by employers.

3.3 Relevant ideas and issues

3.3.1 Rationale for task-based language teaching

A. Definition and task models

Task-based language teaching was originated from Prabhu's Bangalore Project in India. It held that proper activities, namely educational tasks should be used for classrooms and teaching should specify and help with tasks if learning was taking place during doing tasks(Cook 2008). Later it was evolved into a teaching approach and pedagogy side by side with other teaching methods, for instance, grammar-translation, PPP, Audiolingual or TPR and so on. How to define "task" has not been consistent by different educators and scholars. Ellis summarized those definitions and suggested that a qualified task should meet the following standards: focus on meaning, an existence of gap; learning largely depending on doing and attaining the outcome with the language(Ellis&Shintani 2014). This definition was acknowledged by Cook's (2008) three parts of task definition, too, which illustrated the need of learning by using the language, meaning emphasis and achieving the goal by language utilization. It's more unified among scholars to say that the aim of TBLT is to strengthen communicative competence through task performance by involving learners in meaning-focused interaction(Ellis&Shintani 2014). Besides the competence in communication, linguistic competence, like fluency, accuracy and complexity is also the goal of TBLT stated by many researchers, such as Cook(2008), Johnson, Skehan, and Shintani and Ellis(Ellis&Shintani 2014).

Beyond the definition, the nonconformity also goes to the classification of tasks and task models. For instance, Prabhu categorized it into three kinds from the perspective of task content, tasks involving information-gap, reasoning gap and opinion gap. Or input-based or out-put-based tasks were divided in terms of task forms. Or pre-task, main-task and post-task were categorized from the phrases of implementation(Ellis&Shintani 2014). That somehow led to multiple models to TBLT. Here are two major models. One is Willis' TBLT model that was composed of three parts, namely *pre-task phase*, *a task cycle* and *a language focus phase*(González-Lloret 2015); the other is Long's model, which consisted of four steps: needs analysis for task identification; task classification; pedagogic tasks development and syllabus organization and formation(Long 2015). As González-Lloret(2015) pointed out, this kind of syllabus was set up on the following six parts: analyzing learners' needs, selecting and sequencing tasks, developing and instructing materials, implementing the pedagogy; assessing learning progress and evaluating the program. To clarify the implementation of TBLT, Long's TBLT model is adopted in this proposal.

B. Rationale for TBLT

A huge number of empirical studies and theoretical research have proved that TBLT supports second language learning. Here a few representatives are quoted as below. As Mike Long(2015) promulgated, TBLT was generally consistent with theories and research finding in SLA in the last four decades. It's also in agreement with the basic educational philosophy that includes learning by doing and learner orientation. Besides, TBLT is accountable to learners, more relevant, learner-centered as well more functional compared with traditional approaches. Similar comments were made by Rod Ellis. Assuring the learner-orientation, meaning emphasis and development of interaction accuracy and fluency, he advocated that TBLT, with intrinsic motivation and rich language input, could provide a natural learning opportunity in class, complementary to other

traditional approaches(Ellis 2018). Peterson(Thomas&Reinders 2010) even interpreted in detail that TBLT is psycho-linguistic and sociocultural grounded.

3.3.2 Rationale for multi-modal TBLT

As mentioned above, this trial study would incorporate mobile learning and social networking into multi-media and classroom teaching. In a broader sense, TBLT with information technology is not new and results in many advantages. From the aspect of the linguistic outcome, its benefits went beyond the quality and quantity of input accessible to learners, and facilitates complex performance and work plans “*synchronous and asynchronously*”, put by Ellis(2018). Beyond that, positive influence on affective, social and cultural factors could also be found, such as enhancing their learning autonomy and motivation(Ellis 2018). To support the claim, increased cultural interest in the target language was reported by Chapelle(González-Lloret 2015), and pragmatic abilities and an additional benefit are mentioned too, such as developing technological skills out of class. Furthermore, the effectiveness and feasibility have already been tested by many experiments from Wang(Ziegler 2016), Ballester(2019) and Chong(2020), etc, whereas technology-mediated empirical studies of English speaking proved to be welcomed by students, illustrated by Meng&Chen(2021), Lv(2017), etc.

In a narrow sense, the multi-modal proposal itself seems promising and feasible. On the one hand, social networking, like QQ and Wechat, works as a platform to communicate with students instantly, providing more immediate, more individualized and private feedback to learners, especially in the present large classroom teaching setting. Compared with traditional teaching, it offers learners more emotional support and tailored counseling. On the other hand, the mobile learning App——*FIF Oral English Training System* is employed with scrutiny. First, it has been tested for trial use among potential subjects for almost a year, clearing the technological intimidation and burden away for both learners and instructors. Second, its authenticity and professionalism could be told from its founder and millions of users in China. The App was developed by Foreign Language Training and Research Press, the top publishing house specialized in foreign languages and IFLYTEK Corp., a member of the National AI R&D Platforms. The App especially targets speaking and listening for college students and has been utilized by over 1000 universities and colleges in China. Thirdly, the App excels in speedy feedback and more objective assessment compared with traditional interviews, because the multi-dimensional assessment with AI voice identification technology covers fluency, accuracy, completeness, vocabulary and grammar, etc. Fourthly, it meets the diversified and individualized needs of learning. The speaking exercises have multiple scales of difficulty and varied in content, from starters’ level to advanced, from phonological practice to actual utilization of language on campus, tourism, career, public speech, culture and other social interactions. And it allows instructors to create their customized database for learners with speaking exercises, tests and listening input along with students’ digital learning records. Last but not the least, discussion groups and communities of different interests on the App could expedite peer learning, cooperation and support nationwide, far outside the classroom and beyond the teacher-student interaction.

3.3.3 Speaking by multi-modal TBLT approach

Reviewing the previous literature, the TBLT approach has been employed in almost all aspects of language teaching, while the research of adopting the TBLT approach to speaking might be mainly divided into two categories: various task-dominant effects on speaking and

specific linguistic dimensions of speaking linkage to tasks either through theoretical interpretation or empirical case studies.

For example, in terms of tasks, Robinson analyzed the effects of task demands on the performance of L2 speech; while Skehan attempted to discuss characteristics of tasks and corresponding effects on speech performance and production (Robinson 2011). Later Sasayama and Izumi examined 23 Japanese students in high school and investigated the impact of pre-task planning and task complexity on the subjects' oral production (Shehadeh & Coombe 2012). Ekiert and partners probed into the influence of task type on oral production from pragmatics (Taguchi & Kim 2018). Linguistically, previous research Jena (2014) looked into how mother tongue influenced learners' speaking skills by TBLT; while the linguistic complexity, accuracy and fluency were researched by Yaprak and Kaya (2020) with TBLT critically. Along with its effects on proficiency in speaking, Wahidin (2016) also included learners' perceptions of the TBLT approach. Besides, instructors' perceptions in China were also covered in the latest paper by Liu (2021) and her co-researchers. The effectiveness of TBLT on speaking was supported by many other case studies, such as Muhammadipour and Rashid, Tabrizi and Nasiri (Wahidin 2016), Mudra (2016), Khoshshima and Shokri (2016) as well as a lot more Chinese scholars (Lin 2003, Sun 2006, Wang 2009, Liu 2018. etc.).

Chinese literature on English speaking after the founding of PRC could be divided into the following six aspects: studies on theoretical development on oral English, the assessment and evaluation of oral English; oral English teaching; corpus-based oral English research; literature reviewing on papers and book reviews (Yang 2013). Literature in the past two decades showed that western pedagogies have been frequently introduced into Chinese settings, especially TBLT counts for 1/3 of all pedagogy studies (Hu 2020), becoming a trendsetter in research. Yet among these TBLT studies, the merger between TBLT and English speaking has mostly been restricted to the application of TBLT into English speaking courses at the university level with varied focus. Meanwhile, teaching models have also been affected by information technology, specified by the literature review after 2007 (Yan 2017). Some latest papers did inquire into mobile learning in College English speaking course, as Lv (2017) and Meng & Chen (2021) mentioned before, but those research are mostly empirical case studies with a limited theoretical basis. Among all those studies, only very few looked into the application of TBLT into multi-modal English speaking teaching. Furthermore, the CNKI database showed that only 35 papers have been published with the theme of the App *FiF Oral English Training System*, among which research with a multi-modal TBLT approach is numbered. That leaves the trial project much room to explore.

4. Evidence to collect

In this part, Long's TBLT model will be applied to multi-modal teaching and corresponding evidence will be collected to conduct the research and test its validity or possible generalizability.

4.1 Responses to questionnaires of needs analysis

Before the implementation of the actual trial study, a needs analysis will be conducted in questionnaires and corresponding data will be collected. The necessity of needs analysis can't be overemphasized because of the following reasons. First, it's recognized by some researchers such as Norris highlighting that needs analysis is critical to TBLT and regarded as the beginning step in the implementation of TBLT (González-Lloret 2015). Likewise, Long (2015) directly clarified that the TBLT approach means a needs analysis included already in the syllabus, and it probably differed the approach itself from other pedagogies, suggested by González-Lloret (2015). Second,

it's impossible to come up with any kind of teaching model fit for all learners. Because learners are varied in needs and goals from different settings, across groups and even within the same age groups. Thirdly, a needs analysis renders teaching relevant and accountable to diverse learners' needs(Long 2015). Thus, a needs analysis of the multi-modal TBLT approach proposed here would be conducted by Wenjuanxing(www.wjx.cn) and include linguistic, cultural-related and technological information to find out, such as what kind of tasks might be relevant to students; what they've already known about Chinese tales in English, what they want to know and improve; how well they are equipped with technology and digital literacy, what kind of digital skills they have already acquired, etc.

4.2 Data from students' formative and summative assessment

Assessment is both important for students and instructors to locate the weakness and strengths of learners and the effectiveness of instruction. The trial study intends to collect data not only from summative assessment, such as an achievement test, but also several different kinds of formative assessment to follow up learners' improvement in performance as below.

A. Data from learners' self-assessment by FiF Oral English Training System as a pretest

As Cram put forward, self-assessment aimed at providing learners the opportunity to understand their competency in skills and knowledge as well as individual readiness relevant to goals(Nunan 2004). The App could assist learners to assess the above aspects very objectively, and the data could later work as a contrast to that of post-test at the end of the study to identify the change within the controlled groups and between the controlled and non-controlled.

B. Students' task-based portfolio

Not all progression could be examined by tests and not all students are good exam-sitters. As a result, the formative assessment would subsume students' learning portfolios over the program. It is said it could develop students' learning autonomy and monitoring gradually, prove their effort made in the process and thus support students' progressive learning(Nunan 2004). Adapted from Kemp and Nunan's portfolio offer(Nunan 2004), the portfolio proposed would contain students' individual PPT presentation on Chinese tales(written language as record and oral presentation by multi-media in classroom), weekly reflective journals of learning digitally collected through social-networking QQ, group videos of some Chinese tales in English, and video records of plays of Chinese tales in the classroom and corresponding transcripts; individual audio records of telling Chinese tales during the interaction with friends outside the classroom and peer assessment on their daily effort, etc.

C. Progressive data from FiF

This multi-modal TBLT speaking program entails not only output tasks as what's mentioned above in the portfolio and extended practice out of class by FiF, but also input tasks presented in FiF to read, listen or watch. FiF could record every detail of students' learning tracks and give them feedback by both AI and instructors.

D. Data from summative assessment as a post-test

A summative assessment is necessary and important as it could check if students achieve specific outcomes, pointed out by González-Lloret(2015). This program would conduct a post-test to see if the subjects make any improvement at the end of the study compared with the pretest results, meanwhile examine the difference between that of the controlled and uncontrolled group in post-test results.

4.3 Data from program evaluation

As indicated in Long's TBLT model, the last step is to evaluate the program. As González-Lloret(2015) promulgated, program evaluation could examine if the goal was met and learners have achieved the expected learning outcomes, or the result could be availed to adjust or refine the current program or the future studies, and accelerate the progression or even completion of it. The proposed program evaluation is going to collect the following data.

A. Observation notes and introspective logs from instructors

The instructors in the programs are supposed to keep weekly introspective logs suggested by González-Lloret(2015), such as the evaluation of tasks and materials and evaluation of the incorporation of TBLT to multi-modal teaching, plus observations in students' task performance. Additionally, instructors' perceptions of the pedagogy should be encompassed in their logs in the completion of the program.

B. Responses to questionnaire from learners.

Apart from instructors' feedback, learners' evaluation also deserves attention. An overall evaluation of the program by a semi-structured questionnaire with multiple choices by Wenjuanxing, and an open question to fill in learners' specific commentary on it. The questionnaire might be adapted from Cram's proposal, covering learners' self-evaluation about their linguistic, affective and functional achievement, but also their feedback on the strengths and limitation of the program, personal comfort, preferences on the implementation and possible advice on future studies.

C. Responses to individual interviews and focus group

The results of the above questionnaire could supply a general impression of the possible effects or problems of the program, then interviews of the focus group would be conducted to identify specific questions. Furthermore, random individual interviews may double-check the credibility of the results of the questionnaire and deepen the understanding of the study.

5. Methods to collect evidence

Mixed methods are used to collect the evidence above. As the quantitative method is useful to "describe numerical relationships and examine casual relationships"(Brown&Coombe 2015), the quantitative method to collect data from FiF assessment and some questionnaires can uncover the research question 2 and 3, whether multi-modal TBLT bears any relationship with learners' performance in speaking within the controlled group and causes the difference in performance between the controlled group and uncontrolled. Meanwhile, the qualitative method to collect responses from interviews, journals and logs could enhance the understanding of data from quantitative research, probe into the micro-dynamics of variables and answer research question 4, the feedback of instructors and participants to this program. And observations and reflections might shed some light on the first research question and understanding of questions 2 and 4.

6. Description of the settings

This study would be conducted presumably by several instructors in a few different universities in Hubei, Hunan, Sichuan, Jiangxi and Inner Mongolia, China, with one class as the controlled group with the multi-modal TBLT approach, the other as the contrasted group with traditional PPP approach. Each class is composed of around 50 college students of intermediate English level around age 18-20, mixed in gender and majors.

7. The ethical issues you need to consider

This trial study would be in accordance with BERA(2018) ethical guidelines, responsible to participants and corresponding institutions and publications. From the aspect of participants, they

will be informed to sign a consent voluntarily before the study, and given a transparent illustration of the implication, responsibility and contribution of their participation, as well as every right to be honestly and indiscriminately treated, respected, valued and allowed to withdraw from the research at any stage of the research with or without any reason. Besides, their private data will be protected maximally and stored under the law of Britain and China, and incentives would not be used to coerce their participation or impinge on their performance. Similar voluntary consent would be signed with researchers and institutions involved in this study before the implementation of the project. Moreover, those researchers would not only comply with the consideration mentioned above about participants, but also learn from and consult with each other so as to conduct the study to its top standards and guarantee its standing and integrity. Authors or researchers or any other materials referred to in this proposal and actual research would be acknowledged to avoid plagiarism.

8. Methods to analyze the evidence

As recommended by Gitsaki and Robby (Brown & Coombe 2015), SPSS would be managed to analyze the quantitative data. For instance, the correlation would be checked in terms of *T-tests* to compare the mean scores and scores distribution between the controlled and uncontrolled groups; and paired sample t-test would be run in the same controlled group to see the differences in pre-and post-test; ANOVA would be examined with F-test to see the significance in mean differences statistically; possible ANCOVA would also be done to exclude other confounds.

9. Timetable for the proposed project

Adapted from González-Lloret's recommendation (2015), this project will be delivered in the following steps:

Sept. 2021----recruit the participants and collect the data from the Need Analysis and pretest;
 Oct. 2021----start the trial study; select and sequence tasks; develop and instruct materials
 Nov.2021-May.2022----implement the pedagogy, assess learning progress, collect progressive data from FiF and build up learners' portfolio;
 June&July. 2022----evaluate the project and gather data from instructors' observation, the post-test and responses from focus group and individual interview;
 August-Oct. 2022-----analyze data and summarize;

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