

Task-based Language Teaching Pedagogy and Syllabus in Chinese College English Writing Class

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Task-based Language Teaching(TBLT) dates back to the late 1970s and at that time it was considered as a minor supplement¹ traditional language teaching. However, the mid-1980s witnessed proposals for designing complete instructional programs based on tasks. Ever since then, a substantial number of articles on TBLT have been published in prominent journals. And now researchers, teachers and learners are extremely enthusiastic about it. Ellis(2018, p.12) argued that he was afraid of getting involved in the fervour and disagreed with the idea that focus-on -form must be made sure. He argued that it was just one version of it and according to his experience in many state schools in Asia, TBLT should be displayed in another version. In this version, it is useful to adopt a more traditional language teaching along with TBLT. I would base my research on this version of TBLT in an English writing class for college students. In this research, pedagogy including traditional language teaching at the very beginning, a learner-learner interaction, peer evaluation, corrections by teachers and reproduction of a passage by using the learned forms and group discussions about brainstorming ideas are all included, which² facilitates successful writing achievement. In addition to that, a one-year

syllabus of English Writing class is presented. Both qualitative and quantitative data are to be accumulated to ensure its smooth progressing.

AIM:

The goals of this research are as follows:

- (1) To identify the target tasks in writing that are useful for learners in their writing output.
- (2) To design appropriate pedagogic tasks based on these target tasks and implement them.
- (3) To design a one-year syllabus for first -year Chinese college students.

To be specific, the research aims to achieve writing accuracy, fluency and complexity by the pedagogic tasks and a one-year syllabus. It is to help learners to enlarge the vocabulary, be able to use more sentence structures to ensure English language complexity, and correct forms of them in addition to correct grammar to foster accuracy, and finally students are equipped with all the skills mentioned above along with bright ideas, fluency in writing is naturally achieved.

I would focus more on the application of tasks in real classrooms rather than the carefully designed tasks that are solely used in experiments. To replace the traditional Chinese way of teaching English writing. Under the

theory of TBLT, instructional teaching should not take a dominant role in writing class.

Rationale:

The reason for Prabhu's invention of TBLT is that he was extremely dissatisfied with the Structural Oral Situational Methods which was commonly used in India before 1987 the year when *the second language Pedagogy* was published. My starting point was similar to that of the Prabhu's. Writing teaching in China has been greatly neglected and if we have to say that there is writing teaching in junior and senior middle schools, students are often given some instructions like a total imitation of some model writings and making sure that the handwriting is nice. And even in College English Test Band Four, which has been taken as a prerequisite for obtaining a university degree, in the last years, even an outline was given. It is evident that no critical thinking is encouraged. What's more, they are assessed mostly or rather completely on accuracy and fluency, but complexity is almost totally ignored. Because of this, students are encouraged to emphasize more on accuracy ever since they took the first English writing test. Therefore, less attention is paid to enlarge the vocabulary. Drawing on my own and others' experience of this method, a conclusion can be made like that even after more than ten years of instruction students are not capable of deploying the vocabulary they had acquired. For example, in IELTS(International English Language

Testing System) test, the writing average score of Chinese students has ranked third from the last for many years, but for Chinese students reading ranks much better. Therefore, I would argue that the progress of second language proficiency requires not only large amount of language input but also the maximization of conditions in which learners endeavor to cope with real writing requirements. This can be achieved by involving students in writing task performance with TBLT pedagogic tasks.

Candlin (1987, pp.23-46) criticized traditional approaches and argued that they did not emphasize the ultimate goals of education. I would say that under the Chinese current writing teaching and assessing approaches, students are not encouraged to think critically, and even critical thinking is discouraged by offering very low scores. Even worse, the topics are confined to limited fields such as air pollution, letter writing, campus life etc, which is a control of students ideas and can not meet the demand of the new generation born after 2000 and the need of increasing prosperity of the country. Candlin(1987, pp.23-46) and Breen(1989,pp.187-2007) attached great importance to the joint effort of students and teachers in negotiating the content of courses and believed that TBLT offers the best way for achieving this. This constitutes the first rationale of this research.

Another rationale for the study is that there are very few studies published by practicing teachers and also relating writing to TBLT is still innovative. There are a considerable number of studies being published in academic journals(TESOL Quarterly, language teaching research, Studies in Second Language Acquisition, Modern Language Journal, Language Learning, Applied Linguistics) or in books with a series of articles. However, practicing teachers have published much less. In *task-Based Language Teaching:A Reader*, the collection of articles in Van Den Branden et al, there was even not a single chapter written by a teaching practitioner. Since most task-based research aims at providing pedagogy for real classrooms, it is necessary for a research written by teachers and for teachers. Ever since 1987, the studies concerning TBLT are mainly conducted as related to speaking, therefore, my research about TBLT in writing is creative and the results of the research can shed light on the future research in this field.

Nuan(1989, p.56) prioritized practical design and utilization of tasks, which he thought was crucial in communicative language teaching. I, from the perspective of a language teacher, totally agree with him, for without implementable tasks, the theory is nothing but an ornament.

The timetable

The timetable is divided into two stages: the first half and the second half of the year. In the first stage, mainly, the methods involve a pre-task instruction of a sample reading material of about 150 words by the Chinese teacher. It generally lasts for about 30 minutes in a class of about 100 minutes with the focus processing for comprehension and processing for acquisition. After the instruction, students are required to do a learner-learner interaction for 10 minutes, writing down what impressed them most in the instruction by filling in a format, giving specific examples on detailed items including morphological and syntactic elements. In another 10 minutes, 3 students will be asked to present their understanding of the instruction and the interaction. The native English teacher plays the major role in motivating students to communicate and present. Then they will be assigned to write a 80-word passage on whatever topic by using some of the compulsory items in the formal instruction and the assignment should be finished after 30 minutes. Then a quick correction will be done by both teachers. The homework is the rewritten of the assignment and hand them in next time. The second stage focuses its attention on critical thinking and it goes through the second half of the year.



Pedagogic tasks in stage one

I would conduct an input-based task with 30 non-English majors ranging from upper-intermediate level, intermediate level and low level students enrolled in a university program. And the teaching model in the first and second half of the year varies. In the first half of the year, only morphology and syntax are the key elements. To improve writing complexity, accuracy and fluency(CAF). The pedagogy in this stage are as follows:

Repetition

Pattansorn (2010, p.13) classified repetition into three categories. Procedural repetition means carrying out different tasks that need the same procedure to finish the communicative goal but different content knowledge. Content repetition means carrying out the similar tasks that different procedures are involved to achieve the communicative goal but the same content knowledge is needed. Task repetition means carrying out the similar task repeatedly, using both the same procedures and same content knowledge to achieve the communicative objective.

The key rationale for a task-based curriculum is that it focuses on learning. It endeavors to form communicative contexts that will foster intercommunication. There is clear evidence showing that TBLT can succeed in enabling students to develop both linguistic and inter-communicative competence in an L2 communication. However, a

task-based curriculum may fail to help learners to achieve linguistic proficiency at a high level. Long(2015, p. 28) admitted that the command of some L2 forms is demanding because of the interference of L1 (e.g. third- person singular, past tense and plural forms for Chinese students since there is no equivalent forms in Chinese.)Therefore, explicit learning is needed. Even if explicit learning is emphasized, it may not result in the improved proficiency at a higher level because of the negative influence from selective attention.It is because of this, I would argue that in my task-based teaching, intensive repetition is needed to raise the consciousness.

11

In my proposal , the repetition of new words and expressions to increase the complexity of writing tasks is an example of content repetition.The same vocabulary is repeatedly used for more than five times, then it almost becomes a permanent part of the writer's writing. The repetition of emphasizing third-person singular, relative clause, single and plural forms serve as good examples of task repetition. Lambert et al (2017, pp. 167-196) argued that repetition of tasks for several times resulted in salient improvement in fluency. This can also be applied to writing.

12

Ellis(2018, p.124) summarized the task repetition studies in eight different ways among which the time interval between repetitions of the tasks

should be taken into consideration. Wang's (2014, pp. 27–61) research showed that immediate task repetition turned out to be the most effective on complexity, accuracy and fluency.

For example, neglecting third-person singular, a common mistake made by Chinese students, is supposed to decrease after the repetition for several weeks and will almost disappear after students who make the mistakes to give a pre-task instruction about it for just one time. Different types of relative clauses are to be repeatedly instructed in class, one type for a time, and enforced by application of them in real writing, and finally students are given opportunities to instruct a type of relative clause to others and also in learner-to learner activities. Thus, relative clauses are embedded as one of the priorities to consider in increasing the complexity of writing. What's more, in this way, writing fluency can also be achieved because of the rapid use of complex sentence structures and appropriate lexical resources. If the initial instruction is accurately delivered, accuracy can also be achieved without much effort. I would further propose that the interval of repetitions after the initial one can be increasingly longer until finally the new knowledge is achieved.

Interactive and monologic tasks

Many of the latest studies are related to monologic tasks(Bui; Li, Chen and Sun; Mehrang & Rahimpor; Nielson; Saeedi; Wang), but earlier studies focused more on interactive tasks. The monologic tasks are generally about story narration in speaking. Almost all their research was conducted in laboratories, but I, as a teaching practitioner would use it in real classroom with my 30 students in writing tasks. It will be presented in a way like that: After the instruction by giving emphasis to new vocabulary, syntax and morphology appearing in a sample text, students are required to write a short passage by using some(eg. 9 out of 12) new patterns. In my speculation, this approach can turn out to be effective on condition that they are repeated frequently and accuracy of the instruction is ensured. Although interactive tasks play dominant role in TBLT, the initiation of monologic activities can become the norm and can even be generalized to many classrooms.

Interactive tasks

Willis(1996, p.26) introduced a very different approach for a task-based lesson which gave priority to interaction among learners. Willis' framework set up the standard style for a task-based lesson, a stage before the task, in and after the task. Willis encouraged and fully used mini group work in the main task stage(named the task cycle), but permitted teachers to control learning by giving instructions before the task and at language focus stages. Her main purpose was to achieve fluency in the task cycle

and accuracy after the task(language focus). For writing class, I would implement the cycle framework set by Willis. One important pedagogy is learner-learner interaction. This will be used after the teacher's explanation and repetition of vocabulary and other important issues. The interaction between students are to enhance their understanding of the newly-acquired features and then accurate application of some of them in their output writing is made possible. For the first half of the year, the pedagogy will be used every time in class. After the interaction, students are to write a paragraph of about 80 words by using at least 80% of the newly learned vocabulary, expressions, sentence structures or transitional words within 20 minutes. In this process, students are forced to improve their complexity rather than use the vocabulary they have been using for many years. To write a better paragraph, they also have to pay much attention to accuracy. After 20 minutes students works are to be given to a peer to evaluate according to a checklist of grammar, vocabulary, coherence etc. Finally, the writing tasks go to the hands of the two teachers to be marked and will be given back in a new writing class. That is the cycle in the first half the year.

To sum up, in the first half of this year, both traditional teaching style and TBL tasks are proposed to be applied so that CAF is achieved.

Pedagogy in stage two

In stage two, critical thinking becomes the dominant pursuit. The main approaches to it are as follows:

Reading: To produce ideas, the input is of vital importance. Teachers are required to choose materials relevant to tasks from authoritative newspapers or websites, such as the Times or the Guardian. If necessary, the materials should be simplified or worked on to get the outline so that they are understandable to students. The reading activities belong to traditional teaching method, but it can not be replaced by other activities.

Pair work and group work

Although reading the same material, students might get different understanding and in the communication process in pair work, they will share their ideas to each other. By doing this, their thinking is improved through absorbing ideas from the reading and also through the enhanced ideas of the other speaker. Group work is also valuable in brainstorming.

Presentation, practice and production

Even presentation–practice–production (PPP) methodology is considered to be communicative. This methodology can be applied after brainstorming. By doing presentations, students abilities of thinking critically can be bettered. After presentation, practice of using these ideas in a production of writing would become a fascination for students if the topics are well chosen to meet the students demands.

A Writing Syllabus for one year

The easiest way to make sure the tasks related to students' needs is to analyze their needs and identify the target tasks that the learners should be able to perform. Long(1985, pp. 77–100) argued that certain target tasks can be classified together into task types. As far as college students' writing tasks are concerned, writing about a table and writing about a line graph can be grouped as writing about charts. Long(1985, pp. 77–100) also proposed that pedagogic tasks develop to ensure that the requirements of a task are met. However, while designing a syllabus, teachers often judge and then make choices about topics that they think their students will have the motivation to learn. However, this is not usually the case. Therefore, before the starting of the syllabus designing, I would work with a team of five other teachers to make a list of topics and then consult the students by offering them questionnaires with multiple choice questions and they are also obliged to write several topics they find the most engaging besides the ones in the questionnaire. In the case of my task-based writing class, topics will be derived mainly from IELTS writing topics, which are all inclusive.

15

Task designers are to make a decision about whether the tasks should be designed to meet certain purposes of a certain group of people or intend as a pioneer study for teaching in a large scale. In my research, I would wish it can be at least applied to the English writing class in the whole university I am currently working in. The task types are specified in terms of their

topics(education, technology, law, environmental pollution etc.) and the certain operations tasks clarify(brain storming key ideas for a topic related to education). Prabhu's proposal in 1987 is still practical in today's teaching. It offers a model for both horizontal and vertical grading of tasks in the syllabus. Vertical grading is fulfilled by sequencing the different task types and horizontal grading is fulfilled by taking the difficulty of the operations involved in the certain tasks belonging to each task type into the consideration. Getting some insight from Prabhu, I would illustrate vertical and horizontal grading in the table below.

Table 1 Task types and task operations

Task types	task operations		
Children	Children's games	Children's freedom	Whether should children obey rules
Television, computer games	What kind of programs or computer games are popular among children, the middle-aged and the senior citizens	What are your ways of relaxing yourself	Advantages and disadvantage of them
Diversified products	What kind of products do people tend to throw away?	Why has this throw-away culture developed	How to reverse this trend

The establishment of a general task syllabus should be done according to principles for deciding the vertical sequence of task types and the horizontal sequencing of task operations. Although Prabhu did not clarify the principles, it can be seen from the table in 1987 that it was based on

familiarity of the topics. And this is the principle I learned to apply in my research as is shown in table 1.

It is obvious that there is no such a rule as to decide what tasks to select and how to sequence them vertically and horizontally. Researchers have come to some common understanding that topic familiarity and learners' interests are taken as the specific design variables that affect task complexity. So for a long time, experience and intuition should be the resource of the designers to design a syllabus. It is believed that designing of a syllabus is as precise as science and as interesting as arts.

I would present a preliminary but detailed description of the syllabus designed. In the first half of the year, students attention is mainly drawn to morphology and syntax, in which clear guidance will be given as to what kind of materials will be used each time as writing samples, what kind of vocabulary must be learned and what kind of sentence structures are required to acquire and turn out to be output. While in the second half of the year, the focus will turn to brainstorming of ideas and training students capability of reasoning so that students at the end of the year are able to write a 250-word argumentation or report and a 150-word essay to describe a graph. In this stage, material selection, simplification or outlining are important jobs to be done. While the tasks done by students such as

interaction in pair work and group work should be analyzed and presentation be facilitated to make it less demanding.

Data collection

The starting point for this proposal is that it can improve Chinese college students' writing competence within one year by implementing TBLT. Whether it is implementable is of great significance. One criterion of its implement-ability is that students feel pleased to get involved in the tasks and they turn out to be useful. Another standard is the degree to which the task leads to the type of learner behavior that the teacher or researcher has anticipated while designing the tasks. For example, in my proposal I would expect that after an intensive training of one month, ninety percent of the students will totally get away from the habit of neglecting third-person singular in their writing. A third criterion is whether the task results in the students' acquisition of the L2. The three criteria are called motivational, performance and development criterion respectively and they are student-based, response-based and learning based. As to my research, before the task, a trial teaching will be undertaken to show students tasks and students will be invited to give feed back by answering questionnaires, interviews or writing commentaries. Whether students are motivated by the tasks are shown in questionnaires, interviews and their commentaries. A response-based comment can be conducted by check lists with grammatical accuracy, vocabulary and sentence complexity and the

writing fluency. For the acquisition criterion, in my research, I would mainly adopt two ways: video-recordings of the writing task in the whole process to ascertain whether there is obvious improvement and the video recording of interactions in group or pair work and transcribing of it. A comparison of the writing tasks every month will be analyzed and then feedback will be given to students to ensure their step-by-step improvement. Accuracy and complexity will be assessed every month and relevant analysis will be made. Students are also encouraged to write reflections In Chinese to complain about the pressure or reflect their achievements. These are qualitative data. Willis (2005,p.8) showed his favors of qualitative analysis because he believed that task evaluation is to give insight into and help learners and researchers to understand the happenings in TBL in the specific context. In addition to analysis of students' improvement in accuracy and complexity, they will also be assessed every month by giving them scores. In addition to that, it is useful to count the frequency of grammatical, vocabulary and logic errors students make. These are quantitative data. In this sense, quantitative analysis can also offer adequate information. And at the end of the whole experiment, students are required to take a mock IELTS writing exam and as previously, they will be assessed by an expert in marking IELTS writing. In this way, quantitative results are accumulated. Both quantitative and qualitative results will be presented.

Table 2 Quantitative data and qualitative data collection

Quantitative data		qualitative data	
video-recordings	Analysis	Scores	Frequency of error makings
All the writing tasks	Students writings	Students writings	Grammatical, vocabulary, logic
Interaction in group and pair work	Students' reflections		

The settings of the research

Whether TBLT is suited to acquisition-rich' (e.g. where learners can access target language out of the classroom in the wider environment) or 'acquisition-poor' (such as in many language environments where learners do not have access to the learned foreign language out of the classroom) environments has been debated over the years. Researchers used to

believe that it is only in acquisition-rich environment that TBLT prospers. However, recent studies find that TBLT works even better in ‘acquisition-poor’ environments than ‘acquisition-rich’ ones. In many Asian countries, especially in China, where English can not be accessed in most of the places out of classrooms, TBLT is the best way to imitate how English is used in authentic environment.

The setting of my research is an experiment class of 30 students and four hours of writing class each week with the cooperation of a qualified teacher born and educated in China and a native English speaker with high English proficiency.

Participants are the students in my university, who are willing to take part in the research although they may not know clearly what tasks they will get involved. The research will be done without interfering the normal life and privacy of the 30 students and the two teachers. The study will be done according to the rules of the university and Chinese and British laws.

17

Conclusions:

The research *Task-based Language Teaching Pedagogy and Syllabus in Chinese College English Writing Class* will take about a year, 30 students and 5 teachers with two as the leading figures will get involved. TBLT pedagogy along with traditional ways work together to make a set of pedagogy and a one-year syllabus in

teaching writing to achieve complexity, accuracy and fluency.Both qualitative and quantitative data are to be collected to enforce the smooth advancing of the study and a timetable with specific details is also discussed. All the research is done according to the ethical guidelines of the Bera.



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GRADEMARK REPORT

FINAL GRADE

60/100

GENERAL COMMENTS

Instructor

This is a good assignment, which explores the topic effectively.

You provide an interesting rationale for the study and relate to relevant background reading and your awareness of the TEFL module content.

You have succeeded in identifying a key area for further investigation in relation to current practice. Teacher talk is a well-established area of research.

The style is fairly coherent and reflective. You have obviously gained a great deal from this module and you are aware of the limitations of a small-scale study. Good awareness of the research methodology, but clearer research questions and awareness

of shortcomings needs to be communicated clearly.

You might like to consider:

1. Making further references to the research methods literature. Refer to Punch (2009) and Thomas (2009) as discussed in class..
2. Including more varied research methods
3. Refer in further detail to data analysis I e thematic analysis using Nvivo or Atlas Ti.
4. Refer to BERA (2018) ethical guidelines.
5. Try to keep to the word count (5096).



clarify.



Comment 2

Is this process based on a previous study?

PAGE 2



Comment 3

These research questions need to be more focused.



Comment 4

Agreed.

PAGE 3



Comment 5

Why is this feature ignored?

PAGE 4



Comment 6

endeavour

PAGE 5



Comment 7

Interesting focus. Is this proposal based on a previous research study?



Comment 8

alternative metaphor.

PAGE 6



Comment 9

How? This remains rather vague.

PAGE 7



Comment 10

Quote?

PAGE 8



Comment 11

Refer to error analysis theory in more depth.



Comment 12

Give further details.

PAGE 9



Comment 13

Useful.

PAGE 10



Comment 14

What are the dates of these studies?

PAGE 11

PAGE 12



Evaluation.

A useful evaluation of the study with appropriate commentary.

PAGE 13



Comment 15

fine.

PAGE 14

PAGE 15



Comment 16

meaning unclear.

PAGE 16



Background reading

Evidence of wide reading

PAGE 17



knowledge

Detailed knowledge

PAGE 18



Comment 17

clarify.



Comment 18

Refer to BERA 2018.



Comment 19

Useful reading.



Comment 20

Useful resources. How much have you adapted the research methods employed here?