

A Review of Investigating EFL teachers' perceptions of task-based language teaching in higher education in China

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In the countries where English is a foreign or second language, English education often faces kinds of challenges, such as lack of English language pragmatic environment, interference of the native language, and meeting various educational requirements of the State Education Department. According to *A Guide to College English Teaching* (2020), published from the National Administration Committee on Teaching English Language to Majors in Higher Education under the Ministry of Education in China, the teaching of college English courses can start from the teaching concept of “student-centered”, embody the teaching concept of “teacher-fronted and student-centered” and adopt the teaching methods of task-based, cooperative, project-oriented and inquisitive, so as to transform the teaching activities from “teaching” to “learning”.

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is based on communicative teaching and belongs to the “School of functional linguistics” of second language teaching. It emphasizes the cultivation of language communicative competence and pursues the successful expression of oneself and understanding of others in communication. TBLT emerged in the 1980s and had attracted great attention since it was introduced into Chinese foreign language teaching field. TBLT approach is clearly proposed in the Ministry of Education’s English Teaching Syllabus for English Majors in Colleges and Universities (2017&2020).

Despite the emphasis and support of the above theories and policies, there has not been sufficient research and empirical verification in English classroom practice. This study addresses this difference by examining English teachers’ understanding of

TBLT and their evaluation of TBLT implementation.

In this critique, first of all, I will evaluate how the authors present the research questions and consider whether the gaps in the Literature review are consistent with the research questions. What's more, the methodology assessment will be carried out, including three aspects ---the design of questionnaire and interview, implement procedures and data collection. Finally, I will ponder the data results and analyses based on the four research questions.

Theoretical and current situational considerations

As to the literature review, the authors made a good and logical organization from theoretical background, current teaching situation of the research subjects and research gaps.

Tasks in English teaching refer to all kinds of language practice activities that help students to do things in English. Generally, the design of tasks should follow the following principles: (1) Tasks should have a clear purpose; (2) The task should have real significance, that is, close to various activities in real life; (3) The task shall involve the receiving, processing and transmission of information and other processes; (4) Students should use English in the process of completing tasks; (5) Students should do things to complete the task; (6) There should be a specific result after the completion of the task. (Ellis, 2003)

When designing tasks, more specifically, teachers should take students' life experience and interests as the starting point, which should be conducive to the learning of English knowledge, the development of language skills and the improvement of practical language ability, and actively promote the interpenetration and connection between English and other subjects---the students' comprehensive qualities such as thinking ability, imagination, aesthetic taste, artistic feeling, cooperation and innovative spirit can be developed.

Based on the literature review presented by the author, it is obviously noticed that TBLT is very beneficial for the English language teaching in the second language

learning classrooms. However, there are a couple of challenges to use the TBLT theory. To begin with, Chinese educational philosophy focuses on the student-centered, teacher-assisted education model, which is in conflict with the Chinese Confucian tradition that emphasizes the 'hierarchical relations between teachers and students' (Hu 2013: 2). The second challenge to the use of TBLT is that although many studies have put a great emphasis on benefits of TBLT, few textbooks are available in reality (Willis 2007: 201). The third challenge refers to the two significant aspects related to the effective implementation of TBLT, large class size and the examination system.

In addition to the above mentioned challenges, the authors also inferred that there was a clear gap between policy and practice in the context of Chinese universities that calls for continued research to remedy it (Carless 2009; Cheng and Samuel 2011). Furthermore, the second gap focuses on the teachers' perceptions, for instance, Korean secondary school studies such as Jeon and Hahn's (2006) showed that although teachers had a high level of understanding of TBLT, they had a fear of teaching methods due to regular problems in teaching practice. In China, there are also many researches on the TBLT, but most of them are related to the specific writing tasks, rather than the investigation of teachers' perceptions or the employment of TBLT.

On the basis analysis of the literature review, the author raised four research questions in the reasonable and logical way as below:

- (1) Are Chinese college English teachers familiar with TBLT instruction?
- (2) What are the teachers' views on the implementation of TBLT?
- (3) For what practical reasons do Chinese EFL teachers choose to implement TBLT?
- (4) For what reasons do Chinese EFL teachers avoid implementing TBLT?

It is also clear that the literature review of the article is well organized and argumentative. For the good and close relationship between the research questions and literature review. Gaps are found from the literature review and close to the problems. But there is one small drawback that the author did not review all the

literature and only reviewed the writing aspect in Chinese context. However, according to the the search with literature search engine in China and UK, some scholars still made task-based research from other aspects, such as grammar and listening. (Ji, Yi,2020)

Methodology

Based on the original research made by the author in China, this article adopts a mixed research method combining quantitative and qualitative methods.

There is no doubt that mixed methods research helps research by enabling a powerful combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods. It tries to combine qualitative and quantitative research paths, emphasizes pragmatism, and maximizes the realization of research purposes. In belief, if other researchers interested in this field want to go further, it is not difficult for them to replicate the research path.

This study use a questionnaire and further interview to investigate EFL teachers' perceptions of task-based language teaching in higher education in China. I originally wanted to study the researcher's questionnaire and interview outline, but unfortunately the interview outline was not provided, maybe for the reason of layout restriction .

Actually the researchers made a great effort to avoid trustfulness of the survey. Taking the two items related to the third and fourth research questions as an example, in order to avoid presupposition, the researchers list a couple of reasons for like or dislike of TBLT using the multiple choices of pros and cons items with one more open-ended question according to the participants own teaching experiences.

In addition, the authors introduce in detail how to design and make pre-test which sounds good, however, the items setting are not reasonable enough. This questionnaire is divided into four parts. The first part is the background information of the participants, consisting of gender, age, years of teaching and majors of the subjects taught. As far as I'm concerned, it doesn't make sense to design the choice item of teaching for English major or non-English major students, because the

participants of the study are only non-English major English teachers in Chinese universities mentioned in the methodology introduction, not English major EFL teachers. So there is no need to design this item. For the second part, the three items for investigating the familiarity and training experience are too general and it may cause subjective interpretation. For example, the questions “Are you familiar with TBLT?” and “Have you had any training in TBLT?” do not actually serve the purpose of examining how well the participants understand TBLT. Compared with previous studies, some researchers have pointed out the awkward situation that some teachers do not know how to carry out tasks in China (Zheng, 2014) because no precise definition of what is a task given in the curriculum in China at that time. But after nearly a decade of research by other researchers in this field, if possible, it might make more sense to design questionnaire items to test participants’ knowledge of TBLT rather than simply check “yes” or “no” to the question.

As for the sample size, it’s not large enough. The researchers sent out more than 400 questionnaires, but only 66 valid responses were returned. As we know, data collection method plays a crucial role in a persuasive research, maybe sometimes we should do it in person, instead of online.

Results and relevance to theory

In this article, the writer employs task-based language teaching as the main and ideal teaching approach which seems suitable for the Chinese teaching context and explored English teachers’ understanding of TBLT and the implementation status of TBLT in their courses. There also exists a gap in the implementation process, which is mainly hindered by the following three factors: the resistance of students, the lack of support from school administrators or policy makers and the backtracking effect of examinations. It emphasizes the important role of English teachers in the implementation.

Comparing the results of quantitative and qualitative data, the researchers made discussions closely related to the four research questions. Generally speaking, the

study shows reasonable induction and deduction. Arguments, ideas and discussions are coherent and logical, but there are shortcomings.

Combining the data collection methods of questionnaires and interviews, it indicated that most of the Chinese English teachers interviewed held a positive attitude towards TBLT and emphasized various advantages of implementing task-based teaching in their background. The article mentioned further research and research on teacher perspectives should be conducted and analyzed before any policy can be formulated. However, from a practical point of view, I argue that after the promulgation of the Guide to College English Teaching for putting emphasis on TBLT a decade already, it may be necessary to conduct more research on the implementation of TBLT, fully understand the influence of English teachers' perception and teaching situation factors on the implementation of TBLT, and support on-the-job training to make the implementation of TBLT more effective, so as to help bridge the gap between the top-down education system.

Due to the relatively small time span and sample size, this study is inevitably subject to certain limitations. TBLT teaching is a dynamic development process, which requires a long-term tracking process, and the scope and field of research may be expanded in the future. Further quantification will be carried out by enlarging the sample and preparing a detailed questionnaire. At the same time, the choice of TBLT approach by teachers of other subjects is also related to the process of educational practice, and it is worth paying more attention to in the follow-up research.

In conclusion, although there are a couple of minor weaknesses in literature review, questionnaire design, data collection and analysis, it is organized logically and sequentially to focus on the four research questions. Hopefully, more practical implications will be given in the further research in the field of TBLT.

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