Application of Task-Based Approach in Foreign Trade Correspondence Teaching in Universities

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As the chief means of communication in international trade, Foreign Trade Correspondence has been widely used in the field of social business. Task-based approach enjoys popularity in the English teaching nowadays. It focuses more on tasks and evaluates students by learning process and result. This paper aims to discuss the application of task-based approach in Foreign Trade Correspondence teaching in colleges and universities and explore whether it is more feasible and efficient than traditional teacher-centered approach.

Keywords: task-based approach, Foreign Trade Correspondence, application

Introduction

Most classes are conducted in traditional way at Quzhou University, which is teacher-front talking and students listening passively in class (Ellis, 2003). Therefore, the classroom is centered as teacher. In class, few students involve in active learning process, let alone taking charge of their own learning. On occasion, students will be asked to translate a certain sentence or have a dictation. The response to teachers is almost: "I don't know" or "sorry". Some students attend class with sleeping and chatting instead of involving class activities. There is little interaction between teachers and students or between students and students. FTC course is designed in the third year with three periods in one week. The Business English majors have three-year General English learning including listening, oral English, intensive reading, extensive reading, and basic writing, etc. In the fifth semester, students will undertake several professional courses relating to Business English and will be examined at the end of semester. Although students have learned General English for two years, I discover that students' English level is unsatisfactory and disappointing. There are a lot of grammar mistakes and no hierarchical structures in their homework and they cannot express themselves correctly in oral English. What is more, students know little about trade knowledge, which is important in handling business communication and business activities. It partly shows the weakness of current Business English learning and teaching in colleges and universities. I have years' FTC teaching practice at Quzhou University with a good understanding of weakness of current FTC teaching; therefore, in response to the current teaching condition at my college and requirements of FTC Curriculum, I will focus on the improving of FTC teaching approach at Quzhou University and hope to shed light on the following research questions: How to improve teaching approach in FTC teaching at Quzhou university? What is the feasible FTC teaching approach for Business English majors?

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Characteristics of Task-Based Teaching

What these various understandings all emphasize, however, is the centrality of the task itself in a language course and, for task-based teaching as an overall approach, the important of organizing a course around communicative tasks that learners need to encourage in outside the classroom (Yu & Fu, 2014). David Nunan (2001, p. 279) gives us five characteristics of a task-based approach to language teaching:

(1) An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language;

(2) The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation;

(3) The provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on languages, but also on the learning process itself;

(4) An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning;

(5) An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activation outside the classroom.

Task-Based Teaching Model

Based on the above theories of task-based teaching approach, I designed a "task-based teaching model".

Selecting Task

Three students who undertake different roles receive the same letters at the same time, but their assignments are different. The secretary puts emphasis on understanding thoroughly the general idea, the translator explains the meanings of key vocabularies, and the manager puts particular emphasis on items of letter and responses to the writer. The secretary picks out and reads important parts which are translated into Chinese by translator in oral form. The class is also centered with oral practice with reading, listening, and translating without wasting too much time. The teaching approach is coinciding with principles of "from thick to thin" because each student has enough time for preparation. Also, it is convenient for teachers to go on with the teaching process smoothly and quickly. The teaching process like this not only improves students' language ability, but also makes students aware of their role responsibilities. Writing response letter should be the assignment of the next period, which needs the three students' cooperation. Among groups, they are both independent and connected with each other. Actually, the task-based teaching has developed competitive class atmosphere gradually and is very helpful to encourage students' learning enthusiasm.

Performing Task

I divide all the students into several groups with three students in one group. For each group, there are three roles, namely, a translator, a secretary, and a manager. They have specific tasks as follows:

Secretary: To write down the sender, receiver, date and reference number, and excerpt the important parts to the translator

Translator: To check the contents given by the secretary, to translate them into Chinese, then hand them into the manager

Manager: To find out the detailed items mentioned in the letter, to make sure what replied contents are, then response to the writer as soon as possible with collaboration of secretary and translator.

Three students' roles rotate periodically; by doing so, each student has more opportunities to practice himself by undertaking different roles.

Estimating Task

The task is divided into several roles in order to make students concern about the quality of accomplishing the task. To carry out task activities, the teacher should determine and control the difficulty degree of the task and students will focus more on the tasks and stand up to more difficult tasks. Otherwise, the task without clear evaluation demands will be much easier.

Methodology

The paper is a case study which aims to discuss the teaching approach of FTC Curriculum at Quzhou University. I took 68 students who were in the third grade from Business English major as participants. The study was conducted within two years (September, 2018-September, 2020). Here, I'd like to introduce research methodology with subjects and instruments first, then data collection and data analysis.

Subjects

A total of 68 Business English majors at Quzhou University have been chosen as the subjects. They are from different parts of Zhejiang Province. Their ages range from 18 to 20. Before they entered into the third grade, all of them had learned all general language curriculums relating to Business English including extensive reading, intensive reading, basic writing, listening, oral English, and so on. According to the teaching design and requirements, they are expected to take the professional courses in the fifth term. FTC is one of the most important professional courses, which combine language study with professional knowledge widely. The students from two classes have very similar English-learning experiences, such as the same teachers, the same textbooks, and the same learning environment. They must pass all examinations before graduation. I believe I can get authentic data from the group

Instruments

I use two instruments including interview form and testing.

The first instrument in the subject is interview. Interview, of course, is just a way of asking questions, this time in face-to-face interaction, rather than the questionnaire format. The interviews in this research are aiming to collect more information about task-based approach's application in FTC teaching with 68 participants involved. The interview form consists of 15 questions derived from the research data.

The other approach is traditional treatment which is helpful to discover the result of study—testing. In general terms, a test is a systematic approach of eliciting performance which is intended to be the basis for some sort of decision making, although this does not deny that many tests are not terribly systematic, elicit fairly questionable language performance, and do not lead to any decisions being made. I made a test at the end of the fifth term. The purpose of the testing is to see whether task-based approach is more effective than traditional teaching approach.

The research was dealt with at normal English teaching time—half of a year before their final examination at the end of term. There were three periods in one week. The subjects were going on well with the development of contents.

Data Collection

The interview data were conducted once a week. Interviews were carried out by face-to-face individually, lasting 30-60 minutes. The note-taking was used to keep track of interview. The interview was conducted in Chinese so as to avoid misunderstanding because of language barrier.

Based on students' final scores, the testing data were input into the computer in order to get a general picture of application of task-based in FTC teaching.

Data Analysis

When I coped with interviews, I read my note-taking over and over in order to get some valuable information. I myself have been a college English teacher for years and have some ideas about FTC teaching. With enough information about how to deal with FTC teaching at Quzhou University, I realized the feasibility of applying task-based approach in FTC teaching.

When I conducted the testing, I analyzed the scores to explore the effect of task-based approach in FTC teaching.

Results and Discussion

Interview

My interview is concerned with five main perspectives: opinion about General English writing, opinion about FTC Curriculum, expectations for teacher's qualification, what is wanted from the course, and the feasibility of operating the course.

Based on the interviews, it is discovered that students' general writing level is low. They find it difficult to write a good composition. Some students make complaints that they are not good at Chinese composition in the middle school, let alone English composition. Some students are not interested in English writing and are unwilling to ask for help from teachers. One interviewee mentioned: "I am not interested in English writing, but I am good at oral English because grammar is not paid much attention to it. I am very poor in English writing. So I give up devoting myself to studying English writing".

In my interview with English teachers, most teachers are familiar with the traditional teaching approach before the introduction of task-based teaching approach. However, they all agree on the feasibility of creative task-based teaching approach. The application of task-based teaching approach needs students' cooperation absolutely. And the teacher's role is to supervise, to manage their study, and to teach them how to learn well. They are in agreement that teachers should distribute students' roles, assign the role-responsibilities, and give evaluation.

As we can see from my interview, my colleagues in my interview also argued that some students force themselves to listen carefully in class so as to pass the final examination, and will not study FTC well by traditional teaching approach. If they act as certain roles in a business letter, they will be more interested in reading it, remembering it, and applying it flexibly.

Test

Based on the above interviews, in order to see whether task-based approach is more effective than traditional approach in FTC teaching, I made a test in the two classes. During FTC teaching practice, I applied task-based approach in Class 2; however, traditional teaching approach is used in Class 1. The test was made at the end of the fifth semester.

The test mainly includes: multiple choices, translation, and writing.

It involved 68 students of Business English majors. Students' scores are classified into three levels: Level A, the best level (from 85-100 score), Level B (from 70-84 score), and Level C, the worst level (60-69 score).

The marking standard covers the following: trade knowledge, content, language, and structure.

At the end of semester, the students are examined and the same test paper is used in two classes. From the final result, I get the scores and put the scores into the table. To my surprise, the results are different, because of different teaching method adopted. The average score of Class 1 is lower than that of Class 2. The total number of the students who get A and B in Class 1 is 25; however, there are 32 students who get A and B in Class 2.

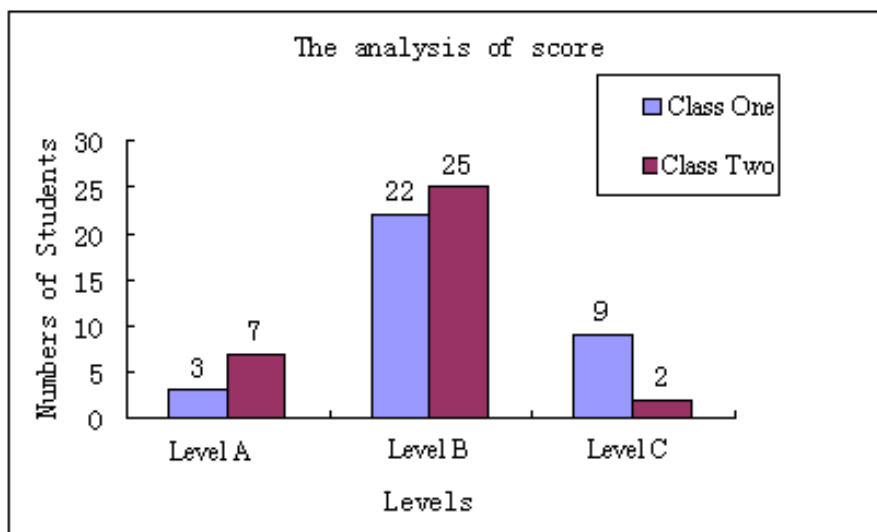The result of the test can be presented as follows (Figure 1):

Figure 1. Teaching mode test in the two classes.

From the diagram, we can see obviously that the total number of the students who get A and B in Class 2 are more than that of Class 1 and the number of students who get Level C in Class 2 is less than that of Class 1. The result of the test tells us directly that the class applying task-based teaching approach achieves better grade than the other class in the test. Why Class 1 gets worse result? It is obvious because different teaching approach causes different results. Characteristics of weak ability for students from Class 1 are: (1) lack of study objective and plans, (2) shortage of learners' autonomy awareness, (3) over-dependence on teachers, (4) the application of traditional teaching approach.

From my study, we may draw a conclusion that the application of task-based approach in FTC teaching is feasible and effective. When I finished the study, I shared the analysis result with my colleagues. We strongly agree with each other that task-based teaching approach has very positive influence on the teaching of FTC. First, it can promote teachers' teaching enthusiasm and solve teaching difficulties. Second, it can train and equip students to be active and transfer passive study into active study. Third, it not only helps students improve their ability of using professional language and practicing their business oral level. Finally, it can strengthen students' responsibilities of undertaken roles, and students will benefit from class atmosphere so as to make good preparation for future working posts.

Conclusion

The paper has offered a valuable conclusion of applying task-based approach in FTC teaching at Quzhou University through interview and test paper. Based on my research, we draw a conclusion that task-based teaching approach gets valid application and is more efficient than traditional approach in FTC teaching, which may be helpful for future research in this area.

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