

Exploration and Practice on Task-Based Language Teaching Theory in College English Teaching

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This article is based on task-based language teaching (TBLT) theory and attempts to explore how to better transfer knowledge and effectively arouse college students' interest in language learning and strengthen their confidence in college English classroom context. Task-based language teaching must be considered and applied in syllabus designing, selection, sequencing of pedagogic tasks, and provision of real-language environment during the learning process. Through the analysis of applying the task-based approaches, it can be found that students' comprehensive ability of English is greatly improved.

Keywords: task-based language teaching (TBLT), college English teaching, interaction, syllabus designing

Introduction

To achieve the goal of enabling learners to use second language by expressing meanings instead of focusing on forms as in traditional grammar exercises, tasks play an essential role in generating interactions between students and teacher in classroom teaching. Effective ways of task implement such as comprehensive analysis of needs and accurate identification of target tasks together with rational adjustments should be reflected on and put into practice by teachers as they perform the role of a facilitator rather than a master in the traditional methodologies in the learner centered language teaching.

College learners in task-based language teaching (TBLT) are not only participants as listeners and speakers, but also creators and sequencers, so the language learning process should allow them to be dynamic in interactive and communicative activities to become real life communicators of English, which is the ultimate goal of college English teaching. Accordingly, student participations such as group work, report, presentation, and role play involve more responses and feedbacks from teachers without preparation which can be more challenging or even threatening to new and unexperienced teachers in the task-based classroom. Only skillful and qualified college English teachers can facilitate students to improve English learning, including more accurate, fluent, and complex oral English with fewer repetitions or pauses. More importantly, the emphasis of college English teaching should also be put on speaking besides listening, reading, and writing. Otherwise, the present dilemma of "mute English", namely, poor communicative ability, as a result of insufficient guidance and instruction will never be eliminated. Therefore, it is necessary to create a highly efficient learning environment in which positive feedback and response system and good interactive system between the teacher and students can be constructed.

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Syllabus, without any doubt, is fundamental in any teaching-learning process as it is the basis of teaching based on certain assumptions and requirements of the target needs of the learners. Task based syllabus is an upgraded modification of communicative language teaching and it differs from other syllabi as it commences after needs analysis (Nunan, 2001). As it is regarded as the most useful and widely-used syllabus in the world due to its effectiveness, task-based language teaching needs to take full advantage of the task-based syllabus in college English syllabus designing to improve language learners' listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Indeed, task-based syllabus designing covers different perspectives of language teaching and has to be carefully designed before application.

The Necessity of Task-Based Language Teaching in College English Classroom

Tasks are not only valid units of analysis for language teachers and learners when it comes to planning and describing classroom activity (Long, 1980), but they also create the conditions for SLA by providing comprehensible input (Long, 1981). Learners may also need opportunities for modifying their output through negotiation if they are to acquire language successfully (Swain, 1985).

As the learners involved in this teaching process are university students who have reasonably rich study and life experience and psychologically they have the willingness and orientation to learn, the advantages can be more obvious when college English teachers explore possible ways of incorporating task-based approaches and procedures, and techniques into the design of syllabus after evaluating their students' real-world need and link the practical need to the classroom teaching context, which is thought to be the natural process of potential negotiation between teacher and learners in the implementation of task-based language teaching. Based on the outline and framework, new notions, ideas, technologies and teaching methodologies should be incorporated into classroom creatively to fully motivate learners' interest and initiative, as the principles of whole person education and learning by doing are highly valued.

The quantitative and qualitative analyses explored the gaps between college English teachers' perceptions and implementation. Although the communicative principles of TBLT were commonly approved, there is still a lack of knowledge on the key concept. The combination of theory and practice of TBLT in classroom teaching needs to be further improved. Therefore, what challenges the teachers is to understand the in-depth theory of TBLT. The task is to allow learners to master language use in the process of potential negotiation in order to achieve the balance between meaning and form by combining input, learners' potential, and output. The college English teachers need to be trained more to be fully aware of the function of language, which is to convey information. More task-based textbooks also need to be developed to enrich teachers' teaching material.

Five task types are summarized by researchers among which the following three are applicable to university students: problem-solving, opinion-exchange, and decision-making. The above three provide learners with more opportunities for negotiation to achieve meaning and therefore will force learners to modify their output. Driven by this principle, meaningful language learning can be promoted and a perfect combination is formed when new language is being internalized, considering the learners' existing knowledge and characteristics as elaborately-designed tasks will definitely facilitate conscious attention to input.

Task-Based Syllabus Design of the First Unit From New Century College English

In view of the above-mentioned importance and necessity of TBLT, college English teachers are obliged to constantly attempt task-based approaches in classroom teaching, which allows students to fully participate in

the teaching and learning process, taking pleasure in the learning environment to their hearts' content. For the purpose of enabling students to learn English in a pleasant and efficient way, syllabus designing plays a pivotal role as a basis. This article illustrates specifically the practical process of the application of task-based approaches in detail by taking the first unit of New Century College English 1 (Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press) as an example. The three stages of TBLT (pre-task stage, while-task stage, and post-task stage) can provide a general line of thought for syllabus designing. The three stages permeate mutually to reach the common goal of help students become more capable problem-solves to get the hang of the comprehensive application of language.

Pre-task Stage

The first unit for the freshers is college life, so it's of great importance to design theme-related tasks for them to reflect on the purpose and meaning of college life while making full use of multimedia and network technology. Since it's the first English class of the freshers who have just embarked on the new journey of their life with much curiosity and great expectations, teachers shoulder the responsibility of stimulating their interest in English learning and guiding them properly at the very beginning. Questions that can provoke them into deep thinking as follows can be asked: Why do you attend college? What's your ideal university like? How are you going to spend the four years in the university? What are the differences between high school life and college life? After interaction between teachers and students, more activities are provided to help students further probe into the theme. Trough videos about the interview between the reporter and Cambridge president to lead the students to analyze similarities and differences between Chinese and western universities. Besides, tasks about the details of the video are assigned in the form of brief questions before playing the video while guiding the students to learn the related communicative strategies in the interview.

To help students better perform the tasks, words and expressions as a part of language teaching need to be introduced, which can be designed as English-Chinese or Chinese-English translation exercises as well, such as "to get first-rate education, to put one's hearts into the liberal arts, thrive on classmates' conversation, hone one's abilities, favorite celebrities, friendships prevail, superb academic performance, to see where truth and beauty connect..." In the next section, different pictures of prestigious universities at home at abroad together with their respective mottos are presented as additional background information. For example, the motto of University of Oxford: The lord is my light/illumination; University of Cambridge: From here, light and sacred draughts; Yale University: Light and truth; Princeton University: In the nation's service and in the service of all Nations; Massachusetts Institute of Science and Technology: Mind and hand; Tsinghua University: self-discipline and social commitment. It's undeniable the fact that the unique and universal values of the world are presented to the students to reflect on the meaning of attending college and also the meaning of life. Consciously or unconsciously, the internal drive for further exploration of themselves and the world will be motivated, which is not just of great help to encourage them to study English but matters more to their pursuit of a better life for the people in the world and of making the world a better place to live.

The last procedure of the pre-task stage is to divide the whole class into several groups of five to six students each group with one group leader in each group, under the guidance of whom the team members brainstorm and work out the answers to the questions. All the tasks need to be reported by each group, and the groups cooperate to decide what to report and how to report before the whole class through clear division. In view of different personalities of students and the common characteristics of Chinese English learners, whether

the teachers can make it clear that it is not just presence, but active participation plays a more important role in the measurement of their performance during the whole process of formative education in this new stage. More importantly, the communicative function of English learning should be emphasized to make the students have the strong resolution to overcome their nervousness and fear of expressing their thoughts freely and boldly even after independent thinking and critical thinking. At the same time the value of group work and team spirit should be conveyed to the students to encourage them to cooperate with each other from the very beginning.

While-Task Stage

Language learning is ultimately a highly interpersonal enterprise, involving relationships between learners and teachers (Dornyei, 2005). While utilizing the learner-centered language teaching approach, as the monitor and also part of the problem-solver in this process, which greatly differs from the traditional teaching approaches which teachers dominate the classroom, teachers observe the groups carefully and give proper guidance and assistance when difficulties occur to guarantee the smooth progress of the tasks. Students are supposed to be encouraged to be more motivated and autonomous by improving their learning styles, for example, by presenting ideas to and exchanging thoughts with other group members. Thus, various learning strategies and aids should be evaluated by teachers while designing the syllabus in advance in order to figure out the most effective ones as facilitators. One most important aim is to stimulate the students to overcome their nervousness to break the ice as for the classroom involvement. Only in this way can make it possible for a lively lesson for active participation in different tasks.

When the representatives report, the teacher then plays a crucial role in helping them overcome nervousness, stimulating collision of thoughts, and thus making supernormal performance possible. A successful presentation on behalf of the whole group will certainly not only boost the speakers' confidence, but also increase all the group members' interest of English learning and help them get a strong sense of accomplishment. There will be more benefits including harmonious and creative atmosphere of the learning environment and trust between students and teacher, which will in return influence the following teaching efficiency positively. This session also allows them to reflect upon their own performance as well as on their peers'.

Post-task Stage

All the tasks accomplished; emphasis should be put on the reflection of the input and output. The collection of students' ideas of the purpose of attending college is having more fun, making decisions on their own, learning as much as possible, to have a bright future, and a lot more than just getting a good grade. After the task, the students will know college is a unique mix of freedom and responsibility and manage to strike a balance between the two. College life is comparable to a journey of self-discovery and self-cultivation. As the doctrine of Confucianism goes, cultivate the character, regulate the family, govern the state, and bring peace to the world, which is a long way to go. It makes great sense to let the students know when the embark is on the new journey of college life that learning is a tough journey and guide them to travel the tough journey because only by doing so can they become sufficiently well-educated to influence the new era. Accordingly, the students will gradually get accustomed to college teaching which emphasizes vocabulary accumulation, listening and speaking more, and grammatical practice less, which also attaches more importance to students' autonomy, motivation, and cognitive abilities through reflectivity, personal involvement and active engagement. During the communicative task, the students will take full advantage of their existing linguistic resources to maximize the potential outcome. Taking the first unit for example, students will associate three

stages of learning by the master of Chinese cultures Wang Guowei with their life. They will definitely be determined to overcome difficulties because just like the tough learning journey, life is full of ups and downs. Only by working hard can they have no regrets and keep going on no matter how hard life is. After going through trials and tribulations, they will achieve their goals. In this sense, English class is not just teaching a language, but it also carries a sacred mission, which is to guide the students to think more, dream big, and give back.

Ultimately, their abilities will improve through self-analysis and self-evaluation. Likewise, teachers explore through the plan-perform-reflect cycle and naturally extend the language learning of the classroom to the realistic social life and also to the deep understanding of university life and their own life. To practice students' ability of writing and summary, the students are required to write a short report about "My ideal university life" using the core words in the class and Unit 1 of the book. Basic goals of task-based approach are achieved through the setting and accomplishment of the above tasks and students' ability in listening, speaking, reading, and writing are enhanced.

Conclusion

Based on the TBLT theory, in syllabus designing, teachers should take such factors as situation, cooperation, conversation, and meaning construction into consideration to build a qualified learning environment in which sufficient student-centered multi-media teaching resources are provided, which becomes more applicable and effective with the help of internet technology. On the whole, relevant information about social and cultural background, smooth interaction between learners and teachers during the process of cooperation and conversation finally contribute to the construction of meaning. In addition, the syllabus should also encourage students to construct their own learning method and mode as they are the center while teachers serve as a guide, a tutor, an assistant, and also an advisor, whose main responsibility includes managing learners' psychological effect and keeping their motivation up spontaneously.

The scientifically and elaborately designed syllabus turns the original boring English materials into dynamic and comprehensive images and videos, thereby assisting the learners to cultivate essential qualities. Future studies in this field are expected to shed light on more practical reference and theoretical framework for college English learners from both teachers' and learners' perspectives. The purpose of the application of task-based approach to college English learning is to fully tap into the potential of students in the process of the use of language and help them take the initiative to successfully construct and enrich their language by flexibly choosing and organizing vocabulary and grammar to express their thoughts. During the whole session, their minds remain active so that they can quickly sense their mistakes and gradually perfect themselves through sharing and exploration with their partners.

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