

Critical Analysis of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in EFL Contexts

Jie Lan

Sichuan Normal University, Chengdu, China

Abstract

TBLT emerged in the 1980s and was introduced to China in the early 2000s. With numerous advantages, the introduction of TBLT has brought vitality to the single and rigid English teaching pattern in China. This essay focuses on analyzing the three TBLT strategies (task authenticity, task sequence and task-based assessment) and clarify their strengths and limitations. In addition, this essay discusses the challenges encountered by TBLT in EFL from three aspects (educational environment, teachers and students) and puts forward corresponding solutions. Moreover, this essay provides some TBLT designs for reference. It is hoped that the analysis of this essay will be helpful to the application of TBLT in middle school English teaching in China.

Keywords

Task-based Language Teaching; middle school English teaching; EFL Contexts.

1. Introduction

This chapter introduces the definition of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and its relevance in English as a Foreign Language(EFL) contexts. The purpose of the essay is also explained.

1.1. Define TBLT and its significance in language teaching

“Task-based Language Teaching is a kind of method which takes tasks as its core [1].” This is an early explanation. With more research on TBLT, it is now generally accepted that TBLT is a general approach rather than a specific method. The main features of TBLT can be summarized as follows: learn language through tasks; emphasize the authenticity of learning tasks and learning materials; express meaning through learning tasks; emphasize student-centered teaching; encourage students to use language creatively; emphasize the connection among tasks in class [2]. The use of TBLT in language teaching can make language learning concrete and improve students’ competence in using language. Practicing in the context makes the class more interesting and arouses students’ enthusiasm in class, improving teaching efficiency. TBLT also helps create a good atmosphere and further reduce teachers’ pressure in class.

1.2. Highlight the relevance of TBLT in EFL contexts

TBLT emerged in the 1980s and was introduced to China in the early 2000s. The introduction of TBLT brought vitality to the single and rigid English teaching pattern in China at that time. In English learning, Chinese no longer focused on forms, but gradually paid attention to language meaning. English is a large and complex language. For non-native English speakers, learning English is difficult, and the single teaching pattern makes foreign language learning a more painful thing. The application of TBLT can make up for the limitations of traditional English teaching and bring fun to it; can let foreign language learners get in touch with the communicative meaning of English in real tasks, no longer limited to language forms; can improve the initiative of learners and improve their autonomous learning ability.

1.3. Outline the scope and objectives of the essay

This essay focuses on analyzing the three TBLT strategies (task authenticity, task sequence and task-based assessment) and clarify their strengths and limitations. In addition, this essay discusses the challenges encountered by TBLT in EFL from three aspects (educational environment, teachers and students) and puts forward corresponding solutions. Moreover, this essay provides some TBLT designs for reference. It is hoped that the analysis of this essay will be helpful to the application of TBLT in middle school English teaching in China.

2. Theoretical Foundations of TBLT

This chapter focuses on the concepts and theories of TBLT.

2.1. Explain key concepts of TBLT

2.1.1. Task

“Task” has been defined by many linguists. There are two different schools of the definition of “task”: strong version and weak version. This essay chooses the definition given by Michael Long, a representative of strong version. “A task is a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward. Thus, examples of tasks include painting a fence, dressing a child, filling out a form... In other words, by ‘task’ is meant the hundred and one things people do in every life, at work, at play, and in between [5].”

2.1.2. Types of tasks

From different perspectives, the types of tasks can also be different. This essay cites the classification of Willis [6] as follows: listing; ordering and sorting; comparing; problem solving; sharing personal experiences; creative tasks. These tasks of six types can be carried out individually or in combination [4].

2.2. Discuss relevant theories supporting TBLT

TBLT has a history of more than 60 years, and it is rich in theoretical basis. This essay focuses on three theories.

2.2.1. Interactive Hypothesis

It suggests that people may encounter difficulties during communication. In order to overcome these difficulties, people need to carry out “meaning negotiation” and complete meaning understanding through questioning, retelling and so on. Interactive Hypothesis holds the following significance for TBLT: learners communicate when completing tasks. Learners give language output, get the feedback, give a modified output, and then make progress in language learning in the process of “meaning negotiation”.

2.2.2. Cognitive Approach

Cognitive Approach believes that in traditional language learning activities, learners’ attention is focused on language forms, which is not conducive to the overall development of language ability. In task-based learning activities, learners need to allocate their attention reasonably and pay attention to the selection and use of language accuracy, fluency, appropriateness and other aspects [2]. Therefore, teachers also need to reasonably design tasks with different difficulties and types to help students fully develop their language ability.

2.2.3. Sociocultural Theory

“It suggests that the study of dialogic interactions can provide a window for viewing the cognitive processes the learner is internalizing [3].” The core of this theory is a kind of social interaction. Learners interact with each other during tasks, get inspired by each other’s statements, develop their own thinking, and also help other learners develop their thinking. Learners engage in tasks together, construct meaning together, and help each other.

3. Critical Analysis of TBLT in EFL Contexts

This chapter analyzes three common TBLT strategies and explains challenges encountered by TBLT at present.

3.1. Examine specific TBLT strategies

3.1.1. Ensure the authenticity of tasks

The tasks discussed in this essay are closer to real world tasks. When designing tasks, teachers should ensure the authenticity of tasks as much as possible. On the one hand, the content of tasks should be closely related to the daily life of students with real contexts. This can stimulate students' interest in learning, drive students to participate in, and also make them realize the application value of the knowledge in real life. On the other hand, tasks require students to really put themselves into action. Students complete tasks through individual thinking, group cooperation and other steps, so as to deepen the understanding and improve the ability to solve practical problems.

3.1.2. Make a reasonable task sequence

In general, teachers should design tasks based on teaching content, making task difficulty generally present a trend from easy to difficult. If the task difficulty and types are unchanged, students are easy to feel tired in class, failing to complete tasks. Teachers also need to take into account the level of target students when adjusting the difficulty of tasks. Tasks should not be too easy or too difficult.

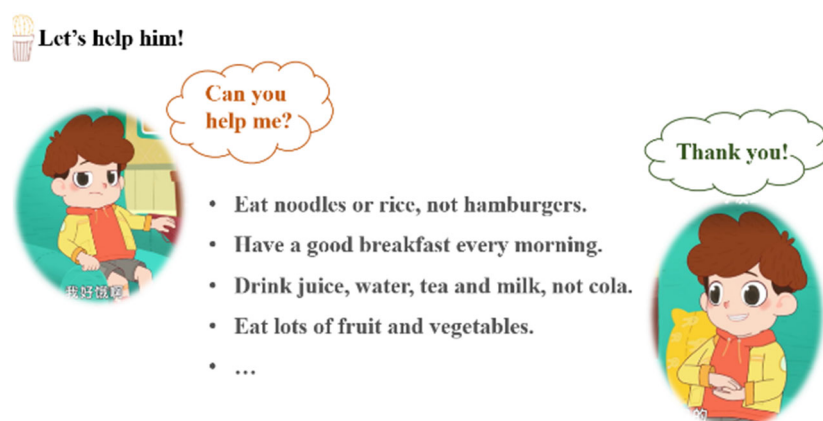
3.1.3. Create an effective task-based assessment

In recent years, a growing number of people have realized the positive effect of the assessment. This is also emphasized in TBLT. Compared with the traditional education pattern, TBLT pays more attention to students' competence of using language in contexts, but the commonly used summative assessment in teaching cannot detect it well. Therefore, in practice, teachers often need to combine formative evaluation and summative evaluation. Teachers are supposed to make reasonable and operable assessment standards, and get real results through self-evaluation, peer-evaluation, student portfolio assessment and other methods.

3.2. Evaluate the strengths and limitations of these strategies in EFL classrooms

Perfection in theory does not mean success in practice. All TBLT strategies in EFL classrooms will show their strengths as well as limitations. The author uses three classroom examples for analyzing.

3.2.1. Task authenticity in EFL classrooms



Let's help him!

Can you help me?

- Eat noodles or rice, not hamburgers.
- Have a good breakfast every morning.
- Drink juice, water, tea and milk, not cola.
- Eat lots of fruit and vegetables.
- ...

Thank you!

Example 1 of the task authenticity

- **Have a healthy menu (菜单) ★★★★★**

Is my food and drink healthy?		
Food and drink	Healthy	Unhealthy
I like...		
I don't like...		

My healthy menu

For breakfast:

- _____
- _____

For lunch:

- _____
- _____

For dinner:

- _____
- _____

Example 2 of the task authenticity

Both tasks are from an English class about food and health. One task is for students to make suggestions for their friend Xu Duo who is getting fat. The other is for students to make a healthy menu for themselves. Both tasks are close to real life. In the process of implementation, the two tasks greatly mobilized the students' enthusiasm and create a good atmosphere. Students can deepen their understanding of the theme by performing tasks in real contexts. The limitation is that students' attention will be diverted. Task authenticity puts too much emphasis on communicative meaning and neglects linguistic forms. In the process of the two tasks, students always focused on the figure of Xu Duo and talked about various delicious foods, ignoring that the tasks required them to make suggestions and menus. Students participated in actively, but their language competence was not fully exercised.

3.2.2. Task sequence in EFL classrooms



Example 1 of the task sequence


This is a reading lesson about Sun Wukong. All the tasks refer to the experience of the four characters who finally got the scriptures after experiencing 81 difficulties in *Journey to the West*. The design also takes into account the characteristics of junior high school students who love adventure and simulation games. These tasks are diverse, from easy to difficult. In general, such a task sequence is in line with the law of students' development. It not only ensures students' participation, but also gradually exercises their language competence. The limitation is that it is too challenging for teachers. When adjusting task sequence, teachers need to consider teaching content, task types, task difficulty, students' level, and possible feedback from students. Definitely, most teachers can finish this, but they are busy with teaching tasks, needing to

prepare for lessons, attend classes, correct homework, organize examinations... If all the time is spent on arranging task sequence, the teaching work is difficult to finish well.

3.2.3. Task-based assessment in EFL classrooms

Self-evaluation

Now I can	
Get the main idea of the passage	☆☆☆☆☆
Use "magic stick" "turn...into"... to talk about the Monkey King	☆☆☆☆☆
Summarize the Monkey King's qualities and learn from him	☆☆☆☆☆
Compare the Monkey King with other heroes and learn from them	☆☆☆☆☆



Example 1 of the task-based assessment

This is a self-evaluation form after class, which belongs to formative evaluation. According to the design, after finishing the evaluation, students can clearly know their situation, check the shortcomings and make up for the knowledge they have not mastered; teachers can monitor students' learning and adjust teaching tasks. But the limitation is that it tends to become a false form in EFL classrooms and does not really work. In EFL classrooms, in order to master the most language knowledge in the least time, students always have a lot of learning tasks, and teachers are also under great pressure. This means that in a class of about 40 minutes, there is not too much time to arrange the assessment for every task. Besides, the carefully designed assessment does not bring positive effects, like a framework to restrict the classroom, and it even plays a role in wasting time sometimes.

3.3. Critically discuss challenges

TBLT has been introduced to China for more than 20 years and has brought about many educational achievements. The limitations mentioned above are all small problems encountered in practice, but from a macroscopic perspective, there are still many challenges.

3.3.1. From the perspective of educational environment

On the one hand, Chinese education is exam-oriented one, such as the Senior High School Entrance Examination and the College Entrance Examination, testing students' mastery of language knowledge rather than their competence of using language. Such an evaluation system is essentially at odds with the philosophy advocated by TBLT. There is always a contradiction between exam-oriented education and TBLT. If students are always evaluated by the standards of such paper exams, the application of TBLT will always be under restrictions.

On the other hand, there are some small problems in the evaluation of teachers. Judging from the results of many teaching competitions, it can be concluded that people are always attracted to some "pretty looks". Taking the task-based assessment mentioned above as an example, a lesson with many assessment links is often considered a good design. Whether the assessment

really works is often ignored. Under such evaluation orientation, teachers often apply a variety of advanced teaching concepts to make a “beautiful lesson”.

Moreover, the teaching materials not in line with TBLT, and the current impact of AI on the education are all challenges encountered in the promotion of TBLT in China.

3.3.2. From the perspective of teachers

The biggest challenge for teachers is not practice, but the understanding of the theory. The definition of “task” is difficult to explain. Many teachers do not take the time to learn the core concepts, but only know them and use them. Therefore, many English lessons designed based on TBLT do not actually have the characteristics of TBLT. These lessons are superficial and fail to take the advantages of TBLT in foreign language teaching.

3.3.3. From the perspective of students

Students do not consciously cooperate with teachers’ classroom designs. Although current teaching is always student-centered, from a macroscopic perspective, students are still passive participants in the process of teaching and learning. Students, as the final target audience, are not directly involved in the formulating of the syllabus, the compiling of textbooks, and the designing of lessons. When teachers design a lesson based on TBLT, students are unaware of this and they will not consciously cooperate.

Besides, with the development of economy and science and technology, students are exposed to abundant resources, and their interest in class is gradually decreasing. This is also a challenge.

4. Practical Recommendations

According to the challenges mentioned above, this chapter lists the corresponding solutions. In addition, this chapter also analyzes the relationship between TBLT and local teaching practices.

4.1. Suggest solutions to overcome challenges in implementing TBLT

As mentioned above, there is a contradiction between the exam-oriented education and TBLT in nature and TBLT fails to fully demonstrate its function. At least for now, exam-oriented education is the most suitable education for China’s national conditions based on population, geography, history, politics and other considerations. Therefore, what we can do now is to exploit the advantages of TBLT to the full under the exam-oriented education.

First, reform the student evaluation system. In English teaching, we should increase the testing of students’ language using competence, such as oral expression and the ability to perform practical tasks. The testing of these aspects is also included in the scoring system in a certain proportion, comprehensively testing students’ English competence.

Second, optimize the teacher evaluation system. Whether it is in regular classes or open classes, the evaluation criteria of teachers should be focused on the authenticity and effectiveness of teaching. For the standards of open classes, the relevant departments can make a unified scoring standard. According to the different educational development in different regions, multiple sets of scoring standards are needed, avoiding the situation that the scoring standards change due to the change of judges.

Third, develop teaching materials and resources in line with TBLT. This can ensure the consistency of teaching content and teaching method and improve teaching efficiency. Definitely, such requirements are demanding. Without supporting resources, teachers can independently integrate and optimize teaching materials to meet the needs of different students.

Fourth, strengthen teachers’ training of TBLT. Relevant departments organize regular training to help teachers deeply understand the core concepts and practices of TBLT. At the same time,

the organizer should provide case studies and practical guidance to help teachers better understand and apply TBLT.

Fifth, combine the latest technology resources to design more attractive teaching tasks. For example, teachers use AI and network resources to improve teaching. Teachers use the tools to design more attractive and interactive tasks, and stimulate students' learning interest and participation.

4.2. Reflect on the importance of balancing TBLT with local teaching practices

Chinese local teaching practices are basically aimed at teaching textbook content and imparting language knowledge. TBLT emphasizes communicative meaning and the competence of using language. No matter how much language knowledge teachers teach, the teaching is meaningless if students cannot use in the context; if teachers only emphasize the context and meaning and do not teach enough language knowledge, students can also not use it. Combining TBLT with traditional teaching, students can use language well while learning language knowledge. With the deepening of education reform and the development of globalization, the combination of TBLT and local teaching practices helps to cultivate students' international horizon and intercultural communication competence. Therefore, educators are supposed to balance TBLT with Chinese local teaching practices, making use of their advantages to promote the innovation of teaching methods, improving students' core competencies, and promoting the modernization and internationalization of Chinese education.

5. Conclusion

This chapter summarizes the views mentioned above on TBLT and analyzes the future implications from the author's perspective.

5.1. Summarize the critical insights

For more than two decades, various TBLT strategies have been repeatedly tested in China's English teaching. While enjoying the positive effects brought by TBLT, we also found that these strategies implemented by different teachers in different regions have different limitations, such as students' attention, teachers' preparing and so on.

From a more macroscopic perspective, the further promotion of TBLT in China will encounter some challenges, such as teachers' understanding, unmatched teaching materials, fast development of AI and so on.

5.2. Reflect on the future implications of TBLT in EFL contexts

On the one hand, it is the theoretical development of TBLT. Under the background of exam-oriented education, the narrow sense of "task" cannot be fully applied in English teaching. The broad sense of "task" is little different from "learning activity". Is there a need for a more distinctive and improved version of TBLT to fit EFL contexts?

On the other hand, it is the practical application of TBLT. Can TBLT and AI work together to drive teaching? How can TBLT collaborate with other teaching approaches in China to create a more effective teaching pattern? How should teachers adjust TBLT to assist teaching in different areas? How to introduce reasonable and authentic intercultural communication contexts in TBLT?

They are all we need to think about the future of TBLT.

References

- [1] Brown, H.D. (1993). *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*, Englewood Cliffs. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

- [2] Cheng, X.T. (2004). *Task-based Language Teaching*. Beijing: Higher Education Press.
- [3] Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based Language Learning and Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [4] Gong, Y.F., & Luo, S.Q. (2006). *Task-based Language Teaching*. Beijing: People's Education Press.
- [5] Long, M. (1985). A role for instruction in second language acquisition: Task-based language teaching. In K. Hyltenstam and M. Pienemann (Eds.), *Modeling and Assessing Second Language Acquisition*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- [6] Willis, J. (1996). *A Framework for Task-Based Learning*. London: Longman.