

The Application of Task-Based Instruction in Chinese EFL Classroom

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Abstract

This paper examines the educational concept of task and discusses its relevance to Task-Based Instruction (TBI). The paper argues that communicatively-oriented TBI may not be appropriate to the Chinese EFL discourse, considering Chinese characteristics of EFL teaching context. The paper expounds the importance and necessity of traditional formal teaching in terms of grammar, vocabulary and translation respectively, but also points out its demerits. In the final part, the discussion, based on the TBI framework of Littlewood, describes the TBI as the integration of communicative activities into the teaching of formal features and recommends the ways to apply TBI in the Chinese context.

Introduction

Since 1980s when task-based instruction (TBI) has been called for in language teaching (Prabhu, 1987, Nunan 1989, Long and Crookes 1991), TBI has attracted to itself positive reception. Willis (1996) commented that "TBI is attractive...". Nunan, in his updated edition, "Task-Based Language Teaching", asserted that TBI has now "moved to the centre ground" (2004, Pxiii). "The task-based approach has achieved something of the status of a new orthodoxy: teachers in a wide range of settings are being told by curriculum leaders that this is how they should teach, and publishers almost everywhere are describing their new textbooks as task-based" as Littlewood noted. However, TBI is not without critiques. Skehan admits that to date, TBI offers no viable framework for the pedagogic planning of communal language-classroom activity. Swan argues: "...I don't believe that TBI can fulfil its claims" and raises questions on the hypothesis underpinning TBI. Even the strong TBI proponent, Nunan warns of the distance between rhetoric and reality on the subject. Still some researchers and educational innovators have been trying adapting it to the specific context, (Long 1988, Fotos 1998, Samuda 2001) and providing the framework for its implementation. (Skehan 1996). In general, Sheen (2002) points out that "the debate revolves around the degree to which teachers need to direct learner's attention to understanding grammar whilst retaining a focus on the need to communicate". But in

China, instruction of grammatical features is still common. The point is how much learners' attention is directed to communication. Then questions arise: is TBI applicable to Chinese EFL classroom? Should the formal teaching be abandoned? To answer these questions, at the outset, it is helpful to examine issues relating to the definitions of tasks and task-based instruction.

Definitions of Task and the Nature of Task-Based Instruction

Researchers are divided as to the range and definition of the 'task'. Williams and Burden (1997:168) define a task as "any activity that learners engage in to further the process of learning a language". Breen (1987:23) included in his concept of task a range of learning activities "from the simple and brief exercise type to more complex and lengthy activities such as group problem-solving or simulations and decision-making". Estaire and Zanon (1994: 13-20) distinguish two main categories of task: 'communication tasks', in which the learner's attention is focused on meaning rather than form, and 'enabling tasks', in which the main focus is on linguistic aspects such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, functions and discourse, and the like. Different from the above definitions, which include the exercises of grammatical features, Stern (1992: 195-196) emphasizes tasks as 'realistic language use', 'communicative exercises...provide opportunities for relatively realistic language use, focusing on the learner's attention on a task, problem, activity, or topic, and not on a particular language point'. Skehan holds that a task is taken to be an activity in which meaning is primary, there is sort of relationship to the real world, task completion has some priority, and the assessment of task performance is made in terms of task outcome.

Those who completely exclude activities of formal features from the category of task are Willis and Ellis. According to Willis (1996: 23), "tasks are always activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome". Ellis terms any activity in which the learners have no communicative purpose as 'exercise'. Now this communicative definition represents 'a broad consensus among researchers and educators' (Ellis 2000:195). Because of its prevalent communicative definition, TBI can be conceived as a development within the communicative approach. It takes on the following characteristics: (adapted from M. Swan: 377)

- Instructed language learning should primarily involve 'natural' or 'naturalistic' language use, based on activities concerned with meaning rather than language.

- Instruction should favour learner-centredness rather than teacher control.
- Communicative tasks are a particularly appropriate vehicle for such an approach.
- Traditional approaches are ineffective and undesirable, especially where they involve proactive formal instruction and practice decoupled from communicative work.

Many questions and counterarguments have been raised in relation to these principles. Fotos (1998), on the basis of his years of experience of teaching English in Japan, recognizes TBI, the research of which is mainly ESL- based, is unsuitable for EFL context. Williams (1995) also points out the inability of communicative ESL teaching alone to promote high levels of accuracy in learners. Swan (2005) argues that it is not clear how TBI can fully meet the requirements of the vast majority of English learners, who need a large amount of input and have not much out-of-class exposure. In fact, teachers are holding on to the traditional teaching methods, sceptical of the value of state-of-the-art methods, just because they are sufficiently aware of the constraints inherent in their situation. The methods to them are clearly inappropriate to their working circumstances.

To address the situation, Littlewood(2004) suggests that, regarding the definition of task, we accept the everyday, non-specialist definition of task given in the 1989 edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, 'a piece of work imposed, exacted, or undertaken as a duty or the like', or 'a portion of study imposed by a teacher' , in this way, our attention is directed to particular key dimensions of tasks relevant to language teaching, such as different degrees of task involvement and different degrees of focus on meaning and to the complementary roles of form-focused and meaning-focused tasks in our methodology. He puts forward two dimensions crucial to understanding tasks. The first dimension is the continuum from focus on forms to focus on meaning and the second is the degree of learner-involvement that a task elicits (Littlewood: 2004).

Involvement task

High task involvement	High task involvement
Low focus on meaning (High focus on form)	High focus on meaning (High focus on form)
Low task involvement	Low task involvement
Low focus on meaning (High focus on form)	High focus on meaning (Low focus on form)

Focus on form ← ← → → focus on meaning

Two dimensions in task-based foreign language learning

In the figure, Littlewood combines the two dimensions into one framework for characterizing the nature of tasks. The horizontal axis represents, from left to right, the continuum from focus on form to focus on meaning. The vertical axis represents increasing degrees of involvement in a task. Thus whether the task content is form-focused language exercise such as grammar, vocabulary or pronunciation or meaning-focused activities such as role-play, discussion or problem-solving, the students may contribute a high degree of involvement (top left and top right). On the other hand, if the language exercises or discussions are not appropriate or uninteresting, students may not get involved (bottom left and bottom right). In this framework students' engagement is emphasized. It seems that the boundary between form and meaning is clear-cut here, because even if the task content is grammar structure, it is achieved through students' meaningful communicative activities. By engaging in the tasks, the students are not only aware of how the target structure is used in context, they also focus their attention on meaning. TBI in the perspective of the framework designed by Littlewood is more applicable to Chinese EFL context, that is, an integration of communicative activities with formal instruction and the engagement of students in the itemized language focus tasks. To justify my argument, in the following sections first I give a brief introduction of Chinese EFL situation and then highlight the importance of the instruction of grammatical features and finally recommend how to apply TBI in Chinese context.

Some Characteristics of English Teaching in China

Centralised Test-Driven Teaching Education System

In China from primary school to university, the teaching of EFL is test-driven. At high school level, teaching is aimed at preparing students for university entrance examinations. At college level, students learn English to pass EPT-4 and-6 (two nation-wide college English proficiency tests) and ultimately the graduate entrance examination. The learners' primary goal is to master specific vocabulary items, translation skills, and grammatical structures and improve listening and reading comprehension. Thus grammar instruction dominates the ELT curriculum. Hu (2003) conducted a questionnaire-based study involving 439 secondary school graduates from 25 provinces and municipalities of China and found clear regional differences in the adoption of communicative language teaching (CLT). The findings show that "although some CLT features were more or less present in classrooms in the more developed regions (i.e. large cities and coastal provinces), they were largely absent from classrooms in the disadvantaged rural areas" (Hu: 2005). Hu also mentioned that even in the former, traditional instructional practices predominated or at least existed side by side with CLT activities. He highlighted the point that "70% of the secondary school students nationwide study in the vast rural areas". Apart from examination pressures on classroom instruction, a variety of contextual factors exert a powerful impact on classroom teaching and make it impossible and inappropriate to adopt communicatively-oriented TBI in EFL classrooms. Among them the most remarkable are teachers' lack of communicative competence in English and of knowledge of English-speaking cultures.

Language Teachers' Competence

In a case study conducted in 2002 of 47 teachers in a northern city of China, Cheng and Wang found that majority of these teachers started to learn English after the critical period: the age that, according to Krashen, plays a crucial role in the proficiency a learner can achieve. As to their educational qualifications, most of them have a three-year course certificate from teachers' colleges and only a minority have a bachelor's degree and one of them holds a master's. As Cheng et al reported in 2003, many in-service teachers of English in China at the junior high school do not have a bachelor degree with the national average being 55% with bachelors at this level of teaching and 80% at senior high schools, and 74.5% of them use grammar-translation method when they learn English. Of these teachers surveyed, more than half express their concern about their own language proficiency and skills in English. This is a typical group of high school teachers in Chinese context with limited English language proficiency and teaching methodologies. They are the major teaching force

in Chinese high schools. In addition to the above characteristics, large size classes and poor-exposure to language also contribute to the necessity of the application of traditional methods. They are not without their merits.

Justification for Traditional English Teaching Methods

Traditional methods are commonly used to accommodate a linguistic syllabus, stressing the instruction of grammatical features and employing grammar translation method in a procedure of presentation, practice and production (PPP). To those Chinese students who have no prior knowledge of English, the primary task is their elementary command of the language, therefore, the language instruction course must establish an appropriate knowledge and skills base for the learner, i.e. the first two steps of PPP in the classroom. According to Swan (2005:387), three problems are meant to be solved:

- Selection and presentation: The most important linguistic elements for learners' purposes must be identified and made available for learning.
- Establishment of a knowledge base: The forms and use of new language items must be fixed in learners' long-term memory.
- Development of recall and deployment: New material, once learnt, must become efficiently retrievable for comprehension or production. Where language use involves not only recall but also computation (for example applying a morphological or syntactic rule, matching a grammatical form to a meaning or situation), learners must acquire the ability to perform the operations required with reasonable accuracy in real time.

Johnson also maintains that language learning is at least partly a matter of acquiring skills: 'a view of language as skill is persuasive, insightful, and useful for language teachers' (1996:38) and emphasizes that instructed acquisition may reasonably include the presentation and practice of such discrete elements of behaviour as syntactic, phonological, morphological and the like which constitute 'sub-skills' in the context of 'skills syllabus'. Long reviewed the research comparing instructed with uninstructed language learning and identified advantages for instruction in terms of the learner's rate of learning and level of achievement. According to my experience and knowledge gained through years' teaching of English in a Chinese university and exchanges with my colleagues, teachers' role as sources of linguistic information cannot be denied and instruction of formal features should not be deleted from the

curriculum. In the following discussion, I would argue for the teaching of grammar, vocabulary and translation respectively.

The Teaching of Grammar

First I would like to take a sentence from *Persuasion* (Austen: 2003) as an example to demonstrate the necessity of knowledge of grammar in comprehending and appreciating the classic English literary works.

" Precisely such had the paragraph originally stood from the printer's hands; but Sir Walter had improved it by adding, for the information of himself and his family, these words, after the date of Mary's birth—'married, Dec.16, 1810 Charles, son and heir of Charles Musgrove, Esq. of Uppercross, in the county of Somerset,'—and by inserting most accurately the day of the month on which he had lost his wife. "(Chapter 1, p9)

This is a one-sentence paragraph on the first page of the first chapter. It is very likely that those foreign students who have not had a good command of English grammar have difficulty in comprehending the sentence. Here are three main grammatical points constituting the barriers. Only when they have learned the rules of 'inversion', can they make sense of the former part by restoring it to 'the paragraph had originally stood precisely such from the printer's hands'. In the latter part, there are two adverbials of manner introduced by 'by' to describe how 'Sir Walter had improved it', one being 'by adding...', the other being 'by inserting...', which are coordinated by 'and' and separated by two other adverbials. The third grammatical point the students should be aware of is the logical object of 'adding'. Only when they learn the rule that transitive verbs must take an object, can they realize they need to locate 'these words' as the object.

This sample of grammatically complex sentences is a common occurrence in our students' reading textbooks. Unless they have gained a good foundation in English grammar, it is hard to grasp the meaning. As Swan (1985:75) put it, "Language is not only a set of formal systems, but it is a set of system and it is perverse not to focus on questions of form when this is desirable". Experienced teachers have realized that some grammatical points are difficult to learn and need to be studied in isolation. Thus, they tend to ask their students to practise difficult structures until they master them. Through this development of explicit knowledge about grammar structures, students' consciousness of the structures is raised so that "they can notice it in subsequent communicative input" (Fotos: 1993).

In cognitive psychology it is commonly acknowledged that the distinction between two types of linguistic knowledge is made: an exemplar-based system and a rule-based system. The former contains both discrete lexical items and ready-made formulaic chunks of language, which can be easily and quickly accessed during fluent language performance, while the latter consists of abstract representations of the underlying patterns of the language. They require more processing and thus are best suited for more controlled, less fluent language performance. Learners call for this kind of knowledge when they have to creatively construct utterances to express meaning precisely or in sociolinguistically appropriate ways (Ellis: 2000). To learners who are not exposed to the target language environment, numerous sentences are not predicted by the syllabus. They can only construct sentences out of lexical and grammatical building blocks in accordance with the various grammatical rules. Thus, instruction of grammatical rules is essential to the attainment of the advanced language level.

Vocabulary-building

We often compare speaking and writing to building a house and words to bricks to highlight the importance of vocabulary. Even if students are taught to express approval, make requests, establish rapport, warn, apologize, and the like, they still cannot accomplish all these tasks without the necessary words. The fact is students already know how to perform these communicative functions in their native tongue and what they need to learn is how to do these things in English. They have to learn the words and expressions which are used to refer to the things in the world. Even if students are given chances to open and close conversations, to interact naturally, to interrupt and challenge, ask for help, the knowledge of the linguistic conventions for all these communication is a precondition, which is owed to the input from the dominating teachers, the teachers cannot elicit what is not there. Researchers such as de la Fuente (2006), Ellis and He(1999), Ellis et al., (1994) and Loschky (1994) have underscored the importance of L2 vocabulary acquisition. The way they teach L2 vocabulary is to engage the students in the language-learning activities.

The Importance of Translation

The mother tongue plays an important role in learning a foreign language. Interlanguage contains errors caused by interference from the mother tongue but it cannot be denied that the association between the mother tongue items and foreign language items contributes to the mastery of the foreign language. Its advantages

overweigh the disadvantages. Behan and Turnbull(1997, from Swain and Lapkin, 2000) compared the oral presentations of the groups of students who used the first language more in their preparations with those of the groups of students who used less and found the former groups did better than the latter, so they concluded that "L1 use can both support and enhance L2 development, functioning simultaneously as an effective tool for dealing with cognitively demanding content". (p.41). Swain and Lapkin made a detailed analysis of the use of the first language while the two groups of students were fulfilling two tasks, and made a conclusion that "judicious use of L1 can indeed support L2 learning and use. To insist that no use be made of the L1 in carrying out tasks that are both linguistically and cognitively complex is to deny the use of an important cognitive tool"(PP.268-269). In my teaching experience, I find that translation of some items is even an easier way to students for their grasp and use of the items. For example, in an English text, we came across the word 'rhinoceros', I first gave the English definition, 'a large heavy thick-skinned animal of Africa or Asia, with either one or two horns on its nose', the students still felt confused, for none of them had ever seen such an animal in real life except several had known it from the picture books, just an English definition is not enough to create an image in their mind. Only when I gave them the Chinese equivalent of the word 'shuiniu', they realized what it refers to and had a picture of it. This recourse to the mother tongue makes it possible for us not to learn a new language from scratch.

Compared with the traditional methods, communicatively-oriented TBI puts greater emphasis on output, only the last step of PPP, not supplying analysed new language material in the form of word-lists and examples of grammatical regularities and has less time available per class hour for new-language input, so it cannot fully meet the requirements of those learners who are learning a new language and need much more input. When I argue for the traditional methods, I do not mean to say it has no demerits. In fact now the drawbacks of this approach have been deeply felt, since learners, despite years of study, are still unable to communicate in English. Many learners invariably express a dislike for the lecture-style class structure, which preclude student participation. To remedy this weakness, the governmental department in charge of education is undergoing remarkable reforms in terms of curricula and syllabus. A great many textbooks emphasizing communication are introduced from abroad or compiled by educators. But questions need to be asked: how to improve the teaching approach? How to adapt the TBI framework advocated by Littlewood to Chinese context?

TBI in Chinese Context

Before I elaborate on the application of TBI, I'd like to clarify a point. The approach of integration of communicative activities into grammatical instruction is not new. In 1988, Long has recommended a syllabus, which he termed 'focus on form', meaning to combine communicative language use with instruction on grammar forms in context, a format which is "particularly characteristic of task-based language instruction" (Fotos: 1998). Here I don't use the term to avoid confusion, because in other articles or books on TBI (such as Littlewood: 1998, Ellis: 2000), 'form' refers to language features, as opposed to 'meaning'. In Chinese context, as the systematic teaching of new linguistic material is the primary goal, priority should be given to teacher's instruction instead of communication or interaction between peers, just as Swan (2005: 390) points out that "If one was seeking an efficient way of improving one's elementary command of a foreign language, sustained conversation and linguistic speculation with other elementary learners would scarcely be one's first choice". On this point, Lightbown (1991:208 from Bruton: 2002) has this say, "On the other hand, since the students are in classes which are strictly homogeneous for native language, they tend to get masses of non-native input which will tend to confirm their own interlanguage hypotheses". "The questionable effects of this peer interaction on interlanguage representations" can be proved by my observation of students' reactions when class time is at their disposal to discuss about some topics. Some students always keep silent, for the reason that "we don't know what to say, how to express ourselves." Other students may get involved in the discussion, but they are not satisfied because "our words and sentences are too limited, what we say are always restricted to those things". Their common response to open-ended pair work or group work is "once or twice one term is enough, if more, it is waste of time". This does not mean there are no other activities or tasks involved in class. Students can be engaged in the 'pre-communicative language practice' (Littlewood: 2004) which is a point on the continuum from focus on form to focus on meaning. The practice primarily focuses on formal features, but is also meaning-oriented

Itemized language focused tasks

The task is preceded by explicit formal instruction, i.e. the teacher first presents language. Then the students practise it to assimilate by doing a series of tasks. The tasks are intended to make the linguistic features salient to students by raising their awareness of the forms. The students fulfil the tasks in pair through communicative activities, in this way; the students are engaged in the interaction. The tasks take the forms of question-answer exchanges, prompted interaction and written language interaction, depending on the kinds of linguistic features.

a. Question-answer exchanges

For example, when the students learn the color words, they can ask each other questions such as "What color is your hair?" and the like. After I finish explaining the grammatical feature, 'cleft sentence', I set the students a series of tasks. Partner A poses the question "Who usually cooks in your family?" Partner B replies, "It is my mum who usually cooks.", and vice versa.

b. Prompted interaction

For example, as regards the conversion of direct speech into indirect speech, when Partner A says "My dad works as a doctor", Partner B responds by saying, "He said his dad works as a doctor." Then B goes on saying, "My dad works in a factory" and Partner C follows suit.

c. Written language interaction

When I finish a text, usually an interesting story, I set the students the task of rewriting the story, and then retelling it between the deskmates. The task takes two steps, first the students finish it independently so that they have time to prepare, and then do it in pairs.

These three forms are the main ones I use in my class to engage my students in the interactive tasks. The teacher has to judge which form is more appropriate to what task. Although the task content centres on grammatical features, the students use the target language in a communicative context. This kind of pair work can overcome the disadvantage of large-size class. With the formal instruction before the task and prompts given during the task, the students will not feel frustrated. In the course of such activities, students' attention is attracted to both formal features and their meanings and they have a high involvement in terms of the second dimension of TBI.

According to Fotos'(1998: 307) "task performance can significantly increase learner awareness of the target structure and improve accuracy in its use, as well as providing opportunities for meaning-focused comprehension and production of the target language. Furthermore, such tasks release more traditionally oriented non-native speaker teachers from the requirement to lead communicative activities in the target language."

As learners' competence improves, the instruction can move along the continuum to 'communicative language practice', 'structured communication' and 'authentic communication', but at the same time students' involvement must be taken into consideration. It is not always the case that the more communicatively-oriented the

task is, the more active the students get, some students' silence in discussion is a case in point. The two dimensions of TBI are re-enforcing.

Conclusion

Now in China empirical research on the application of TBI is still lacking. As Chinese contexts are diverse and complicated, it is a myth itself to specify a certain teaching framework or methodology. Teachers should be encouraged to draw on various methodological choices so that they can adopt more suitable and productive approach to meet their specific teaching context, esp. when the students are at different levels. According to Bruton (2002), at the beginner levels, variations of the present language-practice language-produce language procedures are still standard in conventional foreign language teaching and teacher direction in teacher-fronted activities must be maintained. As students improve in their language levels, they will become increasingly initiative in their learning; 'more independent, less structured student activity' should be added gradually. But as to what levels students reach so that they can be engaged in communicative tasks, there is no definite answer. As Bruton points out that the question of level has been omitted in the arguments about TBI. It is essential that teachers handle the progressive readjustment of the balance between teacher-fronted and non-teacher fronted activities and within sequences of activities. How to design tasks and what tasks are applicable in higher levels of EFL classrooms, whether university students can be counted into higher levels, esp. those of English department will be my future exploration. In addition, in order for the teachers to be qualified and flexible enough in the teaching, they should have chances to be retrained so that they can develop their 'TESOL knowledge base' (Fradd & Lee, 1998 from Cheng et al, 2002). EFL teachers have been facing great challenges in their professional development to effectively carry out their teaching. The future foreign language teachers are required to equip themselves with a much wider array of competences and they are expected to be proficient in foreign language and its culture, proficient in language and culture of the school's community, expert in curricular design and implementation and technologically sophisticated.

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