Exploring Undergraduate EFL Students’ Experiences of Task-based Language Learning in China

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Abstract. Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) is a frequently used strategy in college English teaching. However, the appropriateness of TBLT in the Chinese context is still under suspicion. To fill research gaps, this research aims to explore the undergraduate EFL students’ experiences of TBLL in a specific university in China. This research has chosen the qualitative approach as the research method to have a in-depth investigation of this issue. The results show that all the participants believe TBLT is effective for English learning compared with traditional teaching methods. However, participants also point out some relevant problems existing in the implementation of TBLT. This research makes some implications for the reform of college English teaching.

Keywords: TBLT; undergraduate EFL students; college English learning.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, a new round of curriculum teaching reform in colleges and universities is being carried out in China. As an essential part of higher education, college English plays an indispensable role in the education process (Zhang, 2021). Because of the introduction of New Curriculum Standards, TBLT has become a part of the agenda of the school curriculum reform (Wang, 2007). In addition, TBLT as an effective teaching method has been widely applied in college English teaching. Thus, this research aims to explore the undergraduate EFL students’ experiences of Task-based Language Learning (TBLL) in Central China Normal University (CCNU) in Wuhan, China. More specifically, this research will focus on undergraduate EFL students’ perceptions and attitudes towards TBLL during their English learning process in order to have a thorough understanding of whether TBLL is effective in college English teaching and learning. The structure of this essay includes introduction, literature review, methodology, findings, discussion and recommendations, and conclusion.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction of Task-based Language Teaching and Learning

TBLT has been interpreted differently by different scholars. However, in essence, TBLT is a language teaching approach that focuses on completing meaningful tasks with the target language, similar to the activities that learners need to do in real life (Faez, 2019). According to Nunan (2004), tasks can be divided into two types —— target tasks (also called real-world tasks) and pedagogical tasks. In this essay, the ‘task’ represents the ‘pedagogical task’. Based on the definitions given by other scholars, Nunan (2004, p. 4) deepens the explanation of the pedagogical task, which is defined as ‘a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language’.

2.2 Task-Component Model

Based on other scholars’ conceptualizations, Nunan (2004) proposed the Task-Component Model. To be more specific, a minimum specification of the task will include ‘goals, input and procedures’, which will be supported by ‘roles and settings’ (Nunan, 2004, p. 41).
Table 1: Task-Component Model

| Goals → | TASK | ← Teacher role |
| Input → | TASK | ← Learner role |
| Procedures → | TASK | ← Settings |

(Adapted from Nunan, 2004: 41)

All in all, there are six important components in the Task-Component Model. ‘Goals are the vague, general intentions behind any learning task’ (Nunan, 2004, p. 41). Goals offer a link between tasks and a wider range of courses. ‘Input refers to the spoken, written and visual data that learners work with in the course of completing a task’ (Nunan, 2004, p. 47). ‘Procedures specifies what learners will actually do with the input that forms the point of departure for the learning task’ (Nunan, 2004, p. 52). ‘Role refers to the part that learners and teachers are expected to play in carrying out learning tasks as well as the social and interpersonal relationships between the participants’ (Nunan, 2004, p. 64). ‘Settings refers to the classroom arrangements specified or implied in the task’ (Nunan, 2004, p. 70).

2.3 Application of TBLT in EFL Learning in China’s Higher Education

TBLT has been widely applied in college English teaching and a lot of research has been carried out in this field. Gan (2013) claims that TBLT embodies the new concept of language learning and teaching, which is student-centered, and unlike the traditional teaching method, it takes the cultivation of students’ learning ability as one of the teaching goals. Sun and Yang (2012) point out the application of TBLT has brought significant changes to students. Instead of relying on translations and dictionaries, most students try to use the background knowledge to understand the article. Hou (2011) also states that TBLT provides learners with opportunities for interaction, develops their potential to use the target language, and stimulates students’ creative ability.

Even if TBLT can be regarded as an influential and effective teaching approach, its appropriateness in the Chinese context remains controversial (Bax, 2003; Thomas and Reinders, 2015). The first factor is the institutional factor. The traditional English teaching in most Asian countries can be summarized as teacher-centered, textbook-directed and exam-oriented (Zheng and Borg, 2013). The mismatch between the examination culture in China and TBLT’s goals will make teachers bewildered about how to carry out TBLT in particular class contexts and influence students’ engagement in class activities (Ji, 2017). The second factor is the classroom factor. A large classroom size will severely affect the implementation and results of TBLT (Swan, 2005). The current class size in college English teaching in China is too large, therefore, it is a challenge for teachers to provide students with guidance and assistance in the phase of task implementation (Ni, 2015, Luo and Xing, 2015). The third factor is the authenticity of tasks. The majority of Chinese English teachers seem not to have sufficient resources to prepare task inputs that can really meet the ‘authentic’ requirements based on the language environment in China (Ji, 2017). The implementation of TBLT will be restricted by the shortage of authentic materials, which will affect the task design (Luo and Xing, 2015).

2.4 Research Gaps and Research Questions

Based on the previous research, there still exist some gaps in the current literature. First of all, the previous studies mainly focus on exploring teachers’ perceptions and attitudes towards TBLT, however, little attention has been paid to students’ perceptions of TBLT. It is important and also necessary to investigate students’ perceptions of TBLT, given that students’ viewpoints regarding TBLT, such as the task effectiveness and enjoyment, could be greatly different from teachers’
(Murphy, 2003; Ahmadian et al., 2017). Second, previous studies mainly focus on the application of TBLT to English teaching in elementary and secondary schools, however, there are relatively few studies concerning college English teaching. Moreover, the subjects of most research are mainly non-English majors, while English majors have not been attached great importance for whom English is an essential skill for hunting for a job.

Therefore, to fill research gaps and have a more thorough understanding of undergraduate EFL students’ experiences and perceptions of TBLT in China, the following two research questions of this dissertation have been proposed.

Question 1: What are the factors that students consider important during task-based language learning?

Question 2: What strategies can be adopted to make task-based language learning more effective for EFL students?

3. Planning My Inquiry

3.1 Research Methodology

Qualitative research tends to ‘answer questions about experience, meaning and perspective, most often from the standpoint of the participant’ (Hammarberg et al., 2016, p. 499). Moreover, the qualitative approach seeks to provide a deeper understanding about the ‘what’, ‘why’ and ‘how’ (Aliaga and Gunderson, 2005), thus, it can be applied when in-depth investigation of a certain case is needed (Hammersley, 2013). Concerning the research questions and the research objective, this study finally chooses the qualitative approach as the research method.

3.2 Data Collection

In terms of data generation and collection, the semi-structured interview will be designed to collect the primary data. Semi-structured interviews are widely used in qualitative research to explore the experiences, perceptions and attitudes of the participants (Harvey-Jordan and Long, 2001). One of the advantages of the semi-structured interview is that it can produce rich and abundant data (Harvey-Jordan and Long, 2001) because it tends to employ open-ended questions, which could encourage participants to express their opinions freely so that various themes and subtopics might emerge and develop (Dearnley, 2005). Therefore, more detailed and deep information about students’ learning experiences could be obtained through semi-structured interviews.

3.3 Participants

When it comes to sampling, Cohen et al. (2007) claim that three important factors, which are the size, the representativeness and the strategy, need to be considered. This study is qualitative research, the number of participants will be six based on the time limitation and resources constraint. Besides, all the participants are studying in the English Department in CCNU in China, who have been taught with TBLT by their teachers during the four years of the university. For this research, six participants will be selected according to the principle of convenience sampling. It is much easier to contact and recruit the target participants during a short period of time.

3.4 Data Analysis

In terms of the method of data analysis, the thematic analysis will be chosen in this research. Thematic analysis is used to identify and analyze patterns of meaning within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). It illustrates the data in detail and deals with different topics through interpretations (Boyatzis, 1998). Several steps will be followed to carry out the thematic analysis. First, the data will be transcribed after collecting. Second, initial codes will be generated systematically and the relevant data will be collated into each code. Third, potential themes will be generated based on the codes.
Fourth, a thematic map will be generated by reviewing themes. Besides, define and refine the specifics of each theme. Finally, some vivid and compelling extracts will be selected for further analysis.

4. Findings

4.1 Factors influence Task-based Language Learning

Through analyzing the data, it is found that there are three main factors that will influence students’ TBLL experiences, namely students’ involvement and participation, the role of teachers and task design.

4.1.1 Students’ Involvement and Participation

In terms of the factors that can contribute to a successful TBLL experience, there is a shared sense among all participants that students’ involvement and participation in class play an important role in the learning process.

Participant A indicated that a successful TBLL experience mainly depended on students’ role in the class, which meant they should value each opportunity to practice English in class. However, the majority of the interviewees pointed out the low class participation in current English class. The harm of the low class participation has also been demonstrated. Participant F implied that partners’ involvement in activities would affect the learning experience and learning effect. Besides, two interviewees pointed out possible reasons for the students’ low class participation. Participant C explained that those who were not really interested in English would try their best to avoid being asked questions or participating in group activities. Participant D expressed different opinions, stating that instead of participating in the communicative activities in class, most students only cared about the written tasks in order to get good grades.

4.1.2 The Role of Teachers

The second factor that contributes to a successful TBLL experience can be summarized as the the role of teachers.

First, the role that the teacher plays in the task-based class is important. Participant A explained that ‘whether the teacher can arrange the tasks logically and guide students to carry out the tasks step by step are directly related to the success of a task-based class.’ Thus, it indicates that the teacher should act as not only a task distributor but also a guider and a facilitator. Besides, Participant B recognized the importance of teachers’ feedback, which helps them know their own problems and shortcomings in time.

Second, teachers’ English speaking ability will also affect the success of the class to some extent. Participant A elaborated that ‘Some teachers have a heavy accent or average oral expression ability, so I can not fully understand them in class, and sometimes it even causes some misleading.’ What’s more, Participant C thought teachers’ English speaking ability will affect students’ involvement in class. She argued that ‘If the teacher has a relatively low oral English proficiency, I do not want to listen to him carefully, let alone participate in class activities.’ Therefore, it is a must for teachers to improve their English proficiency.

Interestingly, one interviewee proposed that a teacher’s personality was also likely to affect the teaching effect. Thus, it is suggested for teachers to maintain a good relationship with their students. Be more patient, tolerant and amiable rather than be too strict and harsh.

4.1.3 Task Design

Another factor that has been mentioned by participants is the task design.

First of all, half of the participants reported that the task should fit the content of teaching.

What is more, a majority of the interviewees stated that the task should be interesting and entertaining. Participant B complained that ‘Sometimes the tasks assigned by the teacher are too boring, which makes me feel disgusted, and I am unwilling to complete it.’ Participants F also expressed similar opinions, saying that ‘Learning a language can be boring, however, if the class
activities are interesting, it will make me feel that the whole learning process is relaxing and enjoyable.’ It is implied that students’ interest in English learning can be aroused by interesting tasks, which will enhance their class participation.

Besides, two of the interviewees mentioned that the difficulty of the task should be in line with the student’s English level. Participant C argued that ‘The design of tasks should have a step-by-step process, from simple to difficult. And the tasks must be within the scope of students’ ability, which could be completed by students independently.’ It denotes that an important step in task design is to control the difficulty of the task.

4.2 Effectiveness of Task-based Language Learning

4.2.1 Advantages of Task-based Language Learning in EFL learning

The advantages of TBLL in EFL learning have been recognized by all the participants.

The first advantage of TBLL mentioned by most participants is that it provides a platform for students to practice, especially in the listening and speaking class. Besides, half of the participants mentioned that the second advantage of TBLL is that it is interesting and entertaining. Participant D pointed out that ‘The teacher will scatter the knowledge points among the small tasks, which arouse my interest. When I succeed in completing a small task, I will have a great sense of achievement.’ Furthermore, several interviewees admitted that high efficiency is another advantage of TBLL. Participant B mentioned that ‘I think it is more efficient than the traditional teaching mode. In the task-based class, instead of listening to the teacher casually, I will have a clear goal to achieve, so my attention is highly concentrated.’ It is indicated that TBLL can make students have a deeper impression and understanding of knowledge because it employs various class activities which needs to be done by themselves. It is surely more efficient compared with rote learning in which students memorize knowledge without understanding.

4.2.2 Disadvantages of Task-based Language Learning in EFL learning

One of the disadvantages of TBLL mentioned by half of the interviewees is that it is time-consuming and laborious. Participant A argued that ‘In the task-based class, the proportion of conducting tasks is relatively large, which will occupy more time, so the teaching content of a class is very limited.’ Unlike Participant A, Participant E pointed out that TBLL took up a lot of their spare time, explaining that ‘I have to spend several hours doing preparatory work to complete a task, which is really troublesome.’ Therefore, it is indicated that TBLL is not quite suitable for traditional classes with a very tight schedule.

Besides, the majority of participants claimed that TBLL excessively focused on formalism. Participant A emphasized that ‘In some classes, the tasks assigned by the teacher have little to do with the course content, which seems to be meaningless to our learning.’

Another disadvantage is that TBLL is not suitable for students with poor English foundations. Participant B claimed that ‘TBLT is carried out around the task, which highly emphasizes practice, thus, it can not provide a very complete theoretical framework for students. For students with poor foundations, it may be difficult for them to master knowledge points.’

4.2.3 Effect of Task-based Language Learning on EFL learning

In terms of the effect of TBLL, almost all the interviewees believed that it improves students’ learning ability and comprehensive ability. Participant A argued that ‘TBLL helps me to understand knowledge points more deeply and profoundly. I can quickly recall the corresponding knowledge points in the future study.’ Through completing various tasks, the ability of autonomous learning and critical thinking can be cultivated.

The second effect of TBLL is that it raises students’ interest in learning English. Participant B explained that TBLL could make students more concentrated in class and after completing tasks, students could obtain a sense of achievement, which increased their willingness to be absorbed in English learning in the future. Besides, one interviewee argued that TBLL changed student’s learning strategies.
From the above opinions, it implies that TBLL may not significantly improve students’ academic performance in the short term, but it have a positive effect on the students’ all-round development.

4.3 Strategies to Improve the Efficiency of Task-based Language Learning

4.3.1 Aspect of Students

First of all, low participation in class activities has been one of the problems of TBTL class, so a common view among interviewees is that students should get more involved and engaged in class. Participant B highlighted that ‘Students should actively participate in the activities designed by the teacher, and maintain a good communication with the teacher so that they can continuously improve themselves and overcome their shortcomings.’

The second important strategy is that students should prepare themselves well before class and consolidate what they have learned after class. Participant C emphasized the importance of preparation before class, stating that ‘Students need to make corresponding preparations before class, such as collecting and sorting materials, making PPT, etc., so that they can be more confident to interact with the teacher and their partners, and integrate into the learning process.’ Besides, Participant A highlighted the significance of after-class consolidation.

4.3.2 Aspect of Teachers

First and foremost, the task should be appropriate for students’ English level and learning ability. Participant C argued that ‘Due to the different educational backgrounds of the students, their English proficiency and acceptance of the task are also different. Therefore, while designing tasks, the teacher should consider the actual ability of most students.’

Second, the task should be closely related to the teaching content. Both Participant A and Participant D suggested that ‘Tasks should not be separated from the course content.’ Participant E added that ‘Sometimes the tasks have little or nothing to do with the course content. So even if these tasks are completed finally, I might feel that there is no gain for me, just a waste of time and energy.’

Third, the design of the task should conform to the diversity principle. Participant F explained that ‘Different students like different forms of tasks, so the teacher should design tasks in a variety of forms, so as to meet the needs of each student as much as possible.’

The second important aspect mentioned by the participants is that the teacher should constantly improve his or her professional ability. Participant E mentioned that ‘Teachers with professional ability could provide me with good guidance in the learning process, and their comments and feedback can sharply reflect my shortcomings, which benefits me a lot.’ Another point mentioned by Participant C is that ‘Teachers should regularly carry out teaching and research activities according to the TBLT, and constantly update and optimize the teaching method, which is also a process of teachers’ self-learning and self-improvement.’

4.3.3 Aspect of Institutions

First of all, the institution should focus on teacher resources. It is indicated that teachers’ quality has an effect on the teaching results. Thus, for institutions, it is necessary to recruit teachers who are specialized in the corresponding field and regularly arrange teacher training to guarantee the teaching quality.

Second, one interviewee suggested to adjust the class size. From Participant A’s perspective, it is easier for teachers to manage class with smaller number of students. Every student can get the attention from their teacher. In this way, the teaching effect will be enhanced.

Another aspect mentioned by the some participants is about seat arrangement. It is indicated that the learning environment is also vital in TBLL. The appropriate seat arrangement could create the relaxing atmosphere and make communication and interaction more convenient.
5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research explores the undergraduate EFL students’ experiences of TBLT in China. It is shown that TBLT is an effective teaching method in college English teaching compared with the teaching method, and its advantages have been recognized by both teachers and students. However, nowadays, there still exist many problems in the implementation of TBLT in the Chinese context, which need to be tackled. Thus, it is necessary to improve the effectiveness of TBLT and guarantee the English teaching quality, which needs the joint efforts of students, teachers and institutions.

However, this study also exists some limitations. First, this research was conducted on a relatively smaller scale in a particular university in China. The small sample size makes it difficult to generalize the research findings. Besides, CCNU is a top university in China, where teachers are relatively qualified and professional, and most students have a good foundation in English. However, EFL students in other universities might have different perceptions of TBLT. Second, gender bias might exist in this research. Most of the participants of this research are female, while only one participant is male. However, students of different genders may hold different views on this issue. Finally, the sampling method can cause research bias. In the research, convenience sampling has been chosen as the research method, which is more time-efficient. As a type of non-probability sampling, the findings can not be generalized. Therefore, future research could focus more on the gender difference in this issue and adopt the mixed research method, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods.

References


