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Abstract

This article discusses Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) implemented in the Chinese classroom. TBLT involves a three-phase pedagogical sequence, including pre-task, on-task, and post-task. Different task-based learning activities are designed to promote learners' language acquisition through the performance of tasks. Learners are engaged in interactive and collaborative communication to accomplish meaningful and relevant real life tasks. This article explores the application of one TBLT unit in Chinese for learners' language development in terms of both fluency and accuracy.

Keywords: task-based language teaching, TBLT, Chinese, teaching design, language acquisition

Communicative language teaching has become a major influence on teaching practice in language classrooms. In communicative language learning environment, learners are facilitated to understand and use language through interaction and conversations in situated events. Task-based language teaching (TBLT) emerging in the 1980s in conjunction with the popularization of communicative language teaching methodology, emphasizes that students need both knowledge of language and the ability to use language to achieve communicative goals (Christison & Murray, 2022). TBLT is "an approach based on the use of tasks as the core unit of planning and instruction in language teaching" (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 223). TBLT involves students in using language in terms of both meaning and form to accomplish tasks. A three-phase pedagogical sequence in TBLT includes a pre-task phase, an on-task phase, and a post-task phase (Bygate, 1994, 2016; Ellis, 2019; Skehan, 2011; Willis, 1996). Students participate in different phases of tasks to develop their language fluency and accuracy through interactive and collaborative communication with peers in second language (L2) classroom.

TBLT: Literature and Research Purpose

As an important topic in L2 acquisition, TBLT emphasizes language learners' communicative abilities. Central to TBLT is a discussion on definition of a task. Long (1985) states that tasks could be "painting a fence, dressing a child, filling out a form, buying a pair of shoes, making an airline reservation, borrowing a library book, taking a driving test, etc." (p. 89). These tasks represent many things that people do in real life. Nunan (1989) considers that there are two types of tasks in TBLT, including real-world tasks and pedagogical tasks. Real-world tasks are designed to practice or rehearse the tasks that are found to be important in a needs analysis and turn out to be important and useful in the real world. Pedagogical tasks have a psycholinguistic basis in SLA theory and research but might not reflect real-world tasks. For example, making a hotel reservation would be a real-world task while information gap task would be a pedagogical task. As Ellis (2019) indicates, a task needs to satisfy four principal criteria that include meaning-focused for language use, gap existence for

information or opinion exchange, participants' own linguistic and non-linguistic resources needed for task performance, and communicative outcome to be achieved.

In a TBLT syllabus, tasks are designed and carried out as the core unit. A task involves a pedagogical sequence of pre-task, on-task, and post-task phases. In pre-task phase, learners are informed of the task and receive language input to be prepared for the task. In on-task phase, learners participate in the task and use language to achieve communicative outcome of the task. In post-task phase, learners receive feedback from teacher and peers on their products and get extra support on language forms. TBLT designs tasks that enable learners to develop both fluency and an awareness of language form (Ellis, 2009; Skehan, 1998). The tasks vary in their complexity to be connected to real world activities and encourage learners in input processing, interaction, and output production for language development. Richards and Rodgers (2001) point out that TBLT stimulates the input and output practice, negotiation for meaning, and transactionally focused conversation necessary for language learning. Pair and group work through different phases of TBLT promotes peer collaboration and in-class interaction for L2 acquisition. In pairs or small groups, learners are given an opportunity to draw on and use their own linguistic resources to complete different kinds of tasks through interacting with others, which contributes to the development of linguistic and communicative competence (Richards & Lockhart, 1996). According to Long (1983)'s model of the relationship between type of conversational task and language acquisition, while L2 learners interact focusing on meaningful tasks or exchanges of information, each learner receives comprehensible input from conversational partner, opportunities to ask for clarification and feedback, and negotiated modification of the conversation for language acquisition. This interaction can be facilitated by implementing TBLT into L2 classrooms.

Scholars have contributed to the application of TBLT to L2 learning through empirical research. The studies show that TBLT engages learners in the tasks with L2. TBLT promotes learners' growth in L2 proficiency, meets their academic needs, and increases their positive participation in learning. There are also challenges existent in TBLT such as lack of materials and activities in the lessons. In a qualitative research, McDonough and Chaikitmongkol (2007) examine 13 teachers' and 35 first-year students' reactions to a task-based English as a foreign language (EFL) course at a Thai university over a 12-month period. A team of teachers participate in creating the task-based course, which is pilot tested and revised when the researchers collect the data. The course syllabus is designed around the tasks that target students' real world interests and raise their awareness of Thai social and educational programs. In the findings, teachers and students have positive reactions to the task-based course. They believe that the course helps students to become more independent and addresses their real world academic needs. Yet they show some concerns with course materials and activities in the lessons and expect to have more support for adjusting to TBLT. In a quantitative research, Li and Ni (2013) investigate the impact of a technology-enhanced TBLT curriculum on 471 fourth grade students' EFL learning in four low-SES schools in a district outside Beijing in China. The intervention is a technology-enhanced English language curriculum, the TALENT-English curriculum, which uses communicative tasks as the basic units to engage students in their learning. Students are assessed on their English in pre and post-tests before and after the intervention. The study finds that the TALENT-English curriculum has a positive effect on students' development of English language proficiency. The students in the experimental group have more significant gains than those in the control group on almost all measures. Bao and Du (2015) conduct a qualitative study on the impact of TBLT on 18 students' Chinese learning experiences in two beginning level Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) classes at a university in Denmark. Both classes work on the themes of greetings, family, dates and times, and hobbies. There are mainly three task types such as information-gap task, dictogloss task, and role-play tasks employed in pre-task, during task,

and post-task. It is found that TBLT increases student participation, creates more opportunities for speaking, and lowers anxiety in language learning. Meanwhile, some challenges encountered in TBLT are lack of pronunciation practice, diverse learning activities, and sufficient instructional time.

This article will explore one TBLT unit that is implemented in the Chinese language classroom. This unit is comprised of three tasks about Transportation Means, which selected from Tseng's (2014) *A Handbook of Tasks and Rubrics for Teaching Mandarin Chinese (Volume 1)*. The empirical studies as discussed above, bring implications to my design and application of this unit with a focus on meaningful, relevant, and real life tasks at students' age and proficiency level. I employ a variety of interactive learning activities to engage students in the tasks by using Chinese language in a supportive learning environment. In the following section, I will explain and discuss how I design and carry out the unit lessons in the pedagogical sequence of three-phase in TBLT. The students are a group of juniors and seniors taking Chinese language course, offered in a Midwestern suburban public high school in U.S. Their Chinese proficiency skill is at intermediate low level.

Implementation of TBLT in the Chinese Classroom

In the TBLT unit, there are three tasks selected from the unit of Transportation Means (Tseng, 2014). The first task is for reading, interpreting, and responding to a pen pal's message on transportation means from Beijing, China. The second task is for planning to hang out with friends during the weekend and finding out where and how to go. Students are expected to work in groups of three and engage in interpersonal task for sharing and deciding three places to go. Then group members present the information to the whole class, including where and why they decide to go, and how to get there. The third task is to give an oral presentation, comparing traffic conditions in three largest cities, identifying traffic problems, and proposing resolutions. While selecting these three tasks to be used in the unit, I consider that they are in relation to the three modes of communication: interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational communication. Additionally, I refer to Ellis (2019)'s four principal criteria that a task needs to satisfy: meaning-focused for language use, gap existence for information or opinion exchange, participants' own linguistic and non-linguistic resources needed for task performance, and communicative outcome to be achieved. In this unit, students are expected to use Chinese language focusing on meaning and achieving communicative outcome of the tasks. There exists gap for students to exchange information or opinions. Students also rely on their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources to convey meaning for communication.

For the unit learning objectives, students will be able to:
1. compare advantages and disadvantages of different transportation means;
2. express opinions and make comments on different transportation means;
3. describe traffic condition and problems of three selected cities;
4. Propose and explain traffic resolutions and provide justification.

The new vocabulary words in the unit lessons include 方便 (convenient) [fāngbiàn], 合适 (proper) [hé shì], 交通拥挤 (crowded) [jiāotōng yōng jǐ], 堵车 (traffic jam) [dǔ chē], 高峰时间 (peak time) [gāofēng shíjiān], 避免 (avoid) [bì miǎn], 办法 [bàn fǎ] (solutions), and 省时间 / 汽油 (save time / gas) [shěng shíjiān / qì yóu]. The grammatical structures that students are expected to use in the tasks are comprised of 从 place 1 ------ 到 / 去 place 2 [cóng ... dào qù], 要花 duration of time (It takes --- from place 1 to place 2 by taking transportation means) [yàohuā], A

跟 B（不）一样，因为 ------ (A is not/same with B because ---), A 比 B（更）adj. (A is more adj. than B), A 比较 / 最 adj. (A is more/most adj.), 我觉得 ------，因为 ------ (I think --- because ---), ------ 的时候，------ (when it is ---, ---), and 如果 / 要是 ------，subject 就 ------ (If ---, then subject ---). These language items and structures are comprehended and used through communicative tasks that are embedded in lesson content and sequence of activities.

Pre-task Phase

In pre-task phase of TBLT, students are prepared for the task that they will be engaged in. The preparation includes introduction to the purpose and content of the task, input material that students will work with, and clear explanation of what students are expected to achieve by the end of task. Teachers play an active role in selecting and designing tasks and making connections with students' needs, interests, and language skill levels. The topic of transportation means in this unit is closely related to my students' personal interests and life experience. They drive or take a ride to school. They travel for after school activities, family vacation, and friends hangouts, etc. The tasks are oriented to the target proficiency level for this class. In my curriculum design, the questions "What can learners do by the end of the unit regarding to their four language skills, vocabulary, and grammatical structures at the target proficiency level?" and "Where are learners now and what are they lack of according to the accomplishment of the target tasks?" inform me of adding in the new content and using scaffolding strategies to help students reach the goal. Throughout the unit lessons, content and sequence of activities are often revised and adjusted for a better fit in curriculum design and instructional delivery.

In the unit of Transportation Means, my students' existing schematic knowledge is activated in pre-task phase. They are asked about some places that they like to go. Then relevant vocabulary words and grammar points are taught to be used for the task later. Students are also engaged in pair and group work for interactive conversations by using the vocabulary and grammar that they have learned. One of the examples is about the structure 从 place 1 ------ 到 / 去 place 2 要花 duration of time (It takes --- from place 1 to place 2 by taking transportation means). My students firstly review the vocabulary words 走路 (walk), 跑步 (run), 开车 (drive), someone 开车送 a person (someone gives a person a ride)，and 坐校车 (ride school bus) while responding to the prompt 你怎么去学校？(How do you go to school?). They are engaged in Mix, Pair, Share of Kagan cooperative structure to practice the conversations. For Mix, Pair, Share, students stand up and silently walk around the classroom with one hand in air. After teacher says "Pair", students pair up and have a high five with the closest person. In this activity, students in pairs take the turn to ask and respond to the question 你怎么去学校？(How do you go to school?) to get situated in their real life context. I move around the room and provide students with corrective feedback on their language use. Second, I guide my students to review time phrases and introduce the concept of duration of time in the structure 走路走了 duration of time (it takes --- by

walking). In Pair Talk, students turn and talk to their shoulder partners, describing the given pictures that include different transportation means and times. It could be 跑步跑了十分钟 (run for ten minutes) and 坐校车坐了二十分钟 (ride school bus for twenty minutes), etc. They are expected to write down the phrases on their whiteboards and have their partners review their writing for feedback. I check around students' speaking and writing practices. Next, students engage in interactive conversations in small groups, responding to the prompt 你要花多长时间去学校？(How long does it take you to school?) through the cooperative learning strategy of Single RoundRobin. In Single RoundRobin, students are divided into groups of four. Teacher gives students a think time after showing the question. Students in groups begin with a clockwise rotation, asking and answering the question 你要花多长时间去学校？(How long does it take you to school?) with their teammates until each teammate has spoken. Third, students learn the grammar point 从 place 1 ------ 到 / 去 place 2 要花 duration of time (It takes --- from place 1 to place 2 by taking transportation means) by collaborating on Share Slides. Students use different verb forms such as 开车 (drive), 走路 (walk), and 坐车 (ride a car) to type correct sentences on the slides, sharing their personal life experience. I go through all the slides with the class and help students to notice both incorrect language forms and correct language forms to promote their metalinguistic reflection for language acquisition.

In pre-task phase, it is essential to select and design age and level appropriate task-based activities contextualized in real life settings. Teacher models the activities and tasks to be implemented in TBLT by explaining the procedure and doing it for students. Tasks encourage students to demonstrate their knowledge of language and ability to use language for communicative purpose.

On-task Phase

In on-task phase of TBLT, students participate in the task that involves language use in terms of both meaning and form. Teacher provides support and clarification, and check to make sure that students are on the right track. Teacher might interrupt students' work and provide the whole class input for their learning progress. The task that facilitates meaningful and collaborative group work promotes language learner interaction. During the task, students are engaged in input processing, interaction, and negotiation for meaning to produce language output. The on-task phase of TBLT focuses on tasks, i.e. students use language to accomplish tasks with teacher's support.

I will use the second task in the unit of Transportation Means as an example to show how the on-task phase is organized and carried out in my class. In the scenario of this task, students are exhausted after a whole week of doing homework and exams. They are planning to hang out with their friends at several highly rated and popular places during the weekend. They are checking around and gathering information about three places to go. In on-task phase, students first organize relevant information and complete the form by writing down three places to go, different types of transportation means to be considered, how long to get to the places, and personal opinions on that. Then they are assigned into groups of three and

exchange ideas by using the structures 你怎么去------？ (nǐ zěn me qù) (How do you go to ---?), 你要花多长时间去------？ (nǐ yào huā duō cháng shí jiān qù) (How long does it take you to ---?), and 从 (cóng) place 1 ------ 到 (dào) / 去 (qù) place 2 要花 (yào huā) duration of time (It takes --- from place 1 to place 2 by taking transportation means), etc. After the group members discuss all their places, they vote for one place to go. Then each group makes a short presentation on the gathered information along with their decision to the whole class.

In on-task phase, students play an active role in collaborating with others and working on the task in groups while teacher guides and facilitates students to accomplish the task. I provide comprehensible listening input and involve my students in conversations and discussions about deciding places to hang out with friends. In the process, I listen, make notes of some mistakes that students make, and address those at the end of the class. Though linguistic factor such as new vocabulary and grammar points could be difficult for some of the students, I manipulate this task to be appropriate at students' proficiency level. Students have plenty of conversational practices to strengthen their speaking skills by discussing with me, working with peers, and presenting their final products to the class. They engage in using the language to achieve the task with an attention to the form, which includes new vocabulary and grammatical structures in the unit lessons for meaningful communication.

Post-task Phase

In post-task phase of TBLT, students critique peers' work and offer constructive feedback by using the rubrics. Students' outcome in language use is appraised by teacher and reshaped through teacher feedback or self correction. Teacher guides students to notice grammatical structure again by correcting students' mistakes on the form and summarizing the language that students have learned in the task. Teacher also provides an opportunity for relevant form-focused language practice that students might struggle with.

In the unit of Transportation Means, my students are evaluated on their presentational speaking and writing tasks according to the rubrics in post-task phase. There are such three categories as proficiency, performance, and task in the rubrics. The criteria of proficiency pays attention to grammatical accuracy and language complexity. For presentational speaking task, the criteria of performance includes comprehensibility, organization/flow, pronunciation, and pace/fluency while for presentational writing task, performance is sub-categorized by comprehensibility and organization/flow/fluency. The criteria of task refers to information requirements completion in terms of both quantity and quality. The feedback provided with students is about their organization of the presentational speaking or writing product, use of the language, and information in the product relevant to and supported on the topic or not. Students are further encouraged to develop vocabulary with a broad lexicon, use correct grammatical structures, and elaborate content more thoroughly to support the topic in tasks.

In post-task phase, it is a challenge to identify each individual student's proficiency level based on their speaking performance. For example, the student is able to handle some simple communicative tasks and the conversation is limited to some predictable topics for survival in the target-language environment, which indicates that the student's speaking skill is approaching to intermediate low level. However, when the student frequently makes errors that interfere with meaning articulated in the speech, there are some concerns to rate this student at intermediate low level. Instead, the proficiency level could still be at novice high. According to the ACTFL guidelines, speakers at novice high level are able to handle different tasks pertaining to intermediate level, but are not able to sustain performance at that level.

Discussion

This article discusses the implementation of TBLT in the Chinese classroom for language acquisition. A variety of task-based learning activities are applied to a three-phase of pedagogical sequence in the TBLT unit of Transportation Means, including pre-task, on-task, and post-task. In the tasks, students engage in the input and output practices, interaction, and negotiation for meaning as well as noticing language forms, uptake of corrective feedback, and metalinguistic reflection. They are encouraged and supported through collaborative group work for language acquisition in terms of both fluency and accuracy. As Lightbown and Spada (2013) state, negotiation leads students to acquire the language forms that carry the meaning they are communicating. "Negotiation for meaning is accomplished through a variety of modifications that naturally arise in interaction, such as requests for clarification or confirmation, repetition with a questioning intonation, etc." (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p.166). In this way, students are provided with opportunities for using the language to not only communicate for meaning but also improve accuracy of the language forms through interactive and collaborative tasks with peers in the classroom. This teaching practice has been demonstrated in the design and implementation of this TBLT unit with a focus on meaningful, interactive, and collaborative tasks along with appropriate corrective feedback to facilitate students' language development.

Language output is as important as language input. Speaking and writing skills are important communicative tools used in daily real life situations. Being trained on language output, students are able to grasp how to use those two skills appropriately in different scenarios. In addition to providing students with comprehensible listening and reading input, it is essential to pay attention to language output in the classroom and support students to produce quality speaking and writing output in terms of both fluency and accuracy. There is a need for a good balance between input and output focused instruction, just as a good balance between meaningful interaction and accuracy of language form is necessary in language teaching practice. In TBLT, speaking and writing products are oriented to the target proficiency levels and related learning objectives. Then different task-based activities implemented through a three-phase pedagogical sequence of task facilitate students to attain learning goals and meet the benchmarks. Language output designed and delivered based on the standards also informs teachers of students' learning progress and their current proficiency levels for further improvement.

There are few limitations of TBLT. First, students might try to focus on tasks, but produce less interactive communication in the target language. When they face with a difficulty in the task, some learners use native language (Hatip, 2005). In the Transportation Means unit, students are informed of the unit learning goals and expectations before working on the tasks. Through the process of task-based activities, I remind students of their language use and monitor their learning progress to make sure that they engage in conversations and collaboration for accomplishing the tasks. I facilitate the processes of incidental learning for students' Chinese language acquisition by drawing their attention to language forms when they process the input, interact with peers, and produce the output. The meaningful and relevant tasks in this unit provide students with opportunities to pay attention to linguistic components as they emerge incidentally in the lessons that focus on meaning and communicative outcomes. Students pick up Chinese language items and grammatical features while they are working to achieve the outcome of the task. TBLT caters to incidental language learning, in which students learn a language by being exposed to it in communicative contexts and using it to communicate (Ellis, 2019). Incidental language learning leads to students' L2 acquisition. Second, it could be a challenge to design and implement the tasks at appropriate levels to students in a mixed proficiency level classroom.

As Ellis (2009) indicates, the tasks should be adapted to the linguistic proficiency levels of the students. When students are at different levels, differentiated task-based curriculum, instruction, and assessments would be necessary. At last, it might not be practical for teachers to apply TBLT in language classrooms if they are restricted to use more traditional teaching methods or don't have time and resources to develop the curriculum. According to Hatip (2005), TBLT involves a high level of creativity and dynamism on the part of teacher. Teachers need training on TBLT to understand the curriculum and deliver the lessons. More structured system with the available curriculum materials and resources would be helpful for teachers to integrate TBLT into language classrooms to meet students' needs, understand the lessons, and reach the standards. Overall, continuous reflection and improvement on TBLT practice will contribute to students' L2 acquisition in classroom over time.

CONCLUSION

This article explores the implementation of TBLT in one intermediate level high school Chinese language course. The TBLT unit of Transportation Means includes pre-task phase, on-task phase, and post-task phase, a three-phase pedagogical sequence to facilitate students' interactive communication in terms of both fluency and accuracy. In pre-task phase, students are introduced to the purpose and content of the task and prepared for language items and structures along with the expectations to achieve the task. In on-task phase, students engage in group work to accomplish relevant and meaningful communicative task that involves both meaning and form. In post-task phase, students are provided for feedback on their products based on the rubrics. They are guided to pay attention to language forms again and encouraged for further improvement on language use. In the TBLT unit, task-based activities help language learners to understand and process meaningful language in specific context and facilitate their interactive and collaborative communication for L2 acquisition.

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