

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

Yifan Yu

Sichuan Normal University, Chengdu, China

ABSTRACT

In English teaching under the backdrop of the new curriculum standards, whether students can develop their English core competencies through independent and cooperative learning methods in English learning activities or not is of crucial importance, which requires English teachers to apply more learning activities into classes, use tasks that are highly authentic, practical, and interesting to increase students' classroom participation, and encourage students to express and communicate in English actively and confidently. This not only arouses students' interest in English learning, but also guides them to deeply understand the text, apply and innovate in language use during the process of task - completion, thereby developing students' core competencies. Based on clarifying the connotation of the Task-Based Language Teaching, the definition of tasks, and the principles of the Task-Based Language Teaching, this paper analyzes the advantages and limitations of TBLT in actual EFL classrooms, as well as the challenges and inspirations it faces in practical application. Through this objective analysis, author can have a clearer theoretical understanding of this teaching method and it provides author some directions and suggestions for the practice in real classrooms.

KEYWORDS

Task-Based Language Teaching; EFL contexts; Core competencies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is now firmly established as an approach that is supported by both second-language acquisition research and by principles of sound education. It provides a basis for designing and implementing specific purpose language programmes for teaching foreign languages to young learners in the state education systems of different parts of the world. Compared with the traditional communicative language teaching (CLT), TBLT emphasized task-like activities that focus learner's primary attention on meaning and cater to acquisition. Since the Task-Based Language Learning was introduced to China in late 1990s, it has been learned and proposed by scholars for years.

In order to further study TBLT, this essay analyzes the theoretical foundations, definitions, strategies, challenges, and practical applications of TBLT in English in a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF TBLT

(1) The definitions of task

In task-based teaching, the ultimate goal is education, while tasks serve as vehicles to reach this educational objective. Consequently, having a precise understanding of what constitutes a task is crucial. Candlin (1984) offered an extensive definition of tasks within the educational context.

According to him, tasks involve learners engaging in a sequence of activities, either individually or in groups, through self-directed cognition or communication, to review or acquire knowledge in a specific language, thereby achieving predetermined objectives.^[9]

Long (1985) described tasks as goal-oriented actions designed to accomplish set objectives, akin to everyday activities such as booking flights, taking driving tests, or making hotel reservations. Long emphasized that tasks should reflect real-life significance. Richards (1985) defined tasks as learner actions aimed at completing goals after thoroughly understanding them. Teachers must establish criteria beforehand to assess task completion.^[2]

Breen (1987) described a task as a structured approach designed to provide opportunities for refining the knowledge and skills required for using a new language in communication.-in effect any type of instructional activity. He highlighted that tasks are pre-planned requirements and actions by teachers to achieve educational goals, including methods of completion and expected outcomes. He noted that altering these requirements or sequences creates new tasks.^[3] Skahan (1998) outlined five key aspects of tasks: 1) the core focus on preset goals; 2) problem-solving through autonomous communication or teamwork when challenges arise; 3) mirroring real-world activities in the educational setting; 4) ensuring timely completion; and 5) post-task evaluation.^[7]

Nunan (2000) characterized tasks as teaching activities where teachers guide the process, and students gather and process information according to teaching objectives, presenting it in linguistic form. Nunan also identified structural elements of tasks: purpose, input, behavioral activities, teacher-student roles, and external environment.^[8]

In conclusion, scholars have varying emphases on the definitions of task. And there are four key points can be included: 1) Task design must be grounded in real-life scenarios with practical social significance; 2) Tasks must be feasible and effective, aligning with teaching objectives; 3) Students should apply learned language skills to solve real-life problems; 4) Task design should center on student interests and actual language proficiency to enhance engagement and effectiveness.

(2) The tapes of tasks

Willis (1996) distinguished six types of tasks based on the cognitive operations they involve-listing, ordering, sequencing, comparing, problem-solving, sharing personal experiences and creative.^[11] Task-based researchers, however, have sought to distinguish task types in terms of the communicative and cognitive processes involved in performing them as these affect the way language is used. This has given rise to a widely accepted set of task types:

Table 1. Classification of task types by communicative vs. cognitive processes

Classification of task types by communicative vs. cognitive processes	
Communicative processes	Cognitive processes
Information-gap tasks	opinion-gap tasks
One way tasks	two way tasks
Convergent tasks	divergent tasks
Closed tasks	open tasks

Tasks differ in several other ways. They can be input-based (i.e. involve listening or reading) or output-based (i.e. involve speaking or writing). They can be ‘real world’ (i.e. based on tasks that occur in everyday life such as booking a plane ticket) or ‘pedagogic’ (i.e. involve artificial activities such as Spot the Difference where learners have to find the differences between two pictures). They can be monologic or dialogic. They can involve different rhetorical modes (e.g. instructions, description,

narrative, argument). Tasks can also be unfocused or focused (Ellis, 2003)^[1]. Advocates of TBLT differ in whether they think tasks should be entirely unfocused or a mixture of unfocused and focused.

(3) The framework of TBLT

In the realm of task-based teaching methodologies, two prominent frameworks have gotten significant attention. The first framework, introduced by Willis (1996), structures TBLT process into three key phases: pre-task, task cycle, and language focus. During the pre-task phase, students are provided with an overview of the task to foster an understanding. They are also exposed to relevant data and information, enabling them to grasp the objectives and content of the task more intuitively. Additionally, this phase encourages students to engage in self-directed learning activities by analyzing the provided information.

The task cycle phase is subdivided into three components: task execution, task review, and presentation. Engaging in scientific tasks enhances students' language application skills and supports their subsequent learning endeavors. In the task review section, students reflect on their performance during the task execution phase and organize materials for the final presentation based on their task completion. Throughout this process, teachers assume a guider, facilitator rather than directly participating in students' autonomous learning.

The language focus phase evaluates the completion of previous tasks and emphasizes the accuracy of language use.

The second influential model is Skehan's, which also consists of three stages: pre-task, during-task, and post-task. Both the Willis and Skehan models exhibit clear phased characteristics, typically divided into pre-task, during-task, and post-task stages. In the pre-task phase, teachers introduce the task content and criteria for evaluating task completion. During the task phase, teachers allocate time based on designed tasks and group students according to their language foundation and task difficulty. Teachers should uphold the principle that "students are the main actors in teaching activities," In the post-task phase, teachers should revisit the lesson's teaching objectives, provide detailed explanations and analyses of language points, and effectively evaluate students' performance during the task phase. Evaluation should consider both the quality of task completion and students' behavior during task implementation.

(4) The framework of TBLT

Cheng Xiaotang (2004), by synthesizing the insights of earlier scholars along with his own observations, detailed several foundational principles of English language instruction in his book *Task-Based Language Teaching*. These principles are illustrated in the following parts.^[6]

1) Authenticity

According to Nunan (1989), TBLT should emphasize interactive communication in the target language, presenting learners with genuine materials and environments. This method focuses on both the learning process and outcomes, encouraging students to integrate their prior experiences with new classroom content. Additionally, learners serve as contributors in communication, aiding others. The ultimate goal is to equip students with the ability to use language effectively in everyday interactions, ensuring that classroom tasks reflect real-world scenarios.^[5]

2) Focus on form

Secondly, the principle of form/function integration addresses a common issue in traditional language classrooms: the separation of language forms from context and function. TBLT advocates for teaching that not only imparts language knowledge but also develops students' communicative competence. By integrating form and function, this principle immerses students in authentic language contexts, enhancing their cultural understanding.

3) Coherence

Thirdly, it ensures that tasks are logically connected and that the steps within each task flow smoothly. Task design should avoid disjointed activities and instead focus on creating a cohesive sequence that aligns with the overall teaching objectives. In task-based teaching, achieving goals depends on the interconnectedness and coordination of tasks, which should collectively support a unified educational aim.

4) Practicality

Fourthly, the principle emphasizes designing tasks that are feasible, engaging, and meaningful. Tasks should provide ample opportunities for interaction and mutual learning within the constraints of classroom time and space. Moreover, tasks should relate to real-life situations, guiding students to apply what they learn in practical contexts.

5) Interest

Fifthly, the principle of interest plays a crucial role in student engagement. Students are more likely to participate actively when they find tasks intriguing and rewarding. Interesting tasks not only enhance motivation but also boost confidence. Therefore, teachers should design tasks that are both engaging and valuable, using positive reinforcement to encourage participation.

In addition to these principles, Nunan (1989) highlighted the importance of learning through doing and scaffolding.^[5] Engaging in tasks allows students to acquire language skills meaningfully, fostering intrinsic motivation. Teachers should also be mindful of students' current knowledge levels, providing appropriate support to help them achieve learning objectives and develop necessary language proficiency.

3. RELEVANT THEORIES SUPPORTING TBLT

(1) Constructivist Theory

Traditional embroidery art still has wide application value in contemporary fashion design. For modern fashion design, it still has a very strong sound. First of all, we need to break the integrity of the design. Traditional embroidery art is often lack of abstractness, and the pattern image is very complete, but it has the characteristics of rigidity. It is not conducive to the long-term promotion of traditional ideas, and modern fashion design in the process of integration must break through the limitations of traditional embroidery, the integrity of the continuous to be broken, in order to innovate. For fashion designers, we can divide the patterns properly and pick up the relevant composition methods to make them more in line with modern people's clothing aesthetics. For example, when designing a dress, you can combine embroidery art to form a hollow way, so as to decorate the waist line and make the design effect of the whole curve more prominent. The second is to strengthen the aesthetic level of clothes and make them more in line with people's understanding of beauty. Traditional embroidery art is rooted in traditional culture, so the pattern is very exquisite and meticulous, which makes embroidery art unique and coquettish. It can enhance the aesthetic feeling of modern fashion design, so as to optimize contemporary fashion design. At present, many designers will actively try embroidery techniques in the process of design, so as to enhance the artistic value of clothing design, and even properly use embroidery techniques in foreign high-definition clothing, so as to further improve the quality of clothing.

The renowned Swiss psychologist Piaget (1974) was the first to propose the framework of constructivist learning theory. Subsequently, this theory was further developed by scholars such as Vygotsky, Ausubel, and Bruner, and gradually matured. This theory is based on psychology and philosophy and has a wide coverage and profound theoretical background. According to this theory, learning is a dynamic process where learners actively build their knowledge. Learners process and reorganize new information based on their prior knowledge, eventually integrating it into their own knowledge framework. Therefore, teachers should facilitate the development of new knowledge by

connecting it to students' existing understanding and experiences, rather than merely transmitting knowledge in a one-directional manner. This aligns with the "student-centered" approach in task-based teaching methods. The main features of constructivist learning theory include:

1) Student-Centered Learning

Students should be given ample time and space to explore and construct new knowledge based on their personal experiences. During this process, they may face various challenges. Teachers' role is to design differentiated learning activities and tasks tailored to each student's individual characteristics, interests, cognitive level, and prior experiences. Additionally, teachers should provide rich learning resources and offer appropriate support and encouragement to stimulate students' enthusiasm and initiative, helping them solve problems and build a coherent knowledge system.

2) Emphasis on Collaboration and Interaction

Learning is not only an individual process of knowledge construction but also requires collaboration and interaction. Given the diverse knowledge backgrounds and learning styles of students, cooperative learning allows them to share experiences and explore new knowledge together, achieving resource sharing and collective knowledge building. Therefore, teachers should design collaborative tasks and activities that encourage communication and interaction, thereby enhancing students' language skills and overall abilities.

3) Emphasize on Contextualization

Constructivist theory holds that learning should take place in real or simulated contexts, as these contexts can provide students with concrete application scenarios, helping them better understand and master knowledge. By creating appropriate learning contexts, students can apply the knowledge they have learned in practice and enhance their learning outcomes.

(2) Interaction Hypothesis

In the past four decades, more and more are studying the relationship of input, interaction and language acquisition. Therefore, the interaction hypothesis has been proposed and has been the focus of SLA.

The interaction hypothesis was proposed by Long based on Krashen's Input Hypothesis. The early version bears a close relationship with Krashen's Input Hypothesis but there are some differences. Long (1985) argues that input modification is effective for acquisition because it provides information that students need most when they meet difficulty in communication.^[4] Long (1996) proposed the new version of Interaction Hypothesis. Compared with the early one, the updated one emphasized "modified output".

In a word, interaction is a process which involves noticing, input, interaction mechanisms of learners and output. In the learning process of Task-Based Language Learning, language learners can integrate noticing, input, interaction mechanisms of learners and output together in a meaningful, authentic context.

(3) Sociocultural Theory

The contemporary understanding of sociocultural theory stems from Vygotsky's foundational work (1986) and has been further developed by subsequent theorists. A central tenet of Sociocultural Theory (SCT) is that higher mental functions in humans evolve through social interactions, progressing from more basic to more advanced levels. And it holds significant implications for teaching, schooling, and education.^[10]

Vygotsky (1978) posited that "every aspect of a child's cultural development manifests twice: initially on a social plane, followed by an individual level—first between individuals (inter-psychological), and subsequently within the child (intra-psychological)." Consequently, to fully understand a child's

development, it is essential to examine not only the individual but also the external social context in which the child engages in social activities.^[10]

Besides, Vygotsky proposed The Zone of Proximal Development(ZPD) that represents the gap between a learner's current ability to solve problems independently and their potential ability when guided by adults or more skilled peers (Vygotsky, 1978). Cognitive development and internalization in learners are fundamentally influenced by social interactions and collaborative activities. With support mechanisms like scaffolding-assistance provided by teachers, parents, or more capable peers-learners can surpass their ZPD and reach higher levels of potential. Individuals often acquire more knowledge through interaction and collaboration with others.

4. CHALLENGES OF TBLT IN EFL CONTEXTS

(1) Teacher Readiness and Training

One of the primary challenges in implementing Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is the readiness and training of teachers. Teachers play a crucial role in the successful implementation of TBLT, as they are responsible for designing tasks, managing classroom activities, and providing effective feedback. However, many teachers lack adequate training in TBLT principles and practices, leading to difficulties in applying this approach effectively in the classroom. For instance, teachers may be unfamiliar with the theoretical underpinnings of TBLT and how to translate these theories into practical classroom activities. Additionally, designing tasks that are engaging, appropriate for students' proficiency levels, and aligned with learning objectives can be time-consuming and challenging. The lack of comprehensive professional development opportunities further exacerbates this issue, leaving teachers ill-equipped to manage the complexities of TBLT.

(2) Students' Learning Styles and Exam Pressures

Students' learning styles and exam pressures also pose significant challenges to TBLT. TBLT emphasizes communicative competence and real-world language use, which may not align with traditional exam-focused teaching methods. Students who are accustomed to rote learning and exam-oriented preparation may struggle to adapt to the interactive and communicative nature of TBLT. Moreover, the pressure to perform well in standardized exams can limit the time and resources allocated to TBLT activities, as teachers may feel compelled to prioritize content coverage over communicative practice. This pressure can also affect students' motivation and engagement in TBLT tasks, particularly if they perceive these tasks as less relevant to their exam preparation.

(3) Classroom Management in Large or Resource-Limited Environments

Classroom management is another critical challenge in TBLT, especially in large or resource-limited environments. TBLT often involves group work and pair activities, which can be difficult to manage in large classes. Teachers may struggle to monitor student progress, ensure full participation, manage classroom discipline, and maintain engagement among all students. In large classrooms, the diverse proficiency levels, learning styles, and motivations of students further complicate task design and implementation. Additionally, resource limitations can hinder the effective execution of TBLT, as teachers may lack access to the necessary materials, technology, and support to create engaging and interactive tasks. The need for personalized feedback and individual attention is particularly challenging in such environments, as teachers may find it difficult to provide timely and meaningful feedback to each student.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper highlights the necessity of comprehensive teacher training, adaptive task design, and cultural sensitivity in implementing Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) within EFL contexts.

Future implications indicate that TBLT possesses significant transformative potential, enhancing communicative competence and aligning with evolving global language demands. As technology continues to advance, TBLT can harness digital tools to create more interactive and engaging learning experiences. However, sustained research and collaboration remain essential to address implementation challenges and ensure its effective integration into various educational contexts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial support from State Grid Corporation of China-Deepening research and application of PV Cloud (SGZJ0000KXJS1800281).

REFERENCES

- [1] Ellis, R. (2003). Task-based language learning and teaching. Oxford University Press.
- [2] Ellis, R. (2009). Task-based language teaching: Sorting out the misunderstandings. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 19(3), 221–246. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1473-4192.2009.00231.x>
- [3] Littlewood, W. (2004). The task-based approach: Some questions and suggestions. *ELT Journal*, 58(4), 319–326. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/58.4.319>
- [4] Long, M. H. (1985). Task-based language teaching. *Modelling and assessing second language acquisition*, 18, 77.
- [5] Luo, S. Q. (2011). Task-based language teaching: Tasks, task research, TBLT and evaluation, and teacher training. Higher Education Press.
- [6] Luo, S. Q., & Gong, Y. F. (2007). Task-based language teaching (Revised ed.). Thomson Learning Publishing Group.
- [7] Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2020). English curriculum standards for senior high school (2017 edition, revised in 2020). People's Education Press.
- [8] Nunan, D. (1989). Designing tasks for the communicative classroom. Cambridge University Press.
- [9] Skehan, P. (1998). A cognitive approach to language learning. Oxford University Press.
- [10] Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- [11] Willis, J. (1996). A framework for task-based learning. Longman.