Analysis of College Oral English Class Design from the Perspective of TBLT

—Taking "Read All about It" as an Example

Yan Lin, Qinhua Ji

School of Humanities, Tiangong University, Tianjin, China
Email: 2194835636@qq.com, qinhuaji2020@163.com

Abstract

TBLT (Task-based Language Teaching) has been widely adopted in foreign language teaching. And class design, as one of the major important parts in teaching, needs to be carefully considered. This paper aims to analyze the college oral English class design from the perspective of TBLT. And "Read All about It", a shadow dance, is used as its material. The class design covers three stages: pre-class, in class and after class. And the result shows tasks vary in difficulty at each stage and have different degrees of complexity for different students. The tasks are authentic and communicative to some extent. And the teacher is selector and sequencer of tasks who is responsible for preparing learners for tasks and raising consciousness. Therefore through this analysis, oral English class design can be further optimized.

Subject Areas

English Language Teaching

Keywords

TBLT, Oral English Class Design, Teacher Roles, Learner Roles

1. Introduction

Task-based Language Teaching, by giving priority to meaningful communication activities and improvement of the comprehensive ability and learners' roles, has been widely adopted in foreign language teaching. Class with real-world tasks is relatively easy for teachers to design because tasks are of practical significance. However, if a class is full of pedagogical tasks, raising the interests of students and utilizing it in real life are a little bit complex. Thus how to design

class? What's the purpose of design? What's the practical significance? All these need to be carefully considered. Therefore this paper aims to analyze the design of oral English class in college from the aspect of TBLT. And three stages including pre-class, in class, and after class are to be presented and analyzed. Four research questions are to be answered. What's the purpose of activities? What are the roles of teacher and students respectively in activities? What's the shortcoming of tasks or activities? What implications can be concluded for oral English class design? Furthermore, this paper is divided into four parts. A brief introduction to research background and shadow dance is firstly displayed. Then the literature review of TBLT is presented. The third part covers analysis of oral English class design which includes pre-class, in class and after class on the basis of TBLT. Then conclusion is drawn.

Shadow dance originated in China. Chinese shadow puppet dance is a folk drama in which the story is performed by silhouettes of people illuminated by light from candles or burning alcohol. The silhouettes are made of animal skin or cardboard.

Hungarian shadow dance is a manual general of shadow dance, not like in traditional Chinese shadow dance. It is usually performed by artists to express their emotions with body language through light and shadow. "Read All about It", a shadow dance of Hungarian shadow-theatre group called "Attraction" is used as the material of oral English class. Attraction, founded in 2004 by artist Zoltan Szucs, is a Hungarian Attraction shadow-theatre group composed of 3 men and 5 women. As the world's leading performance company, a leader in shadow dancing, it is good at telling touching stories with their bodies.

"Read All about It", as a Hungarian shadow dance, was awarded the famous British Talent Show Championship. It tells a story about a broken family as a result of the British government's involvement in the Iraq War. This dance was appraised by judges as "so emotional and touching and amazing". It is a distinctive and aesthetic shadow dance which may raise the interests of students. Students can also realize what consequences the war brings to people so as to view war in itself. Meanwhile, students can develop their speaking competence.

2. Literature Review

In this part, definitions and types of task are to be illustrated firstly. And studies on TBLT home and abroad are to be illustrated in detail.

Task-based language teaching refers to an approach based on the use of tasks as the core unit of planning and instruction in language teaching [1]. Thus TBLT is an approach rather than a method. And task, as the main proponent of TBLT, needs to be clarified. There are multiple definitions and one of them is that "the communicative task [is] a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a

communicative act in its own right." [1]. Here it can be seen that TBLT focuses on meaning and communication. And it also suggests that a syllabus might specify two kinds of tasks: real-world tasks and pedagogical tasks. The former one is designed to practise or rehearse those tasks which are important in needs analysis and useful in the real world. And the latter one has a psychological basis in SLA theory and research with no reflection of real-world tasks.

2.1. Studies on TBLT Abroad

TBLT sprang up in the 1980s. And there were two early applications: Malaysian communicational syllabus and Bangalore project. In 1987, a trial lasting for about five years in the south of Bangalore, India, was conducted by Prabhu who was considered as the founder of TBLT. Its core idea was "learning by doing". In this experiment, various types of tasks, especially communication tasks, were designed according to the content of learning so that tasks could be completed in the learning process. And the results showed that TBLT can effectively improve students' oral English proficiency.

In 1989, David Nunan firstly proposed a task framework in the classroom. The scope of the task is broad with each task having different goal. Learners receive multiple sources of language input as long as they come into contact with their surroundings. Thus classroom teaching should be close to life, and then teachers as well as students in the classroom form actual interpersonal relationship [2]. Students can complete language learning and improve their overall skills. Nunan's theory on TBLT had a great impact on Chinese language teaching and foreign language teaching.

In 1996, Jane Willis recommended a sequence of activities: pre-task, task circle and language focus stage [3]. In the first stage, the teacher introduced topic and task which is helpful to stimulate and cultivate students' interest and motivation. The second stage mainly includes task, planning, report and post task listening. And in the third phase, it focuses on analysis and practice.

In 1982, it was believed by Krashen that TBLT originates from his theory "input hypothesis" and learning is also a second language acquisition process. Long put forward the famous interaction hypothesis in 1985. Then Skehan elaborated his opinions after analyzing Willis' framework, such as lack of second language acquisition and teaching objectives. In 1998, he again displayed and analyzed five characteristics of TBLT. And in 2005, the scholar Ellis believed that planning is an integral part of the use of spoken and written languages in the implementation of TBLT [2].

Many experts and scholars have carried out quite a lot of research on TBLT and have yielded fruitful results. Meanwhile, some teachers in the domestic second language education field have been attracted by TBLT.

2.2. Studies on TBLT at Home

In 1997, Professor Wu Xudong, the first person to research on TBLT, compre-

hensively elaborated factors that influence task complexity and proposed a theoretical framework, especially the principles to determine the difficulty of tasks in the article "Principles for Determining the Difficulty of Foreign Language Learning Tasks" [4].

In 1998, Xia Jimei, Kong Xianhui, *et al.* compared problem-based learning and task-based learning in "Theoretical Basis of Difficult Teaching Method and Task Teaching Method and Its Mode Comparison". It indicated that the use of TBLT in English tends to make English teaching more authentic and English class more social [5]. It is believed that English teaching is not only to teach linguistic knowledge but to develop students' comprehensive ability by using English.

In 2001, Liao Xiaoqing summed up the theoretical basis of TBLT and provided some practical suggestions for language teaching, especially listening in "Theoretical Basis and Classroom Practice of Task-based Teaching". It is also pointed out in this paper that the interaction and communication between students in class are helpful for students to use and finally master the language. And TBLT pays attention to communication and authentic activities [6]. In the same year, *English Curriculum Standards* (a guideline for English education formulated by Ministry of Education) officially advocated task-based teaching. Since then, there has been a wave of research on TBLT in China. Here a few of them are to be mentioned. In 2004, Feng Yufang and Tang Xiaoyan indicated that task-based language teaching refers to a foreign language teaching approach that focuses on meaning and aims at completing communicative tasks [7]. In 2005, Cheng Xiaotang and Gong Yafu believed that students do not passively receive knowledge from books or teachers, but construct knowledge and develop language ability in language practice [8]. In 2005, Hu Yining made a practical exploration of designing teaching activities guided by TBLT [9]. And in 2007, Cheng Xiaotang, Lu Ziwen and Zhong Shumei discussed some issues that should be paid attention to in TBLT based on the current understanding and implementation. In 2011, on the basis of constructivist learning theory, Yang Weidong and Zhao Juan combined several teaching methods to implement "task-based teaching and build interactive platform", which is a direction of graduate English teaching reform [10]. And in 2012, Xue Xian discussed "effective reading" and how to cultivate students' skills and strategies for effective reading based on TBLT. And in recent years quite a lot of research based on TBLT, especially in practice continues to be published, such as "A Study of the Application of Task-based Language Teaching in Oral English Teaching in a Higher Vocational College" by Zha Xia in 2019 [2].

Form above it can be seen that domestic scholars have discussed TBLT from different aspects of the foreign language teaching. Some discussed theoretical framework of TBLT such as its philosophy, task complexity, advantages and so on. Others did empirical studies which include class design on the basis of TBLT and applications of TBLT in reading, listening and so on. However due to the

insufficient understanding of the definitions of the task, its teaching principles and implementation procedures including the design of tasks, some experiments failed and have no obvious effect on students' oral English proficiency and their attitude in oral English learning. Therefore, it is necessary to further discuss designs of oral English class in college from the perspective of TBLT.

3. Research Procedures

In this part, task designs in three stages including pre-class, in class and after class are to be presented and analyzed in detail.

3.1. Pre-Class

Before the class, a jigsaw activity is conducted. Students are required to form 5 groups with 6 students for each group. Here are the tasks: four groups search for the background information about Stonehenge; Tower Bridge; London Eye; Big Ben respectively. The locations, time, cause and features must be included. As for the last two questions, which war did palm trees and stretcher relate to? Does it have anything to do with the UK? The fifth group is responsible for those.

Jigsaw tasks: These involve learners combining different pieces of information to form a whole [11]. Its purpose is to partly prepare students well before the class and partly raise their interests in knowing other pieces of information. In this task, students' role is as group participants. And students need some adaptations to be more accustomed to group work. First of all, the group members should choose a leader who will assign a task to each student. To answer questions, students need to do research. How are relevant materials found by students? Students may search for it online using library resources such as CNKI, EBSCO, SAGE, or just Baidu Library. After that, the materials need to be filtered and integrated. But how can students filter and pull together useful materials? Then who will give a presentation in class? During the process of pre-class, students can improve their ability of searching, filtering and integrating information. In the meanwhile, students would remain to be curious about other pieces of information. In addition, the teacher's role is to prepare learners for tasks so that some sort of pre-task preparation or cuing is necessary. The teacher is also the selector and sequencer of tasks. However, the degree of complexity of each task is not the same which may influence the enthusiasm of some students.

3.2. In Class

In this part, three tasks are illustrated respectively.

3.3. Task One

  1) Share with us about some landmark buildings.
  2) Have you ever noticed gun and bombing plane? What does it symbolize?
  What about camel and a palm tree? Is it related to the Middle East?
  Here the first task in the class is presentation. Its basic purpose is to present

information respectively so as to help students know some well-known landmarks, and predict where the story happened. In a deep sense, presentation is interaction to some extent. It requires students to interact with other students. And this interaction is meaningful and it is not the repetition of what have been prepared. Thus students must be sufficiently prepared and be confident to express their own ideas. Here the student is also a monitor who attends the language form. And the teacher is to give feedback on both the message and language form from the perspectives of meaning, accuracy and fluency.

3.4. Task Two

1) How many main characters/protagonists are there in the video?

2) What is the story about? What happened before wedding and after wedding?

Find the emotional change of characters. Here are some notices: wedding, the parting moment of husband and wife.

3) When the girl presented flowers to her dead father, what's her mother's expression? Why does the husband raise his hand when he fell on the ground?

First, think of it by yourself and talk with another partner. Then write down some keywords, and work together to organize what to present. And when each question is answered, the teacher would also take notes on the blackboard.

Here this is a pair work. Both closed questions and open questions are presented. Its purpose is to help students better describe a story or narrative which includes time, place, person and plot. At a deeper level, students may need coordination when the disagreements occur. Thus students are group participants who are interacting with each other. The teacher's role is to give feedback according to accuracy, appropriacy, range, flexibility and size.

3.5. Task Three

Have you ever noticed that this dance drew judges and audience into tears? Why is it so striking? Let us turn to background of this story.

1) Why did the British government decide to enter the Iraq war? Trade blood for oil?

2) What was the attitude of people? Were they for or against the war strongly? Why were they for or against the war?

3) Facing temptation of huge interests, what would you do if it hurts others?

This task, a group work, is the key in the whole class. Firstly students who search for information about Iraq war need to give a presentation in the whole class. Then the teacher adds that due to the British government's invasion of Iraq resulted in the deaths of 179 British soldiers. However, it was later confirmed that the British assessment of the seriousness of the WMD (Weapons of Massive Destruction) threat did not stand up. So what's the real intention of the British government? Trade blood for oil? All these three questions are relatively open which require group members to discuss actively and write down some keywords. Then when students give presentations, the teacher writes down some

keywords and gives feedback from the aspect of meaning, fluency and accuracy.

The purpose of this task is partly to help students realize the background behind the touching and sad story, partly to raise controversial questions for students which have realistic implications. Now the role of students is risk-taker and innovator. They are required to create and interpret messages for which they lack full linguistic resources and prior experience. The skills of guessing from contextual clues, asking for clarification and consulting with other students may also need to be developed. In this task, the teacher's role is not only a counselor but also group process manager. In the period of group work, the teacher can walk around the classroom, see if any group needs help and give cues or scaffold. Thus it is learner-centered classroom which requires teacher to master some management skills. According to Feez, basic elements of TBLT are purposeful activities and tasks that emphasize communication and meaning [12]. Thus form is less concerned and the teacher doesn't need to correct all the errors and mistakes.

3.6. After Class

In this stage, students are required to choose one of titles to write a short composition.

1) Write down the story in details

2) What's your attitude towards wars?

3) What's your option facing temptation of interests which would hurt other people?

Here is an individual work for students. Its basic purpose is to consolidate what they have learned in class. Another aim is to improve students' writing competence. The fact that the teacher wrote keywords on the blackboard, is to make it easier for students to write down what the teacher talked about in class but difficult to express their actual ideas. Here students are seen as independent writer while the teacher is a reader.

From the above analysis, it can be seen that tasks vary in difficulty and can be authentic and communicative to some extent. But pre-class tasks have different degrees of complexity. And the activities in class fail to raise the interests of students. Besides the teacher role is more like a recorder who fails to provide meaningful feedback for students' further thinking. Thus TBLT put high demands on teacher. Teachers need to change their roles as facilitators, supervisors and guides. And in terms of the design of curriculum and teaching materials, teachers should carefully select materials that are related to the learners' daily lives and relevant to the content of the lesson, and maintain the learners' interest to participate in oral English learning. In the meanwhile, tasks should also be interactive.

4. Conclusion

TBLT plays an important role in language teaching. Tasks, its major compo-

nents, vary in difficulty at each stage and have different degrees of complexity for different students. They can be authentic and communicative to some extent but some fail to motivate students. And the teacher's role is more like a recorder who fails to provide meaningful feedback for students' further thinking. Four research questions were answered. First of all, tasks must be purposeful and authentic. They emphasize meaning and communication. And tasks must meet students' need and the degree of it must be in conformity with current level of students. Secondly the roles of the teacher and students vary according to the type of tasks or activities. Materials that are related to the learners' daily lives and the content of the lesson should be carefully selected, and the learners' interest in participating in oral English learning should be maintained. Thus teachers can improve their own professionalism. On the other hand the study fails to present practical advice about how teachers assign tasks to different students and provide scaffolds which need to be further discussed.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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