

Task-Based Language Teaching in Chinese EFL Classrooms: A Critical Review of Implementation Challenges and Pedagogical Adaptations

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Abstract: Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has been widely known as a promising approach within Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), yet its implementation in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings frequently reveals a clear gap between theoretical ideals and classroom realities. This paper critically examines that gap, paying particular attention to how Long's (1981) Interaction Hypothesis fares against the everyday constraints of managing instruction in Chinese middle schools. Drawing on empirical studies and key frameworks—including Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis and Ellis's (2003) work on task complexity—the analysis identifies a set of obstacles: teachers' insufficient pedagogical preparation, students' entrenched examination-oriented habits, and the logistical difficulties of fostering interaction in overcrowded classrooms. The tension between linguistic accuracy and communicative fluency is also addressed. Possible responses include differentiated task design, dynamic scaffolding, and strategic integration of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL). The conclusion is that TBLT's sustainability depends on pragmatic alignment with local socio-cultural conditions, not on wholesale replication of Western instructional models.

Keywords: Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT); EFL; Instructional Design; Classroom Management; Teacher Cognition.

1. Introduction

(1) The Evolution of TBLT in Global Language Pedagogy
Since its emergence in the 1980s, Task-Based Language Teaching has experienced a notable distance—from a marginal experimental notion to a central component of Communicative Language Teaching. Ellis (2003, p. 16) defines Task-Based Language Teaching as “a workplan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome.” [5] The instructional focus, in essence, shifts away from explicit grammar explanation and toward the completion of tasks that carry communicative purpose. Proponents argue that this learner-centered approach not only enhances linguistic proficiency but also cultivates learner autonomy and collaborative skills (Nunan, 2004). In today's globally connected and digitally mediated educational landscape, TBLT offers promising framework for fostering practical communicative competence, and this fits comfortably with the objectives of curriculum reforms in many parts of the world (Ahmadian & Long, 2022) [1].

(2) The Contextual Constraints in EFL Settings
Although its theoretical appeal, TBLT implementation in EFL environments encounters contextual obstacles. English as a Second Language (ESL) learners enjoy immersive exposure. They typically have limited contact with authentic language use outside the classroom (Richards, 2006)[14]. While numerous studies have confirmed that TBLT can ignite learners' motivation and elevate their engagement, yet the translation of these positive effects into durable proficiency gains remains an open question. The socio-cultural dynamics in EFL classrooms—the weight of high-stakes examinations, the persistence of teacher-fronted norms, and a pervasive scepticism toward activities that appear to deviate from “serious” instruction—call for a critical reassessment of TBLT's universal applicability. The chasm between “meaning-making” (Ahmadian & Long, 2022, p. 31) [1] and

the hard realities of limited instructional hours is a persistent challenge for language educators.

(3) Research Objectives and Scope

Moving beyond a mere advocacy of TBLT, this paper undertakes a critical analysis of its efficacy within EFL classrooms. The primary objective is to deconstruct the theoretical underpinnings of TBLT, specifically examining how constructs such as task complexity and interactional modifications function in practice. Particular attention is directed toward the Chinese educational landscape, where large class sizes and an examination-oriented ethos create a unique set of implementation barriers (Wei, 2004) [18]. By identifying the discrepancies between pedagogical theory and classroom reality, this study aims to provide nuanced, context-sensitive recommendations for practitioners. Ultimately, this paper argues that the successful integration of TBLT requires not a rigid adherence to imported methodologies, but a strategic mediation that balances innovative task design with the local educational ecology.

This paper undertakes a critical analysis of its efficacy within EFL classrooms. The primary aim is to deconstruct the theoretical foundations of TBLT and examine how constructs such as task complexity and interactional modification function in real classrooms. Particular attention is directed toward the Chinese educational landscape, where large class sizes and an examination-oriented ethos create a unique set of implementation barriers (Wei, 2004) [18]. By holding pedagogical theory up against classroom practice, this study hopes to offer nuanced, context-sensitive recommendations for practitioners. The central argument is straightforward: successful TBLT integration does not entail rigid application of imported methodologies; it requires a strategic mediation that balances innovative task design with the local educational ecology.

2. Theoretical Foundations of TBLT

(1) Reconceptualizing “Task”: From Activity to Work Plan

Any serious engagement with TBLT must begin with the construct at its core. This term is not used in this framework; it carries theoretical weight. Long (1985) gave an early operational definition. Task characterizes as a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward" (p. 89) [10]—a formulation that deliberately links tasks to real-world, functional language use. Nunan (2004) added a classroom-oriented perspective, describing a communicative task as work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form (p. 10) [12].

Ellis (2003) refined this further by treating a task as “a work plan that engages learners in interactionally authentic language use” (p. 30) [5], thereby connecting task design to cognitive processing and naturalistic language use. This evolution in definition reflects a broader epistemological shift: tasks are no longer exercises or drills. They have become the central unit for defining learning objectives, shaping curriculum content, and assessing competencies.

(2) Cognitive-Interactionist Underpinnings: Input, Output, and Interaction

The theoretical credibility of TBLT rests on three cognitive-interactionist models of second language acquisition (SLA), which together explain how tasks facilitate learning.. East (2021) combines them as input (what learners receive), output(what learners produce), and interaction (what learners share) [4]. These are three complementary mechanisms.

Krashen’s (1985) Input Hypothesis proposes that language acquisition is driven by comprehensible input—target language material that is slightly beyond the learner’s current level ($i+1$) [8]. Within a TBLT framework, tasks serve as the tool for delivering such input in contextually meaningful ways. However, this model has attracted lots of criticism. Swain (1985) argued in her Output Hypothesis that comprehensible input alone is insufficient; learners must also be pushed to produce language, for “production causes learners to engage in syntactic processing,” thereby promoting acquisition through the development of fluency, accuracy, and complexity (p. 252) [15]. TBLT reconciles these positions by designing tasks that both expose learners to rich input and demand meaningful output.

The third pillar is Long’s (1981) Interaction Hypothesis. It holds that acquisition is most effectively triggered when learners engage in negotiated interaction, where conversational adjustments and clarification occur in real time [9]. Long (1985) later contended this into a rationale for task-based instruction, arguing that tasks offer the optimal environment for this kind of modified interaction that drives acquisition [10]. This forms what Ahmadian and Long (2022) describe as the “meaningfulness principle.” The notion that “learners have to use language to communicate or understand meanings in order to achieve the objective of TBLT” (p. 31) [1]. Tasks, in this view, are not only activities but carefully engineered environments where meaning-making becomes the trigger for linguistic development.

(3) The Sociocultural Dimension: Mediation and Dialogic Learning

The cognitive-interactionist strand explains the “how.” While Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory illuminates the

“social [17].” Ellis (2003) explains that sociocultural theory “seeks to explain how mediated minds are developed out of social activity” (p. 175) [5]. Mediation occurs through material tools, interaction with others, and—above all—language.

This theoretical lens reframes TBLT in a significant way. Learning is not a solitary cognitive act. It is “shared between the individual and other persons” (Ellis, 2003, p. 175) [5]. Interpersonal activity precedes intramental activity. When EFL students collaborate on a task, the dialogic interaction they take part in is not merely practice—it constitutes the acquisition process itself. This sociocultural grounding is particularly salient for EFL contexts, where the classroom is often the primary site of authentic linguistic mediation.

3. Critical Analysis of TBLT Implementation in Chinese EFL Contexts

The theoretical framework outlined in chapter 2 positions TBLT as a robust framework for fostering communicative competence. Yet East (2021) reminds us that no pedagogical model operates in a vacuum. Local ecology matters. In the Chinese EFL context—with its high-stakes standardized testing, oversized classes, and deeply rooted teacher-fronted traditions—the theory-practice gap widens [4]. This section unpacks these tensions across three dimensions: inherent limitations in task design, systemic classroom barriers, and socio-cultural mismatches.

(1) Structural Limitations of TBLT Task Design and Sequencing

Nunan (2004) outlines a three-phase task cycle—pre-task, during-task, post-task—intended to scaffold learners from meaning negotiation to linguistic consolidation [12]. Ahmadian and Long (2022) add that the post-task phase should prioritise extended practice or metalinguistic reflection [1]. In a standard 45-minute Chinese classroom, however, the pre-task phase alone—clarifying objectives, activating schemas, modelling procedures—consumes a significant portion of lesson time (Wei, 2004)[18]. This leaves insufficient room for during-task interaction. Post-task reflection? Often sacrificed. Hu (2005) confirms that teachers routinely truncate the final phase to accommodate grammar points mandated by the syllabus [6]. This directly undermines Swain’s (1985) claim that output processing is critical. Teachers are forced to choose between pedagogical best practice and administrative compliance[15].

A further complication: frameworks for classifying task complexity are descriptive, not prescriptive (Nunan, 2004) [12]. What does “code complexity” mean for a specific cohort? No one tells you. Novice teachers either over-scaffold—reducing tasks to rote drills—or under-support, provoking anxiety. And then there is the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE). Should tasks be designed for communicative competence or for test preparation? The literature offers no consensus. Many teachers abandon TBLT altogether in senior high grades.

Assessment presents another blind spot. TBLT scholars typically favour formative, process-oriented assessments—peer feedback, logs, portfolios (Ahmadian & Long, 2022) [1]. Chinese administrators demand summative, score-based evidence. This persistent tension between holistic qualitative assessment and standardised quantitative metrics is well documented (Carless, 2003) [2]. The evaluation mismatch

relegates TBLT to “showcase lessons” for inspections rather than regular classroom practice.

Material design is similarly problematic. International handbooks are filled with Western scenarios such as church visits, gap-year debates. These are alien to Chinese learners’ lived experiences (Hu, 2005) [6]. Even domestically published textbooks include tasks like ordering Starbucks coffee—utterly irrelevant to rural students in western China who have never visited an urban café. Richards (2006) insists that authenticity means alignment with learners’ real-world needs, but few teachers have the time or training to adapt imported materials [14]. The result is tasks that feel contrived.

(2) Ecological Barriers in Chinese EFL Classroom Practice

Four interrelated barriers form a self-reinforcing cycle that discourages sustained TBLT adoption.

First, teacher preparation. TBLT demands a role shift—from knowledge transmitter to task facilitator. Wei (2004) and subsequent studies consistently highlight that formal TBLT training remains limited among Chinese in-service English teachers, particularly in resource-sparse regions [18]. Teachers report feeling “out of control” in classes of 50 or more: monitoring small-group interactions while providing targeted feedback seems nearly impossible. Studies from China show that many teachers equate effective teaching with “covering the textbook without interruption”—a mindset fundamentally incompatible with TBLT (Carless, 2003) [2]. Failed attempts push them back to lectures.

Second, student habits. Chinese students are conditioned for passive reception. Note-taking, rote memorisation, deference to authority. These behaviours are normalised after years of schooling (Wei, 2004) [18]. When pair or group tasks are assigned, many students revert to their first language, treating the activity as a break rather than as learning. Observational studies suggest that student talk during TBLT tasks is often dominated by off-task conversation in Mandarin, with minimal focus on target language production (Deng & Carless, 2010) [3].

Third, stakeholder perceptions. Parents equate “good English teaching” with high exam scores. If students spend time on “talking games,” parents complain to school administrators. Administrators, under pressure to deliver NCEE results, often side with parents. This top-down pressure leaves teachers with no incentive to invest time in TBLT preparation, as any deviation from the exam-driven norm is perceived as professionally risky.

Fourth, class size and technology. Average class sizes in Chinese public secondary schools range from 45 to 60 students. Monitoring individual participation is impossible. The Chinese Ministry of Education has promoted “smart classroom” technologies such as interactive whiteboards, AI-powered assessment tools. But uptake has been largely formalistic. Case studies find that teachers often use technology to digitise traditional lectures, not to facilitate interaction (Zou, 2018) [20]. Replacing oral discussion with typing answers defeats TBLT’s purpose. In rural schools, resource constraints force teachers into low-cognition information-gap tasks simply because they require no additional resources, defeating TBLT’s purpose of promoting deep meaning-making (Ahmadian & Long, 2022) [1].

(3) Misalignment Between TBLT Presuppositions and Local Socio-Cultural Realities

Underpinning these operational difficulties is a deeper, more fundamental mismatch between TBLT’s theoretical presuppositions and the Chinese EFL context, which calls into

question the universal applicability of Western-derived pedagogical models.

The interactionist hypothesis assumes learners have sufficient exposure to target language input outside the classroom and intrinsic motivation to negotiate meaning (Long, 1981) [9]. Neither assumption holds in most Chinese EFL settings. English contact hours are limited to 4–5 periods per week. Extracurricular exposure is minimal, especially in non-urban areas. Even when tasks are implemented, the pressure to cover exam-mandated grammar points forces truncation of the post-task phase. A vicious cycle ensues: teachers see TBLT as ineffective for exam preparation; students regard it as a distraction from “real” learning.

A factor rarely addressed in mainstream TBLT literature is the role of *mianzi* (face) in Chinese classroom interactions. King and Bond (1985) define face as “the positive social value a person claims for himself by lining up his actions with accepted social expectations [7].” In collectivist Chinese classrooms, students are very sensitive to losing face in front of peers. It will make them reluctant to speak in English during whole-class tasks for fear of making mistakes. Tsung (2009) observed that students in large EFL classes exhibit significantly higher levels of reticence during TBLT tasks compared to their counterparts in smaller, more intimate settings, citing “fear of being laughed at” as the primary reason [16]. This face sensitivity directly contradicts TBLT’s requirement for spontaneous, risk-taking communication, which is a cultural mismatch that Western scholars often overlook.

Oliver et al. (2013), studying Australian Aboriginal contexts, demonstrate that TBLT yields sustainable outcomes only when it is adapted to local cultural and linguistic needs [13]. For China, this means reconciling communicative fluency with the national curriculum’s emphasis on accuracy, balancing student-centred interaction with the efficiency demanded by large classes, and addressing cultural-psychological barriers that inhibit students’ participation. Without such adaptations, TBLT remains a theoretical ideal rather than a practical classroom tool.

4. Practical Recommendations for Contextually Adapted TBLT Implementation

Adaptation is central to sustainability. Oliver et al. (2013) make this point forcefully. The problems are not intrinsic to TBLT. They arise from a failure to calibrate its local cultural, institutional, and learner-specific needs. Recommendations are offered below, organised around the three challenge clusters and grounded in established principles. Alignment with the 2022 English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education is maintained throughout.

(1) Optimizing Task Design for Institutional Constraints

The 45-minute lesson squeeze can be eased by decoupling the task cycle. Pre-task activities such as vocabulary preview, scenario orientation—can be assigned as flipped classroom homework via free platforms such as WeChat Mini Programs. This frees in-class time for during-task interaction. Post-task reflection, including error correction and linguistic consolidation, can be integrated into weekly “micro-lessons” dedicated to formative assessment. This elastic cycling model aligns with the 2022 National English Curriculum Standards’ requirement for “blended learning” and avoids sacrificing exam-mandated grammar instruction time (Ministry of

Education, 2022) [11].

A tiered complexity framework anchored to the China Standards of English (CSE) is recommended. For students at CSE Levels 1–3 (junior high), low-cognitive-load information-gap and opinion-exchange tasks are appropriate. For Levels 4–5 (senior high), jigsaw and problem-solving activities aligned with NCEE reading and writing modules can be used. For example, a task requiring students to debate “the pros and cons of online learning” can integrate NCEE-style argumentative writing practice with oral interaction, satisfying both communicative and exam-preparation goals. This stratified approach addresses Nunan’s (2004) call for context-sensitive task design while alleviating teachers’ concerns about exam relevance.

A dual-track assessment model is proposed. A portion of the final grade is allocated to task performance, measured via transparent rubrics covering linguistic accuracy, engagement, and completion. The remainder is derived from standardised exam scores. This hybrid approach provides quantifiable evidence of learning outcomes acceptable to administrative stakeholders while preserving space for communicative development (Carless, 2003) [2].

To resolve the localization gap in task materials, schools should establish collaborative, region-specific task banks during weekly collective lesson planning sessions. Tasks should center on locally relevant themes. Schools in Sichuan, for example, could design tasks around introducing Sanxingdui artefacts, explaining giant panda conservation, or comparing Sichuan cuisine with global culinary traditions. These scenarios leverage students’ existing background knowledge, reducing cognitive load while increasing engagement. Hu (2005) confirms that locally grounded tasks enhance willingness to communicate [6]. Zhang (2008), in a practical guide for Chinese practitioners, similarly emphasises that task materials should be drawn from learners’ immediate social environments—family, school, and community—rather than imported from foreign textbooks. The implication is clear: localisation is not merely a cosmetic adjustment but a pedagogical necessity [19].

(2) Mitigating Classroom Ecological Barriers

Overcoming systemic obstacles requires multi-stakeholder interventions targeting teachers, learners, administrators, and resource allocation systems.

One-off centralised workshops should be replaced with embedded, job-embedded professional development to address the teacher capacity gaps. A micro-training model—where teachers co-design one TBLT lesson per month, observe peer implementations, and engage in reflective debriefing—has proven effective in shifting teacher identity (Carless, 2003) [2]. Additionally, pairing novice teachers with experienced TBLT practitioners in mentorship programs reduces implementation anxiety and provides just-in-time scaffolding for classroom management challenges. Critically, this model requires minimal additional time investment, as it integrates training into existing work routines.

To counter students’ habituation to passive learning, teachers should implement a scaffolded participation framework that lowers entry barriers for reluctant learners. Initial tasks should prioritize low-stakes, structured interactions: for example, allowing students to prepare written notes for pair discussions, or assigning specific roles (e.g., “note-taker,” “spokesperson”) to reduce performance anxiety. Positive reinforcement mechanisms—such as awarding “task achievement stars” redeemable for extra credit—further

incentivize engagement. Such scaffolding strategies are vital for transitioning students from rote learning to active participation (Deng & Carless, 2010) [3].

To resolve stakeholder perception conflicts, schools should launch proactive communication campaigns targeting parents and administrators. Parent information sessions should showcase tangible TBLT outcomes—such as student-produced English vlogs, task reports, and oral proficiency growth portfolios—rather than abstract pedagogical rationales. Integration of task performance into the Comprehensive Quality Evaluation system (mandatory for NCEE applications) helps parents recognise TBLT’s contribution to college competitiveness. Transparency aligns expectations with communicative goals.

Lightweight, zero-cost digital tools are preferable to expensive hardware. Free platforms such as Tencent Meeting breakout rooms enable small-group discussion in large classes. WeChat Mini Programs allow oral task recordings for asynchronous feedback. In rural schools, even basic mobile phone recordings extend task interaction beyond the classroom. This low-threshold approach improves task interaction frequency in resource-diverse settings without imposing prohibitive costs (Zou, 2018) [20].

(3) Bridging Socio-Cultural and Theoretical Misalignments

Addressing deep-seated mismatches between TBLT’s presuppositions and Chinese realities requires culturally responsive adaptations that honor local values while advancing communicative competence.

Given limited in-class exposure, supplementary multimodal materials such as short videos, simplified articles, podcast clips can be delivered via school learning platforms prior to task implementation. This approach aligns with Krashen’s (1985) Input Hypothesis by ensuring learners encounter “i+1” comprehensible input in manageable doses, even outside immersion environments. Providing such scaffolding is particularly crucial in EFL contexts characterized by limited extracurricular exposure (Hu, 2005) [6].

Table 1. Phased Implementation Roadmap for Contextually Adapted TBLT

Phase	Core Activities	Teacher Support Mechanisms	Student Support Mechanisms
Pre-Semester	Develop localized task bank aligned with CSE standards	Collective lesson planning for task design	Pre-assessment of proficiency levels for stratification
Weekly action	Deploy elastic task cycles; assign augmented input	Micro-coaching during planning sessions	Scaffolded role assignments; positive reinforcement
Mid-Semester	Administer dual-track assessments; adjust task difficulty	Peer observation and reflective debriefing	Small-group feedback sessions; portfolio updates
End-of-Semester	Evaluate task efficacy; revise task bank	Mentorship program check-ins	Showcase task outcomes to parents/administrator

To mitigate the inhibitory effect of mianzi (face) concerns,

teachers should establish explicit “no-interruption, no-public-correction” norms during task implementation. Errors in oral production are addressed privately during post-task feedback rather than corrected mid-task, reducing students’ fear of peer ridicule. Additionally, group tasks should prioritize collaborative over competitive structures: for example, grading groups collectively rather than ranking individual performances eliminates incentives for students to mock peers’ mistakes. Such culturally responsive classroom management techniques significantly reduce student reticence during communicative tasks (Tsung, 2009) [16].

(4) Integrated Implementation Framework

To synthesize the above recommendations, Table 1 presents a phased implementation roadmap that aligns TBLT with Chinese secondary school workflows. This framework synthesizes best practices identified in the literature for implementing communicative language teaching in East Asian contexts (Carless, 2003; Hu, 2005).

5. Conclusion

This paper set out to critically examine the implementation of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) within the specific socio-institutional context of Chinese EFL classrooms. While TBLT is globally recognized for its potential to foster communicative competence—anchored in Long’s (1981) Interaction Hypothesis, Krashen’s (1985) Input Hypothesis, and Vygotsky’s (1978) Sociocultural Theory—its operationalization in China has encountered significant friction. The findings of this critical analysis suggest that the challenges are not merely technical but are deeply rooted in structural incompatibilities and cultural-psychological mismatches.

The primary contribution of this study lies in its identification of a “triple misalignment” that hinders TBLT adoption. First, a structural misalignment exists between the time-intensive nature of the tripartite task cycle and the rigid 45-minute lesson structure prevalent in Chinese secondary schools. Second, a systemic misalignment persists between TBLT’s emphasis on formative, process-oriented assessment and the national accountability system’s reliance on summative, exam-based metrics. Third, a cultural-psychological misalignment emerges from the conflict between TBLT’s requirement for spontaneous, risk-taking communication and the Confucian-heritage classroom culture, where *mianzi* (face) and fear of making errors inhibit student participation. These findings extend existing scholarship by demonstrating that TBLT cannot function as a culturally neutral “best practice” but must be pedagogically translated to fit local ecosystems.

Practically, this paper proposed a contextually adapted implementation framework designed to mitigate these challenges. By introducing an elastic task cycling model, a dual-track assessment system, and face-sensitive interaction norms, the study offers actionable strategies for teachers and policymakers. The integration of low-threshold technologies and the development of localized task banks provide concrete pathways for scaling TBLT in resource-diverse settings, from urban centers to rural western China. These recommendations move beyond generic advocacy, providing a phased roadmap that aligns with national policies such as the 2022 English Curriculum Standards and the China Standards of English (CSE).

However, this study is not without limitations. As a critical review based on existing empirical literature, it lacks large-

scale, longitudinal quantitative evidence to measure the long-term impact of the proposed adaptations on NCEE scores. Future research should prioritize quasi-experimental designs tracking student cohorts over multiple academic years to validate whether the proposed “hybrid TBLT” model can simultaneously enhance communicative fluency and maintain examination competitiveness. Additionally, further investigation into the role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in automating task assessment and providing personalized scaffolding represents a promising frontier for reconciling TBLT’s interactive demands with large class sizes.

In conclusion, TBLT remains a valuable pedagogical innovation for Chinese EFL education, but its success is contingent upon a pragmatic shift from ideological adherence to adaptive integration. As the Chinese educational landscape continues to evolve—balancing tradition with modernization—TBLT must be reimagined not as a foreign import, but as a flexible framework capable of nurturing globally competent learners without compromising local educational equity. The journey toward effective TBLT implementation is iterative, requiring ongoing collaboration among teachers, researchers, and policymakers to bridge the enduring gap between global pedagogical theory and local classroom realities.

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