

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

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Abstract: Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is a kind of teaching method that regards tasks as the teaching carrier and encourages learners to mobilize various resources for meaning construction learning, so as to achieve the purpose of communication. This essay critically examines Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in EFL contexts, analyzing its theoretical foundations, practical strengths, and inherent challenges. It offers targeted recommendations, including teacher training, diversified assessment, and contextual adaptation, to enhance the effectiveness and feasibility of TBLT in foreign language classrooms.

Keywords: Task-Based Language Teaching; Task Design; Communicative Competence.

1. Introduction

(1) Definition&Significance of TBLT

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is a kind of teaching method that regards tasks as the teaching carrier and encourages learners to mobilize various resources for meaning construction learning, so as to achieve the purpose of communication (Ellis, 2009) [1]. It requires teachers to transform the process of teaching and learning into task inquiry, emphasizing that teachers should formulate learning tasks for students according to teaching objectives and learning needs, while students, as learning subjects, should complete learning tasks through independent inquiry, cooperative learning and other ways (Guo, 2023)[2]. This teaching method has four characteristics: student-oriented, topic-oriented, language communicative, and group activity as the main form (Zhang, 2024)[3]. In the teaching process, teachers should choose appropriate topics and organize teaching activities with students as the center, while students should work in small groups with language to improve their communicative skills and master language knowledge.

TBLT plays a vital role in foreign language teaching, which is embodied in the five aspects below: Firstly, TBLT focuses on cultivating learners' learning ability (Jia, 2024)[4]. In the process of completing tasks, learners would analyze and solve problems either independently or with the help of others, which helps learners to form the habit of independent learning, improve their ability to solve problems, as well as the ability to cooperate and communicate with others; Secondly, TBLT can stimulate learners' interest and motivation. It emphasizes learner-centered teaching and encourages learners to participate in tasks and interact with others actively. In the process of experiencing and completing a variety of interesting tasks, learners can develop their interest in language learning and get a sense of achievement from it, which is the key factor to promote students to carry out independent learning and participate in the tasks actively (Luo, 2024)[5]; Thirdly, TBLT can meet the learning needs and knowledge level of different learners with its flexibility and diversity. Teachers can fully consider the language level, learning needs and personal interests of learners and then design tasks of different difficulty, so as to realize personalized teaching, improve teaching effectiveness.

Fourthly, TBLT can bring out the comprehensive use of language knowledge and the overall improvement of language skills. In the process of completing comprehensive tasks, learners need to make comprehensive use of language knowledge, including vocabulary, grammar, listening, speaking, reading and writing, etc., which helps them improve their language skills in an all-round way. Lastly, TBLT can adapt to the foreign language learning context. English is not the main communication language in our daily life, a natural language environment for foreign language learners is needed. By designing tasks close to real life, TBLT enables learners to use English in simulated or real situations, which enhances the practicability of language learning.

(2) Relevance of TBLT in EFL Contexts.

Learning a foreign language requires a great variety of time, resources and effort, which is not only from the learners themselves but also the institution providing the instruction. The one-size-fits-all approach may not work well because different learners can have different learning needs in their mind, which means a successful foreign language program should be well motivated and designed according to particular learners' learning needs. The relevance of TBLT in EFL contexts is precisely reflected in the needs analysis of students. A language program without needs analysis simply teaches a certain language wasting learners' time and effort by covering all language points and language skills that students do not need, and by not covering the specialized target tasks they need, while the task-based needs analysis advocated in TBLT can help avoid such wastes of time, resources and effort in foreign language teaching (Long, 2015)[6].

(3) Scope&Objective of the Essay

This essay will make a critical analysis of TBLT to deeply explore its relevance in EFL contexts, its theoretical foundations, teaching practice, significant advantages and limitations, and put forward some practical suggestions to the current challenges TBLT has met, aiming at building a comprehensive cognitive framework for readers to apply TBLT more effectively in foreign language teaching practice.

2. Theoretical Foundations of TBLT

(1) Key Concepts of TBLT

Tasks are practical activities with clear goals. In TBLT, task, as the key process of the whole teaching, is the carrier of

language learning and the bridge which connects knowledge and skills. Tasks in TBLT are usually close to students' real life or specific situations, which requires learners to not only understand language knowledge in the process of task completion, but also be able to use language to communicate with others and express themselves.

When designing tasks, teachers should consider many factors comprehensively, such as the teaching objectives and the knowledge level of students etc., to ensure that the selected tasks not only meet the teaching and learning needs, but also effectively promote the learning and using of language. There are many types of tasks, including role playing, problem solving, and information gathering (Lv, 2024) [7]. In role play tasks, students should play a specific role in a simulated situation and complete the task through dialogue and interaction among students. Problem solving tasks require students to find a solution to a specific problem or challenge through thinking, discussion and cooperation. Information gathering tasks require students to complete reports or presentations based on the information collected by consulting materials, interviewing, etc.

(2) Theoretical Foundations of TBLT

Many theoretical foundations, such as the communicative function theory, the constructivism, the input and interaction hypothesis, provide scientific guidance for the teaching practice of TBLT, and make it an effective language teaching method.

The communicative function theory emphasizes the sociality and communicative nature of language and holds that the basic function of language is communication and exchange of ideas. First of all, it emphasizes that language teaching should aim at students' communicative competence, rather than language knowledge and rules. Secondly, it reminds teachers to fully consider the authenticity and communicative nature of language context when designing tasks to ensure that students can master language in practice. Finally, it requires teachers to draw students' attention to the communicative function of language to cultivate their linguistic sensitivity and flexibility.

The Constructivism holds that learning is a process in which learners actively construct knowledge rather than passively accept it (Zhao, 2024) [8]. It emphasizes the learning subjectivity and principal position of students, and requires teachers to fully consider the learning needs and interests of students, as well as their cognitive level and language ability when designing tasks. At the same time, it also requires teachers to pay attention to creating real communicative situations, promoting students' social interaction and cooperation, and helping students actively construct the meaning of language knowledge in TBLT.

The input and interaction hypothesis is based on the research results of second language acquisition. It emphasizes that in the process of language acquisition, learners not only need to contact and master language through understandable language input, but also need to use language in interactive communication, so as to promote language acquisition and internalization. On the one hand, it emphasizes the importance of comprehensible input in language acquisition and reminds teachers to pay attention to the selection and presentation of input materials when designing tasks. On the other hand, it highlights the role of interaction in language acquisition and requires teachers to create a classroom environment which is conducive to teacher-student interaction and student-student interaction.

3. Critical Analysis of TBLT in EFL Contexts

(1) Strategies&Strengths of TBLT

Tasks related to students' real life can stimulate their interests in learning and help them understand and master English knowledge better. On the one hand, teachers can use role play, situational dialogue or other ways to create a language learning context closely related to students' daily life. For example, in the scene of shopping in the supermarket, students can play the roles of customers and shop assistants to practice dialogues such as the inquiry and negotiation of price to improve their oral skills. On the other hand, teachers should fully take students' personal interests and knowledge level into consideration. Interest is the inner motivation of learning, so if the task is in line with students' interests, they are more likely to participate in the task actively, thus students' independent learning ability, knowledge acquisition ability and problem solving ability can all be improved. In addition, tasks too difficult or easy can both affect students' motivation and engagement. Only when the difficulty of the teaching task matches the knowledge level of students, can they successfully complete the task and get a sense of achievement from it (Xing, 2012) [9].

TBLT emphasizes group cooperative inquiry, and advocates teachers to play the role of mediator and just provide moderate help in the process of teaching (Yang&Lin, 2004) [10]. This teaching method aims to promote communication and collaboration among students through group cooperation, and ensures that students can get necessary guidance and support meanwhile (Ran, 2024) [11]. Group collaborative inquiry enables students to learn knowledge and solve problems together. In students group, students can discuss the topics they are all interested in, and complete the tasks through division of labor, such as consulting materials, analyzing problems, and putting forward plans, which not only helps improve students' oral expression ability and independent learning ability, but also cultivates their teamwork spirit and communication ability. It is worth noting that teachers only need to provide moderate help to students during the teaching process, such as guiding the learning direction, providing learning resources, and solving learning difficulties.

It is inevitable that students will encounter some problems when participating in the task, so teachers should provide timely feedback, which helps students correct their shortcomings. Evaluation scale helps a lot in this case. On the one hand, the evaluation of teachers can be carried out with objectivity and accuracy according to the evaluation scale; On the other hand, the self-evaluation of students themselves according to the evaluation scale can promote students' self-cognition and reflection, and finally achieve self-improvement.

(2) Limitations&Challenges of TBLT

TBLT does have many advantages, but it also has some limitations and has met many challenges in language teaching practice.

Firstly, the challenge of task design. A task which is close to the students' real life and can effectively promote their language competence must be moderately difficult, practical and interesting, which puts forward high demands on teachers (Yu &Yu, 2018) [12]. Teachers must have rich language knowledge and teaching skills, and spend a lot of time analyzing the interests and knowledge level of students, so as

to design realistic and challenging tasks for students. The problems such as unreasonable design of tasks and difficulty in taking into account the needs of all students may appear.

Secondly, the difficulty in classroom management. The task in TBLT involves more student interaction and group cooperation, which may lead to increased difficulty in classroom management. For example, in group discussion or role play, students may get too excited and then stray from the topic, or there may be some free riders who do not actively participate in the task and just rely on other group members. In addition, exam pressure may also cause students to pay too much attention to the accuracy of language forms, while the practical use of language and the communicative competence are not valued.

Thirdly, the improvement of evaluation system. How to establish a scientific and comprehensive evaluation system is also a big challenge. Traditional evaluation based on test results can not accurately reflect students' actual performance in TBLT, thus teachers should design diversified evaluation methods, such as observation records, peer evaluation, self-evaluation, etc., but the implementation and integration of these methods require time and effort.

4. Practical Recommendations

(1) Solutions to Overcome Challenges

These challenges can be addressed by providing regular training and support to teachers, encouraging students to adopt different learning styles, and adjusting the content and form of examinations.

Firstly, regular training and support for teachers can help them improve their teaching skills and their ability to design tasks. The content of training may include the theory and practice of TBLT, the skills of task designing, the classroom management skills, and so on. The theory and practice of TBLT can help teachers understand the core concepts, teaching steps and evaluation methods of it, thus they can be able to design and carry out teaching tasks better; The specific task design strategies and case studies can help teachers learn how to design tasks according to the personal interests, knowledge level and learning needs of students; The classroom management skills enables teachers to manage the language teaching classroom effectively, and ensure that students can participate in and complete the task actively.; In addition, establishing a communication platform between teachers is also of great importance, teachers can share their teaching experience, discuss some teaching problems, and find solutions to them together.

Secondly, encouraging students to adopt a variety of learning methods can cultivate their ability of independent learning, cooperative learning, and technical tools using, etc. Independent learning means that students are able to monitor themselves and control the process of learning on their own, and make a study plan according to their own learning process and learning needs; Cooperative learning refers to the process in which students' teamwork ability and communication skills can be developed greatly through group discussion, role play and other activities, and every student can bring out their best and learn from each other in the task; Making use of technology tools is also encouraged. Students can use online resources, learning software or other technology tools to help with their language learning and improve their learning efficiency. What's more, teachers should give timely guidance to students' learning methods and strategies to help them adapt to TBLT better.

Thirdly, adjusting the content and form of the language examination can help in evaluating students' language communication ability and practical application ability, such as adding oral and listening tests, introducing task-based assessment, adopting diversified assessment methods and so on. Students' oral English and listening comprehension ability can be evaluated through some simulated dialogue, speech and other activities; In order to evaluate students' language competency, teachers can require students to complete a teaching task which is closely related to students' real life, such as making a short English film, writing an English report, etc; Evaluation methods should be diversified as well, in addition to the traditional written test, peer assessment, self assessment can also be used to evaluate students' learning outcomes fully. Through these adjustments, the content and form of the language examination can be more close to the teaching goals of TBLT, thus the true language level of students can be accurately assessed.

(2) Teaching Practice of TBLT

Take the English textbook of eighth grade from People's Education Press as the example, the language points in U7 What's the highest mountain in the world? focus on the comparative and superlative of adjectives and adverbs, and the expression of large numbers. Teacher L from a middle school in Chengdu extended it to a real situation—Introducing the best park in Chengdu in English, and took it as a teaching task. First of all, Teacher L organized students to choose the park with the most votes as the propaganda object, and park A wan, which stimulated students' enthusiasm and interest to participate in the task. Then, Teacher L organized students to visit Park A on the spot, and look up relevant information on the Internet, which not only improved students' ability to collect and organize information, but also provided rich materials for the subsequent introduction. Then, in class, Teacher L organized students to carry out group activities with four members and students introduced Park A to their group members in role play, covering the park's area, the years of construction and other information, which effectively improved students' language competency and teamwork competency. Finally, according to the evaluation scale, the performance of each group of students was evaluated in multiple ways, including teacher evaluation, student evaluation and student self-evaluation, which was further standardized than before to ensure the comprehensiveness and objectivity of the evaluation. Based on students' introduction to Park A, an English poster of it was drawn as the final result of the task, which not only reflects students' learning effect, but also cultivates their ability to put ideas into practice.

(3) Importance of Balancing TBLT with Local Teaching Practices

In the foreign language teaching context, a number of factors need to be considered to ensure the effectiveness and adaptability of TBLT, such as the local teaching environment and students' needs, the relationship between TBLT and other teaching methods, and so on. On the one hand, TBLT is influenced by many factors such as local educational resources, teaching facilities and teacher resource. For example, in some areas, due to the limitation of teaching resources, it may not be possible to provide enough real situations or materials for TBLT, so teachers need to design tasks according to local conditions. At the same time, TBLT should be student-centered and pay attention to students' individual differences and learning styles, and teachers should

design appropriate tasks that can meet their personal interests and learning needs. On the other hand, TBLT is not isolated and can be complementary to other teaching methods such as lecturing, discussion and cooperative learning. In teaching practice, various teaching methods should be flexibly selected and comprehensively applied according to the teaching content and students themselves.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, TBLT is a both scientific and practical teaching method, in which the role of teacher transforms from knowledge imparters to task designers, and guide students to participate in real or simulated activities by designing and implementing tasks and then giving feedback to students. It is obvious that TBLT does help in cultivating students' English subject core competency. However, it also faces some challenges and limitations. With the vigorous development of intelligent technology, TBLT will tend to be intelligent as well, and its strategies and methods will be improved to meet students' learning needs and improve teaching quality better. At the same time, we should actively explore the innovation of TBLT and its integration with other teaching methods to promote the sustainable development of English education.

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