A Study on Task-Based Language Teaching Method in China from 2011 to 2020

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Abstract: Task-based language teaching method is effective in improving students' language ability, learning quality and achieving effective learning, which is widely used in China's classrooms. TBLT research in China can be divided into two stages: the stage of application and exploration of theory (2011-2014) and the stage of improvement and questioning of theory (2015-2020). Although the research on TBLT has been prosperous in recent years, some aspects are still not in-depth. In the future, scholars still need to further develop the theory and the practice of TBLT to improve its local adaptability in China.

1. Introduction

Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) is a method of teaching and learning organized by tasks. It was first formally introduced by Prabhu, a scholar serving in Bangalore, India, in 1983. It consists of three steps: pre-task, task circle, and language focus. It is one of the effective methods to reach the ultimate goal of talent development in higher education.

In this paper, the author will sort out TBLT research in the past 10 years from 2011 to 2020 in China, classifying the achieved results, identifying the existing insufficiency, reflecting on the improvement, and looking into the future. The literature of this paper is obtained from research papers published in 12 core journals or major academic journals of foreign languages in China.

2. Trends in the Number of TBLT Publications in China from 2011 to 2020

The research on TBLT in China began with its introduction and developed with its application. In 1997, Chinese scholar Zhang Yuxiang [1] first introduced the task-based syllabus and its application suggestions, which marked the formal introduction of TBLT from the theoretical aspect. In 2001, the Ministry of Education promulgated the English Curriculum Standards for Senior Secondary Schools (Experimental Draft), which actively advocated teachers apply TBLT in English classrooms. During the decade from 2011 to 2020, a total of 30 core papers were published in China.

The research can be divided into two stages.

Firstly, 2011-2014 was the application and exploration stage of the theory. Luo Zhihong [2] put forward the advantages of TBLT teaching and proposed the principles of designing tasks. Zhao

Yonghong [3] discussed several issues that should be noted in designing pre-tasks regarding the problems in teaching international Chinese oral skills. Yang Weidong and Zhao Juan [4] promoted the cross-application of TBLT in an interactive way. Huang Guojun and Xia Jimei [5] promoted the development of "task-based teamwork model". Qin Lili and Dai Weidong [6] constructed a concrete implementation model of innovative TBLT in ecological perspective.

Secondly, the years 2015-2020 are the improvement and questioning stage of the theory. He Xueqin [7] constructed a flipped task-based teaching model. Hu Xinjian and Wang Qiang [8] proposed the role of design-based research in promoting TBLT to be more in line with the Chinese context. Feng Manzhen and Zheng Xinmin [9] constructed a reflective English writing teaching process based on TBLT and conducted an experiment on its effectiveness. Bi Zheng [10] compared and analyzed the local applicability of POA and TBLT. Tang Meihua [11] proposed that POA is more in line with the teaching reality of English majors in China compared to TBLT. In this stage, scholars developed TBLT while also considering its local adaptability critically. The evaluation of the effectiveness of TBLT began to show a diversified trend.

During 2011-2020, there were 2 foreign language publishers' monographs, 449 master's theses and 2 doctoral theses concerning the study of TBLT. During the same period, there are 30 research papers about the field of TBLT in 12 core journals and other major academic journals of foreign languages in China, among which 8 papers published in 2011, 2 papers in 2012, 3 papers in 2013, 2 papers in 2014, 2 papers in 2015, 3 papers in 2016, 3 papers in 2017, 1 paper in 2018, 3 papers in 2019, and 3 papers in 2020. This shows that the development of research interest in TBLT in foreign language academia in China has been tepid.

In this paper, 30 papers on TBLT published between 2011 and 2020 will be taken as the object of analysis. The published papers will be classified into two categories: theoretical research and empirical research, followed by secondary subdivision according to the research themes, research object, and research method criteria. The comprehensive analysis results are as follows.

2.1. Research Themes

Among the 30 papers, 19 belong to theoretical research, accounting for 63% of the total; 11 belong to empirical research, accounting for 37% of the total, among which, 1 is related to CET-4 English comprehensive ability training, 3 to English speaking, 2 to English reading, 1 to English writing, 1 to Japanese reading, 1 to students' innovation ability, and 2 to teachers' development.

2.2. Research Subjects

1 study was conducted on English graduate students. 1 study was conducted on non-language graduate students. 1 study was conducted on English undergraduate students. 1 study was conducted on Japanese undergraduate students. 4 studies were conducted on non-language undergraduate students. 1 study was conducted on English senior students. 1 study was conducted on elementary school English teachers, and 1 study was conducted on college English teachers.

2.3. Research Methods

4 researches used questionnaires, 3 used experimental methods, one used observational methods, and three used mixed methods.

3. Analysis of Research Results

The literature is classified by the criteria of theoretical studies and empirical studies, and some

representative literature is listed as follows.

3.1. Theoretical Studies

3.1.1. Discussion of the Advantages of TBLT

There are five pieces of literature in this category. Luo Zhihong [2] believes that the advantages of TBLT are changing people's view of language learning and teaching, stimulating students' interest, reducing students' learning burden, and improving the effectiveness of foreign language learning. Tian Tian [12] discusses the advantages of TBLT over the PPP model, namely, clear teaching objectives, teacher-student role transformation, learning motivation conversion, diverse teaching vehicles, and complete input and output. Sui Xiaobing and Zhou Tianhao [13] concluded that task-based teaching content develops both language skills and critical thinking skills for students, which meets the requirements of foreign language talents training needed in the new era.

3.1.2. Discussion of the Development of TBLT

There are 10 pieces of literature in this category. Fang Xueqing [14] proposed a design framework for TBL activities in "CALL" classrooms, which takes the analysis of teaching subjects and the assessment of the network environment as the starting point. The framework includes two parts: task implementation and post-task. The model has the feature of emphasizing students' intrinsic motivation, teachers' evaluation and students' reflective role. Xiang Rong [15] proposed the "task-narrative teaching method", which is divided into four stages and is effective in promoting college English teaching. Qin Lili and Dai Weidong [6] constructed a specific implementation model of innovative TBLT from an ecological perspective, which contains five ecosystems and provides new ideas for the development of second language task teaching in the new era. Dong Fang [16] constructs a task-based teaching model for spoken foreign languages in college, which consists of five stages and promotes language acquisition to a greater extent. Huang Guojun and Xia Jimei [5] propose a "task-based teamwork model", the construction of which includes two processes of assimilation and conformity and provides a solution for the real class.

Zhao Yonghong [3] discusses the problems that should be paid attention to in the pre-task stage of international Chinese teaching, providing ideas for solving the difficulties in the process of learners' oral output. Yang Xueqian [17] suggests that the implementation of TBLT should be in line with the "discourse view", providing a new perspective for the analysis of language teaching guidelines. Wang Huanyu [17] puts forward specific requirements for English teachers' educational concepts and professional competence, providing directions for better application of TBLT. Hu Xinjian and Wang Qiang [8] introduced the role of "design-based research" in improving the local adaptability of TBLT, which has a wide range of application prospects.

Ma Zheng [19] reviews Mike Long's book on Second Language Acquisition and Task-based Language Teaching, holding that the classification of target tasks is still controversial and the sequencing of teaching tasks is yet to be resolved. It has provided insights for further research.

3.1.3. Questioning the Applicability of TBLT

There are four pieces of literature in this category. Wu Wen and Pan Kangming [20] argue that TBLT is constrained by traditional conceptions of language teaching in Asian contexts as well as the language teaching conditions. The problems include the contradiction between TBLT implementation and the cultural context of the examination, the detachment of TBLT from formal language teaching and the conflict with language policy, which provide a multidimensional critical reflection on the applicability of TBLT.

Deng Hailong [21] compared TBLT with POA in three aspects: teaching philosophy, assumptions and process, and held that POA is more suitable for the actual teaching of foreign languages in China's universities. Bi Zheng [22] has further discussed the differences between TBLT and POA in teaching objects, teaching objectives, teaching philosophy and teaching process, and held that teaching materials written based on POA theory are more suitable for teaching English in China's universities. Tang Meihua [11] argued that compared to TBLT, POA is better at motivating students, promoting output task completion and enhancing students' sense of acquisition. POA is more suitable for teaching English majors in China. The above literature provides a new perspective for the analysis of the applicability of TBLT.

3.2. Empirical Studies

3.2.1. Spoken English

There are three papers on the study of spoken English, of which two explore the effects of the implementation of the TBLT model and one explores the effects of the type of task structure on students' spoken English.

Xu Jun and Shi Xingsong [23] took an English course on Business Communication involving 30 postgraduate students of Business English as an example and tested the teaching effect by combining Internet technology and the TBLT teaching model, finding that the implementation of the TBLT teaching model had an improvement effect on the mean values of various indicators of students' business speaking skills and teamwork ability indicators. Wang Jie and Wang Beilei [24] experimented with 170 non-English majors who took a public speaking course at a key university in Shanghai. The results show that the TBLT-based course design can effectively improve students' confidence in English speaking and reduce "foreign language anxiety". Xu Hongliang [25] investigated the effects of preparation time conditions and task structure on students' accuracy, fluency, and complexity of spoken English. The results showed that the preparation time condition and the type of task structure had no effect on the accuracy of the participants' language output, but had an effect on fluency and an effect on language complexity.

3.2.2. English Reading

Two papers were published on the topic of English reading, both of which examined the development and effectiveness of the TBLT model in English reading classes.

Yang Weidong and Zhao Juan [4] adopted the "task-based and interactive" model combining TBLT and interactive discussion, and conducted teaching reform experiments based on reading texts. The results of the post-class questionnaire showed that almost all students found the teaching model helpful to their English learning, as they believed it could help expand their reading, improve their speaking skills, stimulate their interest in learning English and develop their teamwork skills.

He Xueqin [26] constructed a top-down flipped task-based teaching model and verified the effect in the practice of teaching English reading in college. The experiment with four non-English major undergraduate classes revealed that the vocabulary acquisition and comprehension of the text in the flipped-task teaching class were significantly better than those in the traditional class with the lecture format, and the majority of students supported the flipped-task teaching model.

3.2.3. English Writing

There is only one paper on English writing, which is a test of the development and effectiveness of the TBLT model for English writing classes.

Feng Manzhen and Zheng Xinmin [9] designed a task-based reflective English writing teaching

model and conducted an experiment with two non-English major undergraduate parallel classes (45 students in the experimental class and 45 students in the control class). The data results showed that by adopting the task-based reflective English writing teaching model, students' reflective habitual behavior, comprehension behavior, reflective behavior, deep reflective behavior and their writing performance all improved to different degrees. The questionnaire results showed that both students and teachers thought the new model could promote students' English writing skills, but students still had some difficulties in the process of reflection (in descending order of difficulty: 71.4% in the judging stage, 51.4% in the analysis stage, 40% in the planning stage, 37.1% in the summarizing stage and 22.9% in the describing stage).

3.2.4. CET-4 General Competence

There is one paper on the study of CET-4 grade, which reflect general English competence. The paper covers the comparison of the classroom effects of TBLT and PPP.

He Yingqun [27] used two classes (52 students in the experimental class and 54 students in the control class) of English majors in higher education to examine the comparative teaching effects of the TBLT model and the PPP model. The results showed that the TBLT was better than the PPP model in improving students' CET-4 scores. But surprisingly, the PPP model was better than the TBLT model in improving students' vocabulary.

3.2.5. Japanese Reading

There is one research paper on Japanese reading, which is an examination of the development and effectiveness of the TBLT model for Japanese reading classes.

Yang Yuan and Xu Bing [28] constructed a task-based Japanese reading teaching model based on schema theory. Then, a controlled experiment with two classes (25 students each) was conducted. The study showed that the teaching model was applicable to Japanese reading teaching and was helpful in helping students to improve their reading ability, linguistic and logical thinking ability, self-reflection ability and self-evaluation ability.

3.2.6. Innovative Ability

There is one paper on the topic, which involves the development and examination of the effects of the TBLT model pointing to the development of innovative ability.

Yu Cuiye [29] experimented with 182 students from 3 classes as subjects, showing that the combination of TBLT and blended teaching in foreign language teaching can help students improve their motivation to learn, change their original thinking patterns, form creative thinking habits, and thus improve their innovative thinking ability.

3.2.7. Teacher Development

There were two papers about teacher development, one of which explored beliefs about TBLT and its relationship to teaching behaviors, and one explored the relationship between teachers' understanding of the TBLT concept and its implementation in the classroom.

Zhu Yan and Shu Dingfang [30] explored the relationship between teachers' beliefs about TBLT and their teaching behaviors and conducted a comparative experiment with two primary schools English teachers (one is Chinese and another is Australian), finding that the two teachers had different misconceptions about 'tasks' and did not understand the role of tasks in the teaching of language forms. These perceptions had a direct impact on their teaching behaviors. The in-service teacher education program needs to be implemented effectively. Xie Yuanhua and Chen Qiuli [31]

found that there are differences between College English teachers' understanding and implementation of task-based teaching principles through qualitative and quantitative research on 163 college teachers. The specific manifestations are as follows: a) Teachers generally agree with TBLT's communicative principles; b) Some teachers have little knowledge of the key concepts and operation modes of TBLT; c) Teachers are generally interested in implementing TBLT; d) Teachers' understanding of teaching ideas is divorced from teaching practice.

4. Possible Improvements

There are still possible improvements in previous researches on TBLT.

(1) The research findings on foreign languages are unevenly distributed. Most of the research results on TBLT (about 93%) are about English teaching, and only a small part of the literature (about 7%) applies TBLT to the teaching of international Chinese and Japanese, which is undoubtedly a pity in the field of TBLT research.

(2) Research on the four basic skills of English is unevenly distributed and underdeveloped. The number of studies on English speaking is the highest (about 27%), and TBLT has been widely applied to reduce students' foreign language anxiety, but few scholars have developed it. The number of studies on English reading is the second-highest (about 18%), and the number of studies on writing can be described as few (about 9%). In addition, no research has been carried out on listening.

(3) Empirical studies are relatively few, accounting for only 37%. It has been twenty years since the Ministry of Education actively advocated the application of TBLT in the curriculum in 2001, more empirical studies are needed to make the research more refined and accurate.

(4) The research subjects are uneven. At a macro perspective, most of the empirical studies were conducted on students (about 82%) and a small number of studies were conducted on teachers (about 18%). Although TBLT is ultimately oriented towards students' language acquisition, as task designers, teachers' understanding of TBLT has a direct impact on their teaching behavior. Therefore, research on teachers is equally important. In terms of teachers, existing articles have only studied primary school teachers and university teachers, and there is still a lack of analysis of secondary school teachers.

(5) Research methods need to be improved. More literature, about 64%, used questionnaire or experimental methods alone, while only about 27% of the empirical studies used mixed methods. Both qualitative studies alone and quantitative studies alone are hardly able to dig deeper into the research questions. Therefore, the literature needs to be improved in terms of the scientific features of the research methods.

5. Issues to be Considered in the Future

Although the research on TBLT in China has been flourishing in recent years, there are still some aspects of the research that are not deep enough. The author's discussion of the issues worth considering in the future is as follows.

(1) How effective is the application of TBLT in other language subjects besides English? For example, how effective is the application in teaching Korean, French, and other minor languages?

(2) How effective is the application of TBLT in the teaching of English listening? In particular, how effective is the application of TBLT in listening in terms of strategy structure, language communication skills, etc.?

(3) How effective is TBLT in developing various skills (e.g. listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills) for primary and secondary students?

(4) How can the TBLT concept be reflected in the development of school-based textbooks? For

example, how can "tasks" be developed to meet the level of students in schools?

(5) What are the factors affecting the orientation of secondary school teachers towards different outcomes in the teaching process when implementing TBLT? For example, do different principles in the design of tasks in secondary schools lead to different outcomes?

(6) What should a good TBLT classroom look like based on some perspectives? Such as the "educational ecology" perspective? How should the roles of teachers and students be distributed in the classroom?

(7) How can the advantages of the POA model (e.g. helping students to change their conception of English learning, stimulating students' internal motivation, facilitating the completion of output tasks, etc.) be incorporated to enhance the local applicability of TBLT?

(8) Can elements of TBLT be combined with elements of a certain teaching model (e.g. the PBL model) to construct a new model that can help improve the quality of teaching and learning?

6. Summary

This paper has reviewed the research results of the literature on TBLT in China from 2011 to 2020, and reflected that there are still inadequacies in current research on TBLT. These include the uneven distribution of research on foreign language subjects, the uneven distribution and underdevelopment of research on the four basic skills of English, the small number of empirical studies, and the unevenness of research subjects. Besides, research methods needed to be improved. In addition, there is a brief analysis of issues worthy of consideration for the future.

Overall, although TBLT was introduced from abroad and its applicability in China's foreign language teaching classrooms has been questioned by some scholars. Its own merits are obvious, evident, and proven. To combine TBLT with the teaching reality in China and to make it better adapted to our teaching needs, there is still room for development in the teaching field in China. Generations of scholars are still needed to explore and actively contribute to the "TBLT model with more Chinese characteristics" and "Localised TBLT".

Acknowledgments

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