Studies in Second Language Acquisition: Task-based Approach in Chinese EFL Teaching

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Abstract

English as a second Language in Chinese colleges is still characterized by the adoption of the traditional teaching method, which is known as the 3Ps approach（presentation, practice, production）and in which student participation and interaction are quite limited. Although the traditional grammar teaching method helps to improve the students' mastery of the grammatical rules, the students cannot use these rules flexibly and appropriately in communication. The traditional teaching method has its disadvantages which prevent the students from developing their communicative competence. The teacher, being the "knower, undertakes the task of transmitting knowledge to the students and orchestrates what the students do in class. The students accept the English knowledge passively in the procedures set ahead of time by English teachers step by step. So the students cannot improve their communicative strategies in English learning. Task-based language teaching（TBLT）, a further development of communicative language teaching, seems to satisfy such demands by converting the communicative language teaching principles into a practical classroom teaching model. The study of Task-based Language Teaching approach throws some new light on second language teaching research theories. Centering round the Task-based Language Learning, this paper is intended to explore how to use the approach practically and effectively in Chinese colleges, where English is taught as a foreign language. Therefore, this analysis will help the further study of college English teaching; improve students' learning autonomy and communicative competence and cultivate students' innovative ability.

1. Introduction

English as a second Language in Chinese colleges is still characterized by the adoption of the traditional teaching method, which is known as the 3Ps approach（presentation, practice, production）and in which student participation and interaction are quite limited. In contrast to the traditional grammar-translation method or the audiolingual method of language teaching, TBLT, evolved within the Communicative Language Teaching framework, called for students' active participation in pair and/or group work. TBLT suggests that teachers support students with meaningful classroom tasks and help them complete those tasks through modeling, experiencing, practicing, participating, cooperating, and communicating.

1.1 Definition of TBLT

Task-based language learning (TBLL), also known as task-based language teaching (TBLT) focuses on the use of authentic language and on asking students to do meaningful tasks using the target language. Such tasks can include visiting a doctor, conducting an interview, or calling customer service for help. Assessment is primarily based on task outcome (in other words the appropriate completion of tasks) rather than on accuracy of language forms. This makes TBLT especially popular for developing target language fluency and students' confidence.

1.2 Definition of Task

The core of the approach is, as the name suggests, the task. Many experts and scholars give different definitions of the term "task", such as 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. Some observed tasks are activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome. And others state that a task is an activity which requires learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allows teachers to control and regulate that process. From above definitions we can see that a task has four main components: a purpose, a context, a process and a product.

1.3 Principles of TBLT

Task-based Language Learning (TBLT) is an educational framework for the theory and practice of teaching second or foreign languages. It is based on a constellation of ideas issuing from philosophy of education, theories of second language acquisition, empirical findings of effective instructional techniques, and the exigencies of language learning in contemporary society. Task-based teaching and learning is becoming more and more popular in China, and the aim of task is to create a real purpose for language use and provide a natural context for language study.

2. Reading Teaching of College School English

Reading plays an important role in English teaching, so in the process of reading teaching, students should put into the activities in which they can perceive, analyze, comprehend and drill what they need to learn. And they can try to develop their ability of using English.

2.1 Definition of Reading

As reading is very much a part of our daily life. Reading comprehension involves extracting the relevant information from the text as efficiently as possible, connecting the information from the written message with one's own knowledge to arrive at an understanding. Reading is a silent and individual activity since the writer's intention was for the text to be read rather than heard.

2.2 The current situation and purpose of teaching reading in college

Recently, reading test for students, the basic principles that the test designers usually focus on discourse analysis and its application as well as communication. Under the guide of those principles, the reading tests, therefore, display the following features: The difficulty level of reading comprehension has been increased, the factors expressed in detail: The test focus has shifted from form to meaning. The role of knowledge and ability occupies in test organization steadily rises reading test. At present, most teachers have realized the changing, and improve their teaching methods. However, there are some teachers still uses the traditional teaching method. For example, the teaching procedures always goes like following steps: students learn new words; teachers explain the text; students begin to read the text; students complete the reading exercises; teachers make a comment on the answers.

2.3 The Basic Models of TBLT in College English Reading

The core of the lesson is, as the name suggests, the task. All parts of the language used are deemphasized during the activity itself, in order to get students to focus on the task. Although there may be several effective frameworks for creating a task-based learning lesson, here is a rather comprehensive one suggested by Jane Willis.

1) Pre-task

In the pre-task, the teacher will present what will be expected of the students in the task phase. Additionally, the teacher may prime the students with key vocabulary or grammatical constructs, although, in "pure" task-based learning lesson, these will be presented as suggestions and the students would be encouraged to use what they are comfortable with in order to complete the task. The instructor may also present a model of the task by either doing it themselves or by presenting picture, audio, or video demonstrating the task.

2) Task

During the task phase, the students perform the task, typically in small groups, although this is dependent on the type of activity. And unless the teacher plays a particular role in the task, then the teacher's role is typically limited to one of an observer or counselor—thus the reason for it being a more student-centered methodology.

3) Planning

Having completed the task, the students prepare either a written or oral report to present to the class. The instructor takes questions and otherwise simply monitors the students.

4) Report

The students then present this information to the rest of the class. Here the teacher may provide written or oral feedback, as appropriate, and the students observing may do the same.

5) Analysis

Here the focus returns to the teacher who reviews what happened in the task, in regards to language. It may include language forms that the students had, and perhaps forms that need to be covered more or were used enough.

6) Practice

The practice stage may used to cover material mentioned by the teacher in the analysis stage. It is an opportunity for the teacher to emphasize key language.

3. The application of TBLT approach in college English reading

Reading comprehension is a complicated psycholinguistic process, so the research on the reading process has been an important project in the language teaching research. Efforts to explain the reading process, namely underlying conditions or structures that account for the ways in which words are perceived and ideas are understood through the print medium, have generated some theories.

3.1 The design of reading class

Within the application of Task-based Language Teaching approach in reading class, it not only will promote the interest and motivation of English learning, but also will let the student gain better understanding of the reading text.

3.1.1 Needs analysis

Let students first read the text they will learn soon, and exchange their understanding and ideas about this text to each other, then write down and hand in. The teacher should design tasks according to these papers to find the most appropriate tasks that fit students' needs.

3.1.2 Specific design of reading class

1) Lead-in and discussion

Let students first discuss the theme of the reading text, then exchange their ideas and gather the results so that the teacher can summarize the information about understanding of the text. Meanwhile, it will stimulate the interest of students.

2) Skimming and scanning

Ask students to skim and scan the text quickly, and find out the sentences with the key words to understand the main idea of this reading text. Through this way it will help the students improve their reading skill and let them participate in the class.

3) Close reading

Read the text in details. Students can learn the text again and analyze the structure of the text. Find out the contrast sentences, and then conclude them in a diagram with their partners, so that they can understand the organization of this text better.

4) Role-play

Divide the whole class into several groups to carry out a role-play activity. This activity aims at promote students to use their knowledge and language skill into real life. It stresses the personal experience, and gives certain circumstance for students to improve their imagination and creation. This part fulfills the core of TBLT approach—realization of language learning.

3.1.3 Evaluation of Task

By the means of evaluating the performance of students, arranging homework and students evaluate each other, this approach will accomplish the task of English reading class and help the students have a better understanding of reading text..

4. Conclusion

It is obvious that TBLT is an effective way of learning a language since it provides a purpose for the use and learning of a language other than simply learning language items for their own sake. Practically Task-based Language Teaching is student-centered, opposing the mechanical pattern drills of linguistic form and advocating the task should focus on a communication problem which is related with and close to the students' real life and learning experience so that it will interact and motivate them to participate actively and be involved in class. During the task by teachers, learners' differences can be easily found by teachers and teachers can be always getting ready to offer help to learners who need a hand at different settings. Since task-based language teaching approach is both fascinating and stimulating in terms of what, potentially, it can contribute to language teaching and learning. Since there is more and more substantial and empirical evidence that Task-based Language

Teaching (TBLT) can produce better results. It is high time that teachers changed their roles of providing learners with forms of language into ones of designing tasks that can stimulate their learners to respond just like in a real world and keep pace with the development of task-based approach in pedagogical reform in language teaching and learning.

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