Study on the "Task-Based Language Teaching Method" of College English Classes With Aid of "Rain Classroom" Tool

ZHANG Pingfan[a],*

[a]Lecturer, College of Foreign Languages, Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, Nanjing, China.
* Corresponding author.

Abstract

This study aims to improve the learning efficiency of college students of College English classes in China with the aid of "Rain Classroom" smart teaching tool. Under the guidance of "Task-Based Language Teaching" method, this study targets at the non-English major freshmen who have been enrolled into the "Colelge English Level IV" course at N University. This study carries out a semester of integrated teaching practices, and conducted a questionnaire survey and provided data analysis of survey results. The survey results show that the OPOBTP（Online Plus Offline Blending Teaching Pattern）based on the "Rain Classroom" smart teaching tool can improve students' classroom learning efficiency, cultivate personalized learning habits inside and outside the classroom, and help form a diverse and dynamic evaluation system. However, the survey results found many thorny problems that exist in students learning practices, such as browsing irrelevant pages in the process of use, which calls for solutions.

Key words: College English Learning; "Rain Classroom"; Task-based language teaching method

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduce the Problem

With the advent of the "Internet +" era, information technology continues to promote innovation and progress in the field of higher education. In the 2015 "International Education Information Conference", President Xi Jinping emphasizes that "with the advances of IT, Internet, cloud computing, big data and other modern information technology profoundly changing people's thinking, production, living, learning, and has improved the prospects for world development" (Liu, 2015, paras.4). The informatization of education should not only emphasizes on the innovation of educational technology, but could be pushed further to generate impact on learning, teaching, and organizational model, and even have a wide influence on the general behaviors of educational institutions. In 2019, "Modernization of Chinese Education 2035 Goal" was issued, focusing on the deployment of ten major tasks for education modernization, of which Article 8 emphasizes the acceleration of educational reform in the information age, and points out that "building an intelligent campus, coordinating the construction of integrated intelligent teaching and management and service platform" ("Modernization", 2019, paras.12). Under the guidance of this goal, "with the help of a new generation of information technologies such as physical networks, cloud computing, ubiquitous perception, etc.", we are persuaded to create interconnected, intelligent, perceptual, and informatized" (Zhang, 2016, p.70).

The smart campus has undoubtedly become a benchmark for creating an era of smart education. As the core of the construction of a smart campus, "student-centered, problem-centered, and activity-centered" (Wu, 2019, p.82) smart teaching model could transform teachers from the "mouthpieces" into organizers and students' partners of teaching activities. In China, College English

learning is an important part of the compulsory education of colleges and universities, and it faces with multiple challenges: the students' numbers are too big to be fit into small classes, and each class consists of students with various English language learning abilities, hence in college English classes, a lot of students show boredom at the learning materials and teaching and complain of old, rigid evaluational grading mechanism etc. Many problems need to be solved urgently.

How to promote the integration of educational information technology and college English courses, and cultivate first-class talents with global vision and international competitiveness has become the focus of the current college English teaching reform. This study aims to improve the learning efficiency of college students of College English classes in China with the aid of "Rain Classroom" smart teaching tool. Under the guidance of "Task-Based Language Teaching" method, this study targets at the non-English major freshmen who have been enrolled into the "College English Level IV" course at N University. This study carries out a semester of integrated teaching practices, and conducted a questionnaire survey and provided data analysis of survey results. The survey results show that the OPOBTP（Online Plus Offline Blending Teaching Pattern）based on the "Rain Classroom" smart teaching tool can improve students' classroom learning efficiency, cultivate personalized learning habits inside and outside the classroom, and help form a diverse and dynamic evaluation system. However, the survey results found many thorny problems that exist in students learning practices, such as browsing irrelevant pages in the process of use, which calls for solutions.

1.2 Explanation of Related Terms—Rain Classroom

"Rain classroom" is an online educational tool, developed by Tsinghua University's MOOC platform—*Xuetang X*. Aiming at providing free smart teaching tool for online higher education, it was first launched in market in April 2016. Rain Classroom is mainly divided into three parts: mobile phone WeChat terminal, computer PPT terminal and remote server. The mobile terminal and computer terminal serve the teaching link, and the remote server is used to support the operation of the system and the collection, storage and analysis of teaching big data (Wang, 2017, p.26). Without expensive hardware support, Rain Classroom can directly realize a smooth transition from ordinary multimedia classrooms to smart classrooms after downloading and installing its app, through pre-class posting of courseware, classroom teacher-student interaction, real-time answering, post-class feedback, and cloud platform data analysis, so that the classroom interaction will never go offline.

In the wave of education informatization, various educational apps based on smart phones have been spawned, but Rain Classroom is different from other mobile apps in that it relies entirely on WeChat on the mobile side, without the need to download additional apps, which greatly improves the ease of operation. According to the first quarter of 2019, Tencent company (the developer of Wechat) released the report, and states that active Wechat accounts reached 11.12 billion so that almost every Chinese college student could access to Rain Classroom through their smartphones. Combining classroom learning activities and interactive technology, the Rain Classroom echoes the prevailing global trend of "Mobile Learning", that the students and teachers use small technical equipments such as smartphones or tablets to complete daily tasks in a short period of time (Al-Emran et al., 2016, p.94). Sung et al. point out that the mobile learning method could stimulate more learning potential both inside and outside the classroom, and promote the development of communication, problem-solving skills, innovation and other skills (2016, p.252). In addition, the cloud data platform of Rain Classroom provides teachers with detailed data inside and outside the classroom, which solves the old clinched subjective teaching evaluation method in the past, and promotes the formation of a dynamic evaluation process and diversified course teaching result evaluation mechanism.

1.3 Explanation of Related Terms—Task-Based Language Teaching

"Task-based language teaching" (TBLT) is derived from the "task-based approach" (TBA) that is part of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Chen, 2008, p.11). Educator N. S. Prabhu in 1983 first put this method into his teaching practice, and defined the task as "an activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process learners from the outcome of the information given by some kind of thought processes" (1987, p. 24). Hence, according to Prabhu, the whole class activity is achieved by teacher interaction in the method of question and answers, and ends with teachers' marks. However, Prabhu did not give a detailed explanation of the before and after class learning activities. British educator Rod Ellis further explained the meaning of task in second language teaching, that a task is designed to result in language use that bear similarit to the language use in the real worlds…A task may involve productivity or acceptance, oral or written skills, and various cognitive processes (2013, p.16). That is, in the task-based language teaching model, teachers design various teaching activities around specific teaching goals and language projects, and students' complete language learning tasks through these language activities, and ultimately achieve the purpose of learning and mastering the language. Recognized as a "learner-centered promotion of autonomy" (Flavia, 2017, p.693), the development of task language originates from

open and realistic communicative tasks that constitute the teaching process and provide a specific language environment. The task-based language teaching method abandons the traditional teacher role, making teachers become task creators, scholars assisting in the learning process, collaborators, and language inputters; students correspondingly transform into task completers, active learners, activity participants, and content controller (Liao, 2018, pp.343-344).

2. TEACHING DESIGN AND PRACTICES

2.1 Teaching Design

I will give the example to further illustrate the teaching process in my classes.

The first step is to install Rain Classroom software from the official website and "upgrade" old PPT coursewares through Rain Classroom. Afer downloading and installing Rain Classroom plugin, the PPT toolbar will have a Rain Classroom column which enables teachers to use its functions through the PPT. By means of Rain Classroom computer-side plugin, teachers can flexibly make adjustments of their old PPT coursewares. The focus

of my instructional design is to blend English listening, speaking, reading and writing tasks into my classroom teaching, and I resort to Rain Classroom's "in-class tests" function to set up learning tasks. Specifically speaking, Rain Classroom question types are divided into subjective questions (short essays) and objective questions (multiple choices and fill in the blanks), and also voting questions. Teachers can post the questions in the courseware and students would receive questions on their cellphones during the classtime. Once submitted their answers on their cellphones, students can view the correct answers and explanations, and teachers from the teacher end of the phone can see the correct answering rate of students. Teachers could also see other detailed information to keep abreast of students' mastery of knowledge points in time. In addition to the screen projection function, teachers can also forward and push excellent answers to students and initiate mutual evaluation among students. After the class activity is over, the Rain Classroom will automatically upload the "Class Report Reminder," including the number of students, student data, exercise data, courseware data, random points and other detailed content. Teachers can also download more data from the Rain Classroom website account.
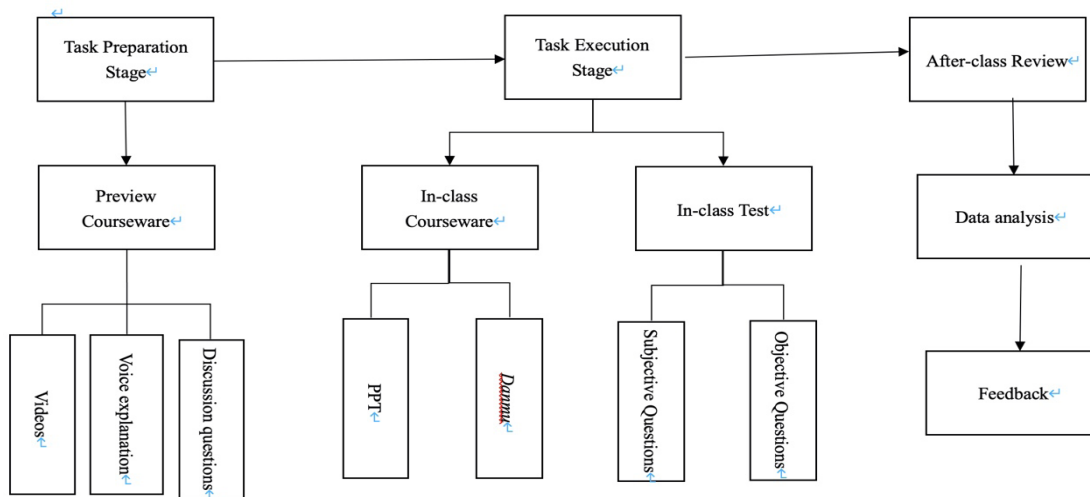

Figure 1
The teaching activity design based on the "task-based language teaching method" of college English based on Rain Classroom

Under the guidance of task-based language teaching methods, the design of Rain Classroom "in-class tests" that integrated with classroom teaching is particularly important. I drew lessons from the three-stage theory of task teaching method proposed by J. Willis, namely, the task preparation stage (Pre-task), the task execution stage (Task-Cycle Stage), and the language focus stage (1996). Based on the advantages of Rain Classroom mobile learning model and cloud platform data analysis, my current teaching design is as follows: the first stage of task preparation, mobile phone courseware is posted through Rain Classroom before class, and the content

of the courseware mainly includes video materials such as micro-lectures, MOOCs, and two to three discussion questions. When the mobile phone courseware is released, there is a one-minute voice explanation from the teacher. The teacher can see the students' preparatory courseware learning in the backstage of the Rain Classroom in real time; the second stage focuses on the classroom task execution and language strengthening. I use the Rain Classroom to teach in the classroom, and before every class student could scan the class code to enter into the Rain Classroom. Throughout the classroom-teaching, the teacher intersperses with the "in-class test" questions,

grouping function, *danmu* (bullet screen in Chinese) function, mutual evaluation function and other functions. In the meantime, students can also see the latest content of PPT in real time on the mobile phone, and can click "I don't understand" or bookmark button; the third stage is the language enhancement stage achieved through review and data analysis. On the one hand, the Rain Classroom assigns review tasks to help students strengthen their understanding and consolidation of the knowledge points they have learned. On the other hand, the teacher obtains the Rain Classroom's cloud data which have been sorted and analyzed to monitor the learning dynamics of students in real time. The specific situation is shown in Figure 1.

2.2 Teaching Practices

Take the teaching practice of "War", the first article of "New Standard College English - Comprehensive Course" Volume 2, Unit 2, as an example. First, I analyzed the content of the article and drew out the key learning points and highlight difficulties. The text is a short story. The story is set in World War I and the story begins with a station. The station is crowded with elderly and sorrowful parents whose children have been gone to war. The life and death of the frontline is unknown. Surrounding the main story, I have designed classroom content around the theme of war. First, in the preparation stage of using Rain Classroom plugin, I updated my old teaching ppt courseware mainly by asserting "in-class test" questions relating to listening, speaking, reading and writing abilites. The specific teaching process is as follows: In the task preparation stage, the Rain Classroom mobile phone preview courseware is posted three days in advance of the class time. The main body of the courseware is related film fragments of *Saving Private Ryan* directed by Spielberg, with teacher's voice explanation and two discussion questions to promote students use divergent thinking to combine movies and articles to discuss how to treat the trauma of soldiers' parents during the war. In the classroom teaching stage, use the fill-in-the-blank questions to conduct a word test to examine students' spelling skills and pre-class preview. Use the voting questions and *Danmu* functions to investigate students' views and opinions on life and death in war in real time. In addition, objective and subjective questions are used to allow students to perform translation, oral and other exercises to further consolidate the language knowledge points they have learned. For up to 100 minutes of teaching process altogether posted 10 objective questions (containing 5 fill-in-blanks questions, one voting question, 4 multiple choices), four subjective questions (containing 3 English translation questions, and 1 role-playing oral English practice). After class, the students will be assigned review tasks in the Rain Classroom as well. At the same time, the teacher downloads the detailed data of the class on the Rain Classroom

web page and incorporates them into the procedural assessment. Besides, teacher could also communicate privately with the "warning" students (students who scored lowest in the class) prompted by the Rain Classroom to understand their learning difficulties.

3. QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY AND ANALYSIS

3.1 Subjects of Investigation

All my students filled out the questionnaire online through the WeChat mini-program "questionnaire star". The students came from different colleges and different majors.

3.2 Investigation Methods and Key Points

82 questionnaires were distributed online and a total of 82 valid questionnaires were recovered. The questionnaire focuses on the learning effect of the rain classroom test session and the questions and suggestions of students using the rain classroom in the classroom.

3.3 Results of the Questionnaire

According to the survey results, a total of 82 freshman students were surveyed, of which 6.1% were students majoring in humanities and social sciences, and 93.9% were students majoring in science and engineering. The survey results are as Table 1:

Table 1
Questionnaire on students' feedback of Rain Classroom usage in the "New Standard College English - Comprehensive Course"

Questionnaire of Rain Classroom Usage	Options	Number of people (%)
What do you think of the learning effect of using Rain Classroom	Bad	1.22
	Just so-so	23.17
	Good	50
	very good	25, 61
Which part of the Rain Classroom do you think will help you the most	Preview courseware before class	1.22
	Classroom teaching	63.41
	Homework and review	35.37
In classroom teaching, which of the following functions do you find most useful in Rain Classroom?	PPT courseware	73.17
	Classroom test	17.07
	Sign in	6.1
	Danmu	3.66
	Private letters	0
What do you think is the effect of the classroom practice test in Rain Classroom?	Bad	3.66
	Just so-so	35.37
	Good	47.56
	very good	13.41
Which of the following Rain Classroom exercises do you find the most useful?	Subjective questions	17.07
	Multiple choice	53.66
	Voting questions	24.39
	Fill in the blank	4.88

Questionnaire of Rain Classroom Usage	Options	Number of people (%)
How often do you use the Rain Classroom feedback function?	Rarely	24.39
	a bit less	19.51
	Occasionally	37.8
	often	18.29
Did you browse other irrelevant pages during the usage of Rain classroom	often	15.85
	Occasionally	43.9
	Rarely	24.39
	No	15.85
Which of the following teaching modes do you prefer	Offline traditional classroom based on PPT	14.63
	Rain Classroom Online and Offline Hybrid Mode	84.15
	Online learning mode	1.22

3.4 Analysis of the Questionnaire

The above survey results show that more than 70% of the students recognized the learning effect of Rain Classroom and more than 80% of the students tend to choose the online and offline hybrid mode of Rain Classroom. Nearly half of the students think the classroom test part of Rain Classroom is effective. It is worth noting that for most students, the greatest convenience brought to their learning by Rain Classroom is still the preservation of teaching courseware and after-class review in the classroom teaching process. Few students think that the effect of the pre-class preview is satisfactory, and Almost half of the students browsed other irrelevant pages occasionally or often during the use of the Rain Classroom.

4. QUESTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

4.1 Questions

In the past two years, based on my usages of rain classroom, observation, and interviews with relevant teachers and students, I summarized problems such as under:

Student level: Excessive use of mobile phones in the classroom can easily lead to distraction of students, and even spend time browsing other irrelevant pages or playing mobile games; Rain Classroom requires a better classroom network signal, and vice versa is wasted in classrooms with poor signal. The student's answering time, and additional factors such as the size of the mobile phone screen, single-finger interaction, and battery life have seriously affected the sense of use of the Rain Classroom (Yang and Wang, 2017, p.54). When using Rain classroom to submit their answers, students answer the questions in order. Hence, if student A finishes the question first, the correct answer will be displayed. Student B who has not completed the question next to him may copy the answer after seeing it.

Teacher level: The operation of Rain Classroom is difficult to use. Some teachers waste valuable teaching time and cannot make full use of feedback and other functions because they are not proficient in actual operation. Many teachers report that the types of Rain Classroom questions are too single and difficult. It is closely connected with the exercises of the four links of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. For example, the current classroom teaching in Rain Classroom still does not allow students to upload audio and the practice question setting page does not have the option of inserting listening audio or video; some teachers report that PPT is automatic in the rain classroom teaching environment. The video playback function often freezes, so that the teacher can only play the video smoothly after exiting the rain classroom.

4.2 Solutions

Based on practical experience and feedback from students and peer college English teachers, the following suggestions are made:

Teachers can formulate strict classroom mobile phone application disciplines to guide students to use Rain Classroom Mini Programs correctly. Once abuses are found in the classroom, they will immediately warn students and urge students to supervise each other; under the guidance of task-based language teaching methods, teachers can be moderate Increase the frequency of classroom test questions and optimize the test question bank (Qin et al., 2019, p.194). In addition, teachers could set a time limit for each topic to complete, so that students spend most of their time thinking and answering questions, thereby cutting off the possibility of students browsing other irrelevant pages at the source. In response to the operational difficulties reported by some teachers, a wealth of smart teaching model training can be carried out at the college and department levels, such as rain classroom practical exercises and experience-sharing sessions, and rain classroom open classes can also be added to provide sufficient information for interested teachers. At the school level, the pace of building smart campuses can be increased, the campus network system updated and upgraded, and more smart classrooms with rich and complete functions can be added to provide adequate technical and hardware guarantees for teaching activities.

5. SUMMARY

Professor Yu Xinjie, a leading professor advocating Rain Classroom of Tsinghua University, explained his teaching philosophy of "student-centered teaching and learning" and mentioned that "the advancement of Internet technology, educational technology, and educational philosophy" has promoted the focus on students' learning effectiveness, thereby allowing students to have better learning results in the same learning time (2017, p.49). In addition, Yu Xinjie pointed out that the

information technology-oriented teaching models such as Rain Classroom and MOOC classes have realized "synchronous" and "asynchronous" dual-channel teaching, using precious classroom time for synchronous learning of students, and asynchronous learning ensures that each student's learning is individualized, allowing students to complete learning tasks in their spare time according to their own abilities and arrangements. Due to the limitations of time and technology, this research mainly focuses on the teaching practice of task-based language teaching in the synchronous teaching in the classroom, but there are not many asynchronous teaching practices and learning results outside the classroom. A more perfect connection between the learning activities inside and outside the classroom requires more teaching practice explorations. Based on the above analysis, this research believes that in college English teaching, how to reasonably allocate time and learning tasks inside and outside the classroom should arouse the attention of every teacher. With the help of smart teaching softwares such as Rain Classroom, dual-channel teaching can be initially achieved, thereby promoting student-centered college English teaching and learning model.

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