The Effects of Task-Based Teaching Approach on College Writing Classes

HAN Min[a],*

[a]School of Foreign Languages, China West Normal University, Nanchong, China.
*Corresponding author.

Abstract

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) which lays stress on the natural and gradual acquisition of language through fulfilling various tasks is a learner-centered teaching methodology. It is an instructional approach that can fit neatly into English teaching classrooms. Its basic theoretical foundation is Krashen's acquisition theory. Researchers both at home and abroad have carried out various researches in this field and proved that task-based teaching can enhance learners' communicative competence. This paper takes advantages of Willis's framework of TBLT and researches on the feasibility and effectiveness of TBLT. An empirical study for writing classes by implementing TBLT was carried out by the author for two hours every week for one semester. All the findings from this research indicate that task-based teaching approach can cultivate learners' self-study awareness as well as improve learners' writing competence and language proficiency significantly. In this study, TBLT approach is very effective for writing classes.

Key words: Communicative competence; Target language; English writing; Task-based language teaching

INTRODUCTION

Task-based language teaching (TBLT), which is a subcategory of communicative language teaching, is one of the most important methodologies in English teaching. In the past decades, TBLT has gained much attention from educators and researchers in various teaching fields. TBLT was developed in the 1980s under the influence of communicative language teaching and hence, the notion of "task" also derived from communicative approach. TBLT, also known as task-based language learning (TBLL) or task-based instruction (TBI) puts much emphasis on requiring learners to fulfill meaningful tasks and the use of authentic language by using the target language. According to Skenhan (1998), for learners in TBLT, the first priority should be given to the accomplishment of learning tasks rather than the mastery of language forms. TBLT emphasizes that the language should be acquired naturally by accomplishing various tasks.

Writing, as one of the four basic language skills, is of great importance for English learners. Wolff (2000, p.111) thinks "writing is not only a means of communicating, but also a tool of learning a language". From this interpretation, we can see a good command of writing skills is crucial to the improvement of language learning. However, in Chinese English learning context, writing is often a headache and a difficult process for many students. For many teachers, it is always a tough experience to figure out satisfactory ways for students to participate in classroom activities actively and effectively in writing classes. The employment of effective teaching approaches in college writing classes is of great importance to students' learning outcomes. This paper aims to provide a practical and helpful way to improve learners' writing abilities by utilizing Jane Willis's framework of TBLT in writing classes.

1. DEFINITIONS AND FRAMEWORK OF TBLT

1.1 Definitions of the Word "Task"

In Task-Based Teaching (TBT) classroom, the task is the core for TBLT. According to the different understandings

from the perspectives of cognition, psychology or language teaching, many researchers give different definitions to the word "task". Nunan (1989, p.10) defines it as: "A task is a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language which their attention is principally focuses on meaning rather than form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right." Skehan (1998, p.95) summarizes some features of a task: "Meaning is primary; there is a goal that needs to be worked toward; task completion has some priority." From Ellis's (2003, p.16) viewpoint, a task is:

> a work-plan that requires the learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed. To end this, it requires them to give primary attention to meaning and to make use of their own linguistic resources. A task is intended to result in language use that bears resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world.

The word task is interpreted in various ways in these definitions. In common, they all emphasize the importance of meaning rather than language forms.

1.2 The Characteristics and Principles of TBLT

According to Nunan (1991), five characteristics should be concluded in TBLT: a) It lays stress on acquiring communicative competence through learners' interactive activities. The word "task" is not only the core, but also the foundation of the classroom instruction; b) It requires introducing the real social activities into language teaching in classrooms; c) Relevant learning materials and more opportunities of the use of target language should be provided to students; d) It puts emphasis on the combination of personal learning experience with communication and views this kind of integration as an important component of the classroom learning; e) It attempts to link the classroom language learning with language used outside the classroom.

From these characteristics, a conclusion can be drawn that TBLT, on the one hand, attaches great importance to the authenticity and socialization of the classroom language, on the other hand, it pays much attention to the accomplishment of a variety of tasks which are related to the real social life by using the target language.

Several basic principles are to be followed in terms of designing tasks: a) Principle of authenticity. This means that tasks should have practical meanings, that is to say, the language learners use in class can be applied to their real-life communications. Also, the authenticity of teaching materials is equally important since it can provide students more opportunities to interact with each other by using the real-life language. b) Principle of moderate difficulty. Learners will easily lose interest in activities if the tasks are too simple or too difficult.

c) Principle of coherence and integrity. TBLT does not mean just to design several scattered activities without any relationship with each other. On the contrary, specific tasks for each learning stage should be clearly known by teachers and students. d) Principle of diversity. Diverse tasks enable learners to use the target language in different situations.

1.3 Three-Phase for TBLT

According to Willis (Willis et al., 1996), there are three stages for TBLT as shown in Table 1.

Table1
Jane Willis's Three-Phase Framework of TBLT (Adapted From Willis 1996, p. 53)

Pre-task	Introduction and language input
While-task	Planning, fulfilling and reporting
Post-task	Analysis and practice

For pre-task, the teacher introduces the tasks and provides comprehensible language input to students. For while-task, students try to plan and fulfill the tasks as well as report or display their learning outcomes. For post-task, teachers need to guide students to compare and analyze all the materials and do some practice to consolidate what they have learned.

1.4 Task Types

Tasks can be categorized into various types. In 1980s, Willis started to carry out experiments on TBLT and wrote the book "*A Framework for Task-Based Learning*" based on her research in 1996. According to her book, there are six components contained in a task: goals and objectives; input; activities; the teacher's role; the learner's role and settings. Also, Willis (1996, p.26) classifies tasks into six types in this book. a) Listing: learners are asked to list the things or facts related to the titles; b) Ordering, sorting and classifying: learners need to sort and classify the input materials in order; c) Comparing and matching: learners should try to find out the similarities and differences of the input materials; d) Problem solving: this kind of tasks require students to solve some real-life problems by cooperating and communicating with each other. For example, the topic for a writing task can be "A notice for the welcome party for the freshmen"; e) Sharing personal experience: it encourages students to share their personal information or experience with each other; f) Project work and creative tasks: learners need to obtain information on a certain topic by consulting reference books or going to the internet.

2. TBLT IN ENGLISH WRITING CLASSES

2.1 Participates

The author carried out this experiment in two classes, whose students were non-English majors and had nearly

the same academic achievements in the final English examinations in their first year college study. One was the experimental class with 46 sophomores while the other was the control class with 48 sophomores. TBLT was carried out in the experimental class for two hours each week for one semester whereas the traditional teaching for writing was still adopted in the control class. The aim of conducting such an experiment was to see if the application of TBLT to writing classes could bring positive effects on learners' writing abilities and language competence. At the end of this research, students in the experimental class filled out a questionnaire with 3 open-ended questions related to TBLT.

2.2 Teaching Procedure

In both classes, writing tasks related to daily life were assigned to students in and out of class, such as translation, writing various letters (invitation, congratulation, memorial speech and letters of thanks), e-mails, notice, plans for the meetings, applications for jobs and compositions on various topics. Nevertheless, teaching approaches varied from the experimental and the control class. To be more specific, in the experimental class, what was different from the control class was that autonomous and interactive learning strategies were taught to students and always practiced by them. The teacher constantly reminded and supervised students to use these strategies to solve problems. In the control class, students just fulfilled diverse tasks as the teacher required without being taught about the concepts of autonomous and interactive learning strategies.

In the experimental class, for each writing class, the teacher would first put forward some questions related to the subject. Take the subject titled with "An application letter for a promising job" for instance. Questions could be: What qualities are crucial for an applicant to have a better chance to get the promising job? What kind of desirable jobs do you want to get after graduation and how do you intent to make adequate preparations for that now? Students were encouraged to discuss these questions with their group members divided before this experiment and when necessary, the teacher could provide timely assistance. After that, some students were asked to do the oral report about their discussion. Next, the teacher displayed some excellent demos for that topic in the form of PPT. During this stage, the teacher would remind students to pay special attention to the sentence structure, contents, coherence as well as the writing style of the composition. For students, what were worth noting in this phase was that they should form a good habit of viewing the demos from a global perspective rather than the specific language forms of each word or sentence. Then, students discussed about what they had learned from the demos and several students were randomly asked to report to the whole class about their discussions, for example, which aspect needs to be paid special attention to compose

a good composition and how to write a proper one like the demos. After discussion, students needed to write a composition related to that subject. Group members first graded the composition for each other owing to the sentence structure, grammar and language accuracy. Then they handed another revised paper to the teacher, who graded all the compositions and gave timely feedback to them. Some good sentences or common mistakes chosen from their compositions would be displayed next class. Besides, the teacher would upload all the demos to QQ for all the 94 students to share and study.

3. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

3.1 Data Collection

Qualitative data were obtained from the questionnaires distributed to students in the experimental class at the end of this research. The aim to design this questionnaire was to see if TBLT had stimulated students' learning motivation and brought the desired learning effects to students in the experimental class.

3.2 Data Analysis

At the end of this experiment, an anonymous questionnaire with 3 open-ended questions was handed out to students in the experimental class. The questions are as follows: a) Does TBLT bring meaningful effects to your study? Support your answer with one or more detailed examples. (Yes, No or Unsure are all acceptable.) b) Does TBLT create a new or interesting learning atmosphere for writing classes? Please state your reasons too. (Also, Yes, No or Unsure are all acceptable.) c)According to your understanding about TBLT and its influences on you, please sort out its strengths and weaknesses, or the aspects that need to be improved. All the answers for these questions were collected and analyzed by the author. Students' viewpoints about TBLT could be seen from the following figures and table.
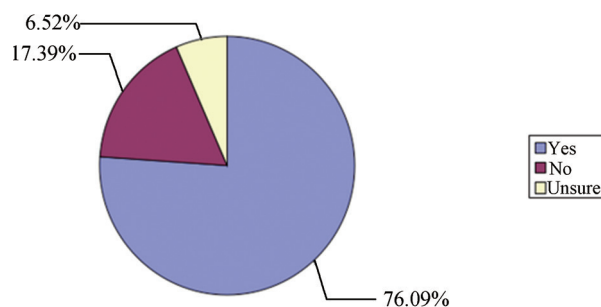

Figure 1
Percentage of Students' Answers to the First Question

Figure 1 clearly demonstrates the percentage of students' attitudes towards TBLT. More than three fourths (76.09%) of the students thought TBLT had brought meaningful effects and improvement to their study, especially to their writing competence. In TBLT, they

were the center in class, therefore they were willing to accomplish various tasks that appealed to them. In their further explanations, some students stated that they read more books mainly thanks to the pressure of frequent spoken and written tasks both in and out of class, so gradually, they could read articles more smoothly than ever before. A few claimed that they came to realize the importance and necessity of adequate language input in English learning and thought that "The more input one gets, the more output can one produce". Many who used to consider writing as a tedious and torturing process and often failed to put what they were really thinking into compositions now had taken to writing classes. Nevertheless, there were 8 students (17.39%) who did not think TBLT enhanced their writing and some said the tasks were too difficult for them to fulfill chiefly owing to their poor language performance and eventually, they lost interest in any task. Some were unwilling to participate in the activities or interact with others on account of their learning habits. Besides, 3 students (6.52%) expressed that they made no progress in writing and were not sure about the effects of TBLT on them. They neither liked nor disgusted TBLT.
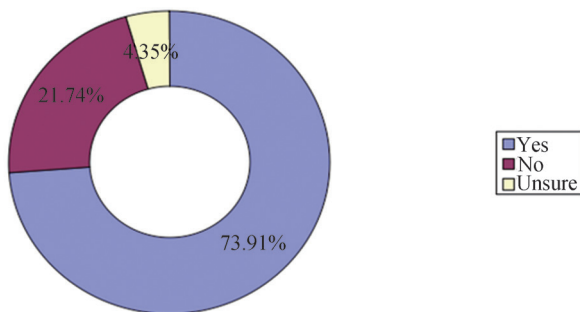

Figure 2
Percentage of Students' Answers to the Second Question

Figure 2 displays that 34 students (73.91%) thought TBLT brought them a more interesting learning environment. They liked to communicate with their group members and which in turns enhanced their oral competence. The relaxed atmosphere that TBLT brought about made them have a strong desire to perform better in front of their classmates. Ten students (21.74%) held the opposite opinions, and among them, 4 students declared that they had fallen into the habit of being a passive receiver for everything from the teacher instead of actively taking part in the tasks and activities. These students felt it was safer for them to just sit quietly in the classroom with their habitual learning styles. They preferred to the traditional teaching where the primary responsibility for a teacher was always to be a knowledge-provider. Therefore, it was difficult for them to adjust to the student-oriented classroom in TBLT. Two students (4.35%) reported that they could not tell which approach was more interesting, the traditional one or TBLT. They

did not care which method would be adopted in the class, however, they said they would study hard and follow the teacher's instructions whichever teaching method would be used in the class.

As to the third question, most students spoke their minds freely mainly due to the questionnaire was anonymous. Some of the standpoints from students are summarized in the following table:

Table 2
Students' Viewpoints on TBLT

Strengths
It teaches us many interactive and communicative strategies.
It brings about a marked improvement to our writing competence.
It creates more opportunities for us to practice our oral English in class.
It teaches us to view the articles from a global perspective instead of focusing on the meaning of each word or sentence.

Weaknesses
Some tasks are dull and tedious to us.
Within the group, it is awkard to have the compositions written in poor English corrected.
It is inconvenient for the student who has no personal computer to study the materials via QQ after class.
Under the pressure from peers and task itself, sometimes, personal opinions or even experiences have to be shared with the group members unwillingly.

Students gave many positive viewpoints on TBLT, whereas the weaknesses of TBLT that students mentioned should also be updated in the future teaching practice.

Besides, some suggestions are made:a) Some learning materials for activities should be chosen by students but the right to decide which kind of materials will finally be used goes to the teacher. Because they think that sometimes the teacher may not know very well about their interests or learning needs. If they can select some interesting subjects or topics related to their daily life, maybe more students will take part in the classroom activities enthusiastically. b) Many students hope that TBLT can be adopted to more English classes such as listening, speaking and reading. They expect to make more progress in their English study.

From all these perspectives and suggestions, it is plain to see though a few students are not in favor of TBLT, most students give positive affirmations and admit that TBLT indeed enhances their learning motivation and helps them a lot in their study, not only in writing, but also many other aspects such as reading and speaking.

3.3 Implications for English Teaching

TBLT is a learner-centered instructional teaching approach that can fit neatly into English teaching classrooms. In TBLT, the teacher acts as different roles from the organizer, instructor, mediator, monitor, controller to the facilitator, whose fully understanding about TBLT are crucial to the success of the application of task-based activities. Brown (2000, p. 160) states that: "It is easy to

assume that success in any task is due simply to the fact that someone is motivated." Indeed, as for students, they seldom behave and participate in the teaching process actively in the traditional classrooms. However, in TBLT, the shift from the teacher-centered classroom to the learner-centered one really helps a learner gradually become an active participator, helper and presenter.

In TBLT, students have harmonious relationships with their group members and often do their utmost to finish and present their tasks to the whole class as well as provide prompt help to others. This kind of communication enhances their overall abilities. According to Vygotsky (1978), social interaction plays a crucial role in the development of one's cognition. TBLT not only develops learners' linguistic skills but also non-linguistic qualities through constant interactions and communications with each other.

CONCLUSION

The primary purpose of conducting this study is to see the effectiveness and feasibility of TBLT in college English writing classes. All the findings from this study prove that the application of Willis's framework of TBLT is effective and feasible in writing classes. Students conducted with TBLT in the experimental class were more active than the students exposed to the traditional teaching in the control class. It provides an interesting learning atmosphere for the use of target language and activates learners' motivation to the utmost. TBLT can improve learners' integrated skills through interactive activities since all linguistic skills are interrelated. It improves learners' writing and communicative competence along with their academic performance. As the saying goes: "Three helping one another bear the burden of six." It shows the important function of interaction and cooperation, which are best embodied in TBLT. It's promising to employ TBLT to more English teaching fields in Chinese learning context.

REFERENCES

Brown, H. D. (2000). *Principle of language learning and teaching*. New York, NY: Pearson Education.

Brown, R. (1991). Group work, task difference, and second language acquisition. *Applied Linguistics, 12*(1), 1-12. Retrieved from http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/applin/

Ellis, R. (2000). Task-based research and language pedagogy. *Language Teaching Research, 4*(3), 193-220.

Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Horowitz, D. (1986). What professors actually required: Academic tasks for the EFL classrooms. *TESOL Quarterly, 20*(3), 445-462. Retrieved from http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3586294

Littlewood, W. (2004). The task-based approach: some questions and suggestions. *ELT Journal, 58*(4), 319-326. Retrieved from http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/elt/58.4.319

Long, M., & Crookes, G. (1991). Three approaches to task-based syllabus design. *TESOL Quarterly, 26*(1), 27-56. Retrieved from http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3587368

Nunan, D. (1989). *Designing tasks for a communicative classroom* (p.10). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nunan, D. (2004). *Task-based language teaching* (pp.100-150). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Retrieved from Http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511667336

Skehan, P. A. (1996). A framework for the implementation of task-based instruction. *Applied Linguistics, 17*(1), 38-62. Retrieved from http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/applin/17.1.38

Skehan, P. A. (1998). C*ognitive approach to language learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Willis, J. (1996). A framework for task-based learning. *ELT Journal, 60,* 1-4.

Willis, J., & Willis, D. (1996). *Challenge and change in language teaching*. London: MacMillan and Heinemann ELT.

Willis, J. (2002). *A flexible framework for task-based learning: Challenge and change in language teaching*. Shanghai, China: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

Wolff, D. (2000). Second language writing: A few remarks on psycholinguistic and instructional issues. *Learning and Instruction, 10*(1), 107-112. Retrieved from http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0959-4752(99)00021-3

Zhang, Y. (2009). The application of task-based teaching methods and self-regulated learning strategies on the writing course in English. *Shandong Foreign Language Teaching,* (2).