Application of Task-based Learning in Chinese Context[*]

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Abstract—**Task-based language learning (TBL) and teaching plays significant role in developing Chinese English learners' linguistic competence. In Chinese English-teaching context, the discussion concerning how to change learners' role from passively receiving to autonomously participate through the long-term TBL application lingered on and on. This paper attempts to discuss TBL in foreign language teaching, and the problematic issues related to TBL implementation, furthermore, it takes whether TBL is superior to the traditional teaching approach, and conductive to involve learners into the communicative classroom actively into serious consideration.**

Index Terms—**task-based learning (TBL), linguistic competence, foreign language teaching**

I. INTRODUCTION

There is a widespread view that the objective of foreign language teaching is to develop learners' linguistic competence as well as communicative competence. It indicates that language learners can be taught how to use a second or foreign language more effectively in the foreign language learning experience. Most importantly, language learners should be made aware of how foreign language is used as a communication tool in their learning experience. Over the last few decades, there has been an increasing interest in the research of task-based language learning and teaching since the 1980s (e.g. Prabhu, 1987; Skehan, 1998; Willis, 1996; Bygate, 2001; Nunan, 1989 & 2004; Ellis, 2003).

Dated back to the 1970s, task-based approach is indirectly initiated and gradually developed by scholars, emphasizing on the communicative approach and learner-centered rather than teacher-centered approach to foreign language teaching (e.g. Brumfit, & Johnson, 1979). Additionally, TBL is regarded as an effective approach to foreign language teaching based on the theory and research (e.g. Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 1989 & 2004). It is widely acknowledged that task-based approach is superior to the traditional approach to foreign language teaching, (e.g. grammar translation, PPP approach, audio-lingual approach).

This paper attempts to firstly review the literature of task-based learning (TBL), concerning the definition of *'task' and TBL,* the contributions of TBL to SLA and foreign language teaching, and the problematic issues related to TBL implementation. Under the ground of the framework of TBL initiated by Willis (1996), lastly, I will propose a specific task designed for Chinese senior high school students in terms of developing EFL learners' linguistic skills and communicative skills.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. The Definition of Task

Nunan (2004) stated that most of language educators and teachers were not familiar with what the actual task was. Thus, understanding the exact definition of task would be beneficial for helping teachers achieve language pedagogy as to develop learners' 'interlanguage system'. However, many linguists hold different views on the identification of task in the language pedagogy. Long (1985 cited in Ellis, 2003, p. 4) states that the 'task' is related to hundreds of things people would do in the daily life (e.g. "painting the fence, dressing a child, buying a pair of shoes, making airline reservation", etc. cited in Ellis, 2003, p. 4). While, Ellis (2003) argued that non-linguistic outcome has been emphasized based on Long's definition. It implies that language learners' attention would be more on the communication and interaction rather than on the language forms. Thus, it can be argued that Long's view of task may neglect emphasizing the importance of linguistic features in the communicative language learning. In some sense, the foreign language outcome might not be achieved.

Contrasted to Long's perception, Breen (1989) argued the distinguished definition of task at the pedagogical perspective and states that 'task' is a 'work-plan' aiming to draw learners' attention on the meaning in the language use. Breen (1989) also pointed out language learners could be engaged in the real communicative environment through classroom activities settings, such as the 'group problem-solving, simulations and decision-making'. He elaborated the broad scope of task as the 'pedagogical task', which is similar to the notion of 'pedagogical task' defined by Richards et

al (1985). It is apparent that the classroom outcome would be achieved by the accurate exchange of language meaning rather than rough communication. This hypothesis is also be supported by other researchers. Skehan (1996) argued that task is a kind of meaning-based activities concerned with the 'real world'. Thus, a focus on meaning is the substantial characteristic of task. Most importantly, the 'goal' and classroom outcomes should also be concerned as the component of the task, which are suggested by Willis (1996): 'tasks are the activities where target language is used by the learner for a communicative goal in order to achieve an outcome' (p. 23).

Additionally, Ellis (2003) also defined 'task' as a 'work-plan', but he focuses on the acknowledgement of language production by saying "…A task is intended to result in language use that bears a resemblance, direct, to the way language is used in the real world…" (p. 16). This definition focuses on the pedagogical outcome, i.e. how language is used spontaneously in the target language environment. Moreover, Ellis (2003) put forward the communicative task, which "requires students to pay attention to meaning and to make use of their own linguistic resources" (p. 16). It seems that learners might generate the language with the knowledge they have know. Language input and language output are probably processed based on their knowledge articulation. Ellis (2003) also discussed the differences between task and exercise. He pointed out 'task' is 'meaning-focused', while 'exercise' is 'form-focused' in the language use (p. 3). According to Nunan (2004), task is defined from the pedagogical perspective. He stated that:

"Task is a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form." (p. 4).

Clearly, it emphasizes language learners' attention will be drawn to focus on language meaning rather than merely on language form in the communicative tasks. Nunan (2004) shows that the natural process of learner's performance in the task might be sequenced through analysing the language features by language input, consolidating the knowledge by conducting the tasks, and then generating the accurate language by what they have learned. Pedagogically, it illustrates that language learners will be engaged in the communicative activities to learn how language is used in their target language and then express the grammatical meaning they have examined.

B.   The Definition of TBL

Having discussed the definition of *task* above, it is apparent that *task* has different dimensions. It can be described that the communicative task should be related to 'real-world' situation. The goals and perspectives for educators to design tasks should be concrete. Significantly, learners' attention would be focused on the meaning rather than merely on grammatical form when they are involved in the communicative task. Thus, applying task for language teaching is not only to help learners to use language effectively, but also focus on the accurate use of language (e.g. Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004).

According to the Willis's (1996) notion of task, TBL can be defined as one of the communicative approach to foreign language teaching, in which learners' 'communicative purpose' for target language learning will be eventually achieved by tasks with a variety of activities. TBL is a sort of learner-centered language teaching approach which concerns on language learners' actual performance in the communicative tasks. Additionally, TBL attempts to engage learners in the interactive context to fulfill the task, where learners' language system will be developed through the process of performing the task (Skehan, 1998). Thus, the perspective of applying TBL in the foreign language classroom is to make aware of language learners' conscious identification of foreign language learning and effective communication. Therefore, the discussion on the value of TBL related to the pedagogical outcome of TBL will be presented in the next section.

C.   The Contributions of TBL

Ellis (2003) mentioned that *'task'* would be of great value in providing the opportunities for language learners to experience the 'real-time communication', in which language learners would develop the competence in communicating fluently and effectively. In other words, learners will be engaged in using target language in an actual context when tasks are implemented in a language class. The similar perspective is ascertained by Nunan (2004) who highlighted that language learner will be given the chance to experience the communicative language use through 'task-focused' approach. Learners will be developed to acquire skills and strategies in using language for effective communication (Nunan, 2004). Furthermore, learners will become the active participants in the communicative classroom in the interactive activities settings (ibid).

Moreover, Task-based language teaching (TBLT), which focuses on the 'meaning-based learning' and 'students-centered' teaching approach, would make learners have a sense of accomplishment when they perform task successfully (Prabhu, 1987). Inspired by Kolb (1984) and Kohonen's (1992) model of experiential learning, Nunan (2004) claims that it provides the theoretical evidence of TBLT in achieving the second language teaching outcome. Thus, Nunan (2004) concluded TBLT is beneficial in developing language learners' foreign language ability as their existed knowledge has been put into the real language use. In addition, TBLT focuses on learners' performance in the manipulation of language knowledge as well as autonomous learning.

TBL, aiming at developing language learners' language accuracy and fluency, provides the ground of facilitating L2 acquisition (e.g. Nunan, 1989; Willis, 1996; Ellis, 2003). One of the attractive feature of TBLT defined by Ellis (2003) who points out that task-based approach emphasizes on the 'syllabus', 'methodology' and 'what can be taught and how

to teach' (p. 30). It indicates that the *task* is of great value for the communicative language curriculum design and appropriate use of teaching method. Another supportive view is made by Willis (1996) who claims that TBL integrates the "best insights from communicative language teaching with an organized focus on language form" (p. 1). Thus, TBL approach perhaps will deal with the constraints of merely form-focused or communication-focused approaches since fluency and accuracy are highly emphasized.

All these noticeable features of the foreign language teaching mentioned above are attributed to the value of TBL. Nunan (2004) claims that TBLT that is a 'flexible and contextual sensitive approach' would facilitate foreign language learners' learning and teachers' teaching within different language background. TBLT becomes an innovative foreign language teaching around the world (Nunan, 2004). According to Nunan' findings and empirical studies in 2004, TBLT has been drawn by many educational institutes and ministries of educations in some Asia countries, such as Japan, China, Singapore, Korea, and Malaysia. It would be summarized that TBL not only focuses on the development of learners' communicative competence, but also facilitates their L2 learning process.

D.   The Critical Views of Problematic Issues Related to the Application of TBL

According to the contributions of TBL discussed above, it is conceivable that TBL is an attractive approach to language researchers and practitioners. Apart from the benefits of TBL, there are some variable factors would affect the successful possibility of TBL application, such as the teaching method, flexible time, language materials, the decisions concerning on the content of syllabus design, learners' language level and individual differences (e.g. Prabhu, 1987, Willis & Willis, 2001; Nunan, 1989 & 2003; Swan, 2005).

Swan's (2005) assertion can be one the instances more associated to my teaching context-based in a secondary school. He points out the factors affecting the TBL implementation are mainly from the large classroom size in the secondary school classroom and the existed 'unmotivated' young learners. In such circumstances, TBL might not provide much opportunities and time for adolescents to experience language drills and practices, i.e. "memorize word list, learn grammatical rules by heart or translate sentences" (Swan, 2005, p.383). Swan (2005) also cited Skehan's (1994) argument and then investigated TBL might fail to develop learners' ability to produce accurate language with grammatical features.

Thus, it is clear that TBL would have problems in affecting learners' grammar acquisition. It can also be argued that the application of TBL lies in helping learners achieve fluent and accurate performance in the mastery of language process. Swan (2005) indicated that language learners would face the problem in achieving 'fluency and accurate language production' in a simultaneous and spontaneous way (p. 387). Then, the process of 'negotiation of meaning' in TBLT is also argued when learners are at the noticing stage and interaction stage (Swan, 2005). He argues that teachers often feel frustrated about the learners' involvement in the communicative language environment, i.e. accurate interaction in the task, interference of their counterparts' errors, ignorance of teachers' control, L1 use for the effective communication (ibid). Hence, classroom management seems to be challenging for teacher to concern the appropriate use of TBL to engage learners to perform tasks effectively in the 'mixed-level classes'.

Moreover, Ellis (2003, p.31) cited Kumaravadivelu's (1993) statement by saying "methodology becomes the central tenet of task-based pedagogy, in that no attempt is made to specify what the learners will learn, only how they will learn" (p. 31). It indicates that linguistic outcome might not be achieved, such as grammar acquisition. While, it implies that TBLT only highlights the focus on the students' action in the foreign language learning process rather than the linguistic point and language content. In addition, Ellis (2003) states that "the rationale for task-based syllabuses is largely theoretical in nature, there being little empirical evidence to demonstrate that they are superior to linguistic syllabuses" (p. 210). Under the ground of these assumptions, it may not be convinced that TBL is the most effective approach in the second language teaching. It is doubted that TBL would be done successfully in the practice of teaching foreign language. In light of these problematic issues of TBL, it seems that many researchers suspect the value of TBL (e.g. Ellis, 2003; Swan, 2005).

It is worth mentioning that those problematic issues discussed above might be supported with the empirical studies in the Asian countries context. Some Linguists found that teacher may not perform very well in the sequencing stage while implementing TBL. Classroom management is one of the substantial factors in affecting the successful of TBL application in the L2 classroom, which is supported by Carless's (2002) empirical study in the Hong Kong primary schools. 'Large classroom size', 'teachers' low language proficiency' and insufficient knowledge of task-based approach, 'traditional examination-based syllabi' and the frequency of L1 (Cantonese) use are the situational factors occurred in the process of TBL (Carless, 2002). It shows that the teachers have difficulties in controlling the learners' performance in performing tasks because of the classroom 'noise and disciplines' when learners are involved with the task (ibid).

Similarly, by citing Li's (2003) study based in Mainland China, Littlewood (2006) found that many teachers were often frustrated in applying communicative activities and tasks because of the inadequate time and learners' reluctant attitude. The frequency of L1 use in TBL is attributed to learners' low foreign language level (ibid). By illustrating most researchers' observation in many Asian countries (e.g. Hong Kong, Mainland China, South Korea and Japan), Littlewood (2006) reveals that English teachers are often lack of confidence and concrete objectives on the application of TBLT, which was resulted from their own language development and experience, classroom management, plus language learners' levels as well as individual differences. These empirical evidences are relevant to the literature

argument of TBL done by Ellis (2003) and Swan (2005).

As for the problems concerned for the application of TBL, many researchers suggest different ways to deal with these problems existed in the implementation of TBL. The 'quality' of task design with simple or complex form should depend on specific pedagogical perspective (Skehan, 1998). Also, appropriate sequencing process in a task-based language class should also be considered based on the learners' target language needs (ibid). Willis and Willis (2007) points out the classroom time should be used properly based on the curriculum design. Additionally, well-designed of tasks with appropriate materials for the specific instruction might promote language learners' ability in the fluency of meaning expressing and accuracy of linguistic features use (e.g. Skehan, 1998; Willis, 1996; Ellis, 2003; Swan, 2005).

Overall, TBL attempts to develop language learners' 'receptive skills and productive skills' as well as promoting their 'academic language proficiency' (Duran & Ramaut, 2006). Then, Richards and Rodgers (2001) stated that the input material for TBLT could be books, newspaper, video, TV and so on. While, the in-put materials should be neither too difficult nor too easy so that learners will have enthusiasm and confidence to perform the task (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). Additionally, Willis (1996) says that the TBL framework would help teachers approach in-class task with challenge but without too much risk. Thus, TBL framework seems likely to help teachers to deal with time management, to conduct L2 input materials, to change the traditional classroom condition, to change teacher and learners' roles in the TBL classroom. In light of these suggestive standpoints, the next section of this essay will discuss the TBL would be probably implemented based on the specific teaching context in the Chinese secondary school.

III. THE APPLICATION OF TASK-BASED APPROACH IN THE CHINESE CONTEXT

A. Brief Description of My Teaching Context

As some circumstantial factors mentioned by many linguists (e.g. Swan, 2005; Littlewood, 2006) are relevant to my teaching context in China. It reflects that some variable factors, possibilities and challenges might be of considerations for implementing the TBL in my specific context. It needs to point out the classroom size of senior high school is often ranged in 40-50 students in the secondary school (e.g. junior high school and senior high school). The students' language level is varied from high, intermediate to low. Most importantly, the time set for English class is arranged in 45minutes for only one lesson each day, approximately 3 hours a week, around 40 weeks a year. In that situation, communicative approaches to foreign language teaching involved with so much communicative activities and specific tasks are often ignored.

Therefore, the approach to foreign language teaching in the secondary school is more teacher-centered rather than learner-centered. PPP (presentation, practice, production) and grammar translation are widely used as the main teaching methodology in the secondary English teaching in China. All these intentions mainly depend on the much emphasis of the school entrance examination launched by the Chinese Ministry of Education. Thus, teachers' teaching perspectives focus much on the development of learners' linguistic competence but less on their communicative competence. It is resulted that teachers have occupied a large amount of talking time for the explicit grammar instruction at the beginning of class. To some extent, with the misunderstanding of CLT, teachers often neglect students' achievement for accuracy so that students can not express their meaning that is grammatically acceptable. TBL is also misunderstood by many teachers in the secondary school because they regard *task* as the exercise and grammar drills. They do not know how to design and sequence the appropriate communicative tasks which not only focus on the language point acquisition, but also the pragmatic language use.

From learners' perspective, my target students who are within low intermediate level aged from 16-18 in the senior high school play passive roles in the language learning. Most importantly, most of my students with low proficiency of oral performance can not express themselves clearly though they spend plenty of time on studying grammar rules. Also, they are reluctant to speak out in front of the class when they are involved in the interactive tasks in the paper-based and blackboard-based classroom. Their objective of learning is not clearly stated, what is more, concrete instruction for tasks and activities are also approached with fewer targets by teachers. Therefore, most learners found that English class is boring, as a result, their motivation, confidence and enthusiasm for English learning is low. Thus, currently senior high school English teachers have to concern on how to make English teaching more communicatively and creatively. Furthermore, they need to consider how to make learners feel more confident and enjoyable in the L2 learning experience.

B. Application

1. The aim of the task design

Based on the brief description of my specific teaching context in one of the senior high schools in China, applying tasks in its foreign language teaching process seems very urgent. It is because of the value of TBLT in developing language learners' linguistic competence, but also their communicative competence (e.g. Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 1989 & 2004). In light of showing the application of tasks in senior high school English teaching grounded in Chinese context, I would like to design a specific task based on the course book of senior high school curriculum. The major purpose of presenting the task is making students aware of what task is, as well as providing a rough introduction to process task design for teachers. Most importantly, my attempt is to make senior high school students have conscious sense of the accurate grammatical structure as well as actual foreign language use. Overall, the task would be designed in

accordance with my target learners' language ability. Inspired by many linguists' concerns on TBL (e.g. Willis, 1996; Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Willis and Willis, 2007), the focus of the task is going to be involving learners in the creative and communicative environment where they can get access to the 'real language use'.

2. The rational for the task design

Having discussed the definition of task above, it is apparent that meaning is one of the significant characteristics of *task* when 'meaning-focus' is highlighted by many linguists (e.g. Skehan, 1998; Nunan, 2004). Other importance dimensions of task are pedagogical outcome and goal, which are mainly discussed by Skehan (1998) and Willis (1996). Thus, it is not surprising that the task design should take these dimensions into serious consideration. In addition, Skehan (1998) suggests that the 'task-like' activity should be related to the real world. Moreover, Willis and Willis (2007) suggest task should be based on learners' interest. Learners should be engaged in the classroom tasks to produce their own meaning and complete the task so as to achieve language learning outcome (Skehan, 1998). Thus, in terms of the real language use, learners' language needs, interests and learning outcomes, these general discussions provide an explicit guideline for task design,

In light of these rational and criteria for the design of 'task-like activity', learners' engagement in the real language use and meaning-focused performance seem to be an essential consideration for designing a task with fun and excitement. With the serious consideration of the task design and my specific context, I would like to propose a task for the senior high school students to engage in the 'real language use' with less difficulties and more confidence. The topic is the "good manner" in unit 6 associated with the course book set for senior high students who are in grade one, aiming at showing students how to behave acceptably and politely if they were involved in some specific situation. This topic is more related to learners' actual performance in their daily life so that they might discuss it with high motivation based on their personal experience. Most importantly, this task attempts to help students learn some new words and useful expressions, socialized etiquette. In a word, learners will be involved in the 'real-time communicative environment' with this motivating topic and rich opportunities to interact with each other in the communicative classroom.

3. The sequence of the TBL lesson

As the issues concerned in TBLT, it is important for teachers to consider what will happen when learners are given the opportunities to experience communicative L2 learning? Regardless of a task as a 'workplan', to what extension of consideration the task designer should concern? And how TBL might promote L2 learners' learning? By taking into account of these considerations in TBLT, the understanding of TBL can be explored deeply by looking at the TBL framework proposed by Willis (1996). It might be of a help for teachers to reflect how TBLT can be achieved with the parallel tasks and phases. Three phases which are 'pre-task', 'task-cycle' and 'language focuses' provide teachers with explicit procedures to conduct the TBL lesson with specific task in the classes. Thus, the specific sequence for this TBL lesson has been followed gradually concerning on the basis of TBL framework.

4. The evaluation and proposed suggestions

With the consideration of my target students' learning ability, this TBL lessons including simply tasks intends to engage students in the communicative tasks to have a certain opportunity to speak with confidence and enthusiasm. Many 'task-like activities' (e.g. brainstorming, group discussion and 'comparing activity') have been simply adopted to draw learners' attention to the specific topics. Learners probably will be aroused to focus on the meaning first and then focus on the form, depending on teachers' sequence of communicative tasks and explicit instruction for follow-up tasks (ibid). All these principles are basically followed by Willis' (1996) framework and other researchers' emphasis (e.g. Skehan, 1998; Willis and Willis, 2007). It is widely acknowledged that learning a foreign language should be associated with vocabulary learning, sentence structure learning and techniques for effective communication. Thus, this TBL lesson is probably simplified by conducting the specific communicative activities with specific task sequence and group or pair works' discussions, aiming at approaching the communicative tasks effectively and making learners learn interactively.

Additionally, this TBL lesson would be differentiated from the traditional English class as it will be approached through computers. PowerPoint soft with visual aid has been applied to conduct this TBL lesson more creatively in the computer room. Accordingly, computer-assisted language teaching would involve EFL learners in an authentic environment with visual aids and authentic materials (Bax, 2003). Thus, this kind of teaching approach for TBL lesson may help teachers to change the traditional classroom from boring one to arousing one' interests with the exciting pictures. For the whole sequence of the TBL lesson, the teacher acts as the 'monitor', 'adviser', 'instructor', 'chairperson' to discern what they will teach and how they will approach the tasks to students. Therefore, the students seem likely to perform the task actively with teachers' proper instructions, classroom controlling, communicative task setting. Thus, in light of these possible benefits of this TBL lesson, it might be desirable to see that the outcome would be achieved.

However, the potentiality of this TBL would be concerned by the classroom management. Time management is regarded as an important factor in the TBL setting (Willis, 1996), thus, I have simply set the expected time for each task phase so as to minimize the classroom time with endeavors for this TBL lesson. This is the proposed sequence to approach each task phase in the TBL lesson. However, it might also be challenging and risky for the time management and classroom principles. Thus, it might seem to be difficult for teachers to complete all the activities as planned with time limit in the class, plus other classroom risk, such as classroom chaos. The proper consideration for this issue might

be dealt with by setting additional lessons for the continuous sequence of this TBL lesson. Additionally, another limitation of this TBL lesson is a lack of the authentic materials for the 'good manner' with some native-like texts. Thus, in terms of this limitation, my target students may not acknowledge the native-like context in this TBL lesson.

With the potential limitations of this TBL lesson, the future improvements would be probably focused on the development of rich authentic in-put materials for the task design. The certain time and proper classroom management might be controlled depending on the syllabus design. If it is possible to change the L2 education program for the implementation of TBL, the school authority may take the TBL designers' teaching needs and learners' leaning needs in the English classes into specific consideration by specifying sufficient time for English classes. Though many constraints and potential limitations might affect the successful implementation of TBL in the Chinese context, the English teacher might also implement task-based approach in their English teaching practice with long-term endeavor.

IV. CONCLUSION

With the overview of the theoretical background and practical part of TBL, it seems that TBL is superior to the traditional teaching approach as learners play the active role in the communicative classroom. The learners' role would be changed from passively to actively by the long-term TBL application. The language classroom would be changed from the quiet one to the active and communicative one. Language learners will be given the chances to experience real language learning with the rich authentic material input. Learners' linguistic skills and communicative skills would be developed through task-based approach. TBL might help language learners manipulate their language knowledge and express meaning fluently and accurately in the long-term project. In short, TBL seems like an effective approach to promote L2 learners' foreign language learning and develop their linguistic competence and communicative competence. It is admitted that there would be challenging and risky for teachers to implement TBL effectively in the foreign language classroom, especially in the secondary school context. However, personally, its advantages might far overweigh its disadvantages.

In short, according to my teaching context in China, it seems that task deign would be a complex work for English teachers as it is time-consuming. Thus, it might be suggested that teachers who are working in the EFL context can work cooperatively with their colleagues to design the tasks for one English session. Teacher can also be together to discuss how to develop the TBL lesson more effectively if time is available. With the consideration of teachers' language development, they might be suggested to take a English teaching training program to learn how to apply TBL effectively for speaking, listing, reading and writing so as to achieve pedagogical outcome. Overall, there is a growing need of task-based teaching approach to help learners promote target language learning in the EFL context in China.

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