

Application of Task-based Instruction to College English Reading Teaching for Non-English Majors in Leshan Normal University, Sichuan, China

Ye Zhou

School of Foreign Languages, Leshan Normal University, China

Abstract—First raised in 1980s, Task-based Instruction (TBI) is an effective teaching method advocated by many foreign language researchers, focusing on the use of authentic language and on asking students to do various kinds of meaningful tasks through the target language. Based on a study carried out in Leshan Normal University, the writer proves that the application of TBI to college English reading teaching can greatly intrigue non-English majors, help them build their self-confidence in English study, cultivate their sense of cooperation in the process of carrying out classroom activities and tasks with their classmates and thus to improve non-English majors' reading ability. In addition, some suggestions to TBI are also presented for further studies.

Index Terms—task-based instruction, College English reading teaching, non-English majors

I. INTRODUCTION

With the development of economic globalization and China's increasingly vital role in the world, English has become more and more important in China. Under this circumstance, English learning is a must for students especially college students. But the current English study in Chinese universities and colleges is far from satisfaction and still has a long way to go. With the fast development of new theories and approaches of language teaching, college English teachers begin to realize that traditional teaching methods fail to arouse students' interest in English learning. The teacher-centered class should be converted into the learner-centered urgently. Task-based Instruction (TBI) is an efficient approach recommended by many foreign language researchers in that it can greatly help college students to improve their language learning. Based on a study carried out in Leshan Normal University, this paper aims to prove that TBI is of great importance in college English reading teaching for non-English majors, in terms of greatly intriguing non-English majors, helping them build their self-confidence in English study, cultivating their sense of cooperation in the process of carrying out classroom activities and tasks with their classmates and thus improving non-English majors' reading ability.

The definition and features of TBI are as follows. Task-based Instruction (TBI) is also called Task-based Approach (TBA) or Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT). The task-based language learning was firstly raised by Prabhu (1987) from the aspect of teaching, stressing that students study languages by fulfilling the tasks in the process of language use. It has caught a lot of attention of educators and scholars in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) since then. Peter Skehan (1998), a famous British linguist, defined TBI as "Instruction in which learners are given tasks to complete in the classroom makes the assumption that transacting tasks in this way will engage naturalistic acquisitional mechanisms, cause the underlying interlanguage system to be stretched, and drive development forward" (p.95). Jane Willis (2000) thinks that Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) is an effective method to English learning and teaching which take advantage of tasks assigning language learners in a given context and encouraging them to finish those tasks for the purpose of communication.

The theoretical basis of TBI includes language acquisition theory, psycholinguistics, constructivism, socio-linguistics, cognitive psychology, etc.

The features of TBI put forward by Skehan and Nunan are summarized as follows: "The primary one is meaning; some communication problems should be solved; there are some priorities of task completion; the assessment of task performance is in accordance with the outcome; there are some kinds of relationships to the real world." (Skehan, 1998, p.95)

The features of TBI summarized by Nunan are summarized as follows: "The provision of opportunities for learners to focus not merely on language, but also on the learning process itself; the introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation; a stress on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language; an enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning; an effort to connect classroom language learning with language activation out of class." (Nunan, 1991, p. 279) And further, Nunan (1989)

summarized the following 5 principles in TBI for task selection: the form-function principle, the authenticity principle, the task dependency principle, learning by doing principle and Scaffolding principle.

II. CURRENT PROBLEMS OF ENGLISH READING TEACHING FOR NON-ENGLISH MAJORS

Current problems of English reading teaching for non-English majors in Leshan Normal University are listed as follows:

1. *Deficient Teaching Time*

English study needs a lot of practice, especially the practice under teachers' enlightenment, supervision and instruction. But in China, most universities and colleges like Leshan Normal University offer 4 English classes per week only for freshmen and sophomores. Within limited instruction time, it is hard for teachers to give instructions to college students, which makes it difficult for them to improve their English reading. What makes thing worse is that the students lack the initiative to study English in their spare time.

2. *Traditional Methods of English Reading Teaching*

Currently, more and more emphasis has been laid on students' practical and communicative abilities in English, but there are still a great number of English teachers who adopt traditional test-oriented methods in their classes. In this kind of teaching, teacher-centered class prevails where the teachers focus on teaching language knowledge like vocabulary explanation, sentence translation and grammatical points, failing to arouse the students' interest in English study. Thus, the students find it hard to improve their English competence.

3. *Students' Improper Reading Habit and Inefficient Reading Skill*

In English reading practice, students' improper reading habits are big problems, such as reading word by word, looking up dictionary every time they meet new words, reading back again and again, etc. These bad habits not only decrease the reading speed, but also prevent them from understanding the main idea of the reading materials. What's more, inefficient reading skills are barriers to students' English reading. Proper reading skills and suitable supplementary reading materials are badly needed for students. Only when they form the good reading habit and master efficient reading skills can they improve their English reading competence.

4. *Students' Lack of English Vocabulary and Related Background Knowledge*

To understand reading materials well, students need to master certain amount of vocabulary in the first place. But in reading classes, most English teachers only focus on the article and the textbook without introducing efficient approaches to the students to memorize vocabulary like associating words with one another, the mastering the rules of word-formation, making inference about the meaning of new words from context, etc. Lack of vocabulary render them lose heart in English reading. In addition, students' lack of related background knowledge is another big obstacle for students to fully comprehend English reading materials.

5. *Students' Lack of Self-confidence in English Reading*

In traditional test-oriented and teacher-centered English reading class, the students could not generate curiosity and thirst for English learning, resulting in boring and inactive English class. As time goes by, it makes the students lose heart and then they gradually become sick of English study. And this phenomenon is more and more common among college students, especially non-English majors. In Leshan Normal University, the certificate of CET is no longer a must for graduation, which makes things worse. The students pay little attention to English study due to the lack of confidence in it.

III. METHODOLOGY

Purposes of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to prove TBI is more effective than traditional teaching methods in English reading teaching for non-English majors in Leshan Normal University. Besides, the study will try to prove that TBI helps to arouse non-English majors' learning interest, to establish their self-confidence in English study and to improve their English reading ability.

Subjects of the Study

The study carried out in Leshan Normal University lasted one semester from September 7th, 2015 to December 31st, 2015 (specifically, sixteen weeks, four classes per week). The students are sophomores of Class 1, 2, 3 of Grade 2014 in the School of Physical Education. In English reading class, the students were taught by using TBI. Teacher carefully designed various tasks according to the reading materials. In class, the teacher encouraged all students to participate in classroom activities actively.

Content of the Study

Questionnaire

The study adopted a close-ended questionnaire mainly divided into the following four parts: Basic conditions of English reading teaching in Leshan Normal University (such as students' current English level, the reading materials used in English reading class, etc.); students' knowledge about the traditional teaching methods and TBI; students' learning interests and self-confidence before and after TBI is used in English reading teaching; and students' reading habit and reading time out of class before and after the use of TBI in English reading class. Altogether, 180 handouts

were sent to Class 1, Class 2, and Class 3 of Grade 2014 in the School of Physical Education. And 175 valid questionnaires were collected.

Interview

In the study, the author interviewed some students randomly chosen from Class 1, Class 2, and Class 3 of Grade 2014 in the School of Physical Education after the application of TBI. The author had prepared some topics and questions beforehand. The purpose of the interview is trying to get the students' attitudes, opinions and suggestions about TBI. The topics and questions are as follows: (1) What do you think of TBI? (2) Which one do you prefer, the traditional teaching methods or TBI? (3) Are you more motivated after TBI is used in English reading teaching? (4) What tasks attract you in English reading class? (5) What can you get from tasks like problem-solving and group discussion? (6) What is your suggestion to TBI in English reading teaching?

Classroom Observation

In the study, the writer made a careful observation of English reading teaching in the three classes of the School of PE after the application of TBI, making recordings with a video tape recorder of the whole process in the class including the classroom atmosphere, the teachers' teaching, the students' learning, the students' implementation of the tasks as well as the interaction between teachers and students. The observation was launched with the purpose of getting the whole picture of the current situation of English reading teaching in Leshan Normal University, which mainly concerns the reading materials, students' participation in tasks and classroom atmosphere, and so on.

Teaching Stages

In English reading teaching, the writer adopted 3 stages after the use of TBI: pre-reading stage, while-reading stage and post-reading stage. In pre-reading stage, related background knowledge and cultural knowledge were conveyed to the students. In while-reading stage, the teacher designed various kinds of tasks for the students to practice such as exchanging opinions, role play, group discussion, predicting the writer's ideas, skimming and scanning, careful reading, critical reading, problem solving, sharing personal experience, written work and exercises, etc. In post-reading stage, the teacher put more emphasis on encouraging students to develop their reading ability as well as language competence.

IV. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Major Findings of the Study

The study proves that TBI is a more efficient approach than the traditional teaching methods in English reading teaching. The application of TBI arouses the students' interests in English study, helps them to build self-confidence, to foster strong sense of cooperation and to improve their English reading competence. The major findings of the study are summarized as follows:

1. The application of TBI is able to stimulate non-English majors' learning interest and to cultivate the sense of cooperation with their classmates in the process of implementing classroom tasks. Based on the questionnaire and interview, the writer has found that with the help of TBI most of the students are obviously more active and enthusiastic in English reading class than before, that they enjoy participating in different tasks assigned by the teacher, that they have fostered good habits of English reading, and that the aroused interest stimulate them read more and learn more in return. Meanwhile, the writer has also found that through certain tasks like role play and group discussion the students' sense of cooperation with one another has been greatly enhanced.

2. The application of TBI is able to build non-English majors' self-confidence in English reading. Based on the questionnaire and interview, the writer has found that with the help of TBI more and more the students are willing to answer the questions raised by the teacher initiatively with high accuracy. Besides, their answers are not limited to the question itself, and they would like to discuss the background information of the task-related question with the teacher. In group work, most of the students are active to exchange opinions with other group members. In addition, more and more students begin the autonomous English reading in their spare time. Gradually in this way, they make progress in English reading, which helps them become more and more confident in English reading.

3. The application of TBI is able to help non-English majors to improve their English reading competence. With the help of TBI, the students can greatly improve the reading speed and reading skills. In the study, the writer has found that the reading speed of the students in the school of PE has increased a lot compared with their previous speed. In the past, their reading speed was about 60 words per minute, but it has reached more than 120 words per minute after the TBI is used. Reading word by word no longer happens. What's more, the writer has also found that most students can consciously use some reading strategies and skills like skimming and scanning in order to increase reading speed and improve reading validity.

Implications of the Study

The following implications of the study can be concluded for the teachers to take better use of TBI to improve English reading teaching.

1. TBI changes the teacher-centered class into the student-centered class. Spoon-feeding and learning by rote no longer exists in English class. The theory of TBI advocates learning by doing. The students convert from passive recipients to active participants.

2. TBI alters teacher's role in class. The teacher is not only an initiator of knowledge but also a facilitator, a guide and an observer. The teacher is supposed to design appropriate tasks for students and guide them to finish those tasks with

satisfactory results.

3. TBI enhances students' cooperative and communicative learning. In the process of fulfilling tasks, non-English majors are exposed to good opportunities and suitable environment of communication and cooperation. Only in this way can they practice what they have learned in class.

4. Every coin has 2 sides. So TBI also has the following disadvantages that need the teachers' concern:

(1) In the application of TBI to English reading teaching, the teachers are supposed to be highly responsible, positive and innovative. They must bear the principle of student-centered class in mind, they must convert their roles in classroom teaching, and they must spend more spare time in finding more reading materials and preparing more related cultural information in order to implement task-based reading teaching smoothly, otherwise TBI may be impossible to carry out.

(2) In the process of TBI, the teachers are supposed to explain relevant cultural points and language points in the first place before they actually assign the tasks, so it is the teacher's job to choose the appropriate content from too many resources available that will interest the students most, or the students will feel bored, which will certainly affect TBI.

(3) In the process of TBI, when students are implementing their tasks with one another in the group work or discussion, the teachers are supposed to adopt some methods to control the whole class so that the classroom won't be out of the order. It is advisable that the teacher should walk around the classroom and listen carefully to the students' discussion and even participate in one or two groups.

(4) In the process of TBI, the students have limited time to fulfill their tasks in class. In such case, the students are apt to use incorrect pronunciation, grammar and even vocabulary due to haste. But if the incorrect language is often used, it will surely do harm to the students' English competence. So it is advisable that the teacher should arrange some tasks to be implemented out of class and correct the students' wrong use of language anytime.

(5) Scientific and valid evaluation of TBI is hard to make. Currently, the traditional tests like College English Test Band 4 or 6 cannot do the job. TBI not only improves the students' integrated language proficiencies but also develop their abilities in reasoning, cooperation and autonomous learning, etc. Apparently, one single test like CET4 or CET6 cannot prove everything.

Suggestions to Further Studies

The following suggestions are presented for further studies on TBI:

1. The teaching tasks should be designed based on the reading material itself. In the application of TBI, English teachers are likely to focus more on designing different kinds of tasks while ignoring the close links between the tasks and the reading material, which results in that students fail to apply the knowledge to practice correctly. That requires the teacher to fully comprehend the reading material and to do more work in their task design. Besides, in task design, the teachers should take students' opinions and suggestions into account. Only in this way can the class become really student-centered.

2. The teaching tasks should be designed based on the students' real life and study. In this case, the teachers are supposed to have a thorough understanding of TBI theories so that they can design more scientific and feasible tasks that are closely related to the students' real life and study. Only in this way can the students become more interested in the tasks and fulfill the tasks more easily. What's more, the teaching tasks should be presented clearly by the teacher, or the students can not understand the teachers' requirements fully, the tasks will become too complicated for them to implement, and the class will become teacher-centered again.

3. In the application of TBI, the teacher should encourage all students to take part in the tasks. Previously, when the teacher raises questions or assigns tasks, chances are that only a few active students speak while others remain indifferent, and that the teacher tends to praise only those active students especially when they complete their work correctly. In this case, other students' learning passion in English is worsened. To change the situation, by TBI, the teacher should incite all students, especially those who are not active in class, to participate in tasks from the easier ones to harder. And the teacher should make more positive compliment and encouragement for their participation.

V. CONCLUSION

To sum up, English reading teaching in Chinese universities and colleges still has a long way to go. Currently, most of the English reading classes are still teacher-centered in which the teachers dominate the whole class by reading the article, introducing new vocabulary, explaining difficult sentences, assigning exercises and supplying right answers to the exercises. Under this circumstances, students do exactly what the teachers want them to do without actively thinking about why to do or how to do it more efficiently. In this case, the students' learning interest will be worsened and their English competence cannot be improved.

Fortunately, more and more educators and teachers of English realize that English class should be converted from the teacher-centered to the student-centered. And they have studied for years in finding the best way to make things better. The application of TBI can greatly arouse non-English majors' learning interest in English, help them to build their self-confidence in English study, cultivate their sense of cooperation in the process of carrying out classroom activities and tasks with their classmates and thus to improve non-English majors' reading ability.

Based on TBI, the writer did this study in Leshan Normal University and proved that compared with the traditional methods TBI is more effective in many aspects. What is more, TBI can greatly improve non-English majors' English

reading competence as well as other skills. In addition, it can also motivate students' autonomous learning in English. However, TBI still has some disadvantages like the teachers' competence to carry out TBI, the evaluation approach, etc. Thus, further studies should be launched to solve these problems.

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Ye Zhou was born in Leshan City, Sichuan Province, China in 1983. She received her Master's Degree in Comparative Literature and World Literature from Sichuan International Studies University, China in 2012.

She is currently a lecturer in the School of Foreign Languages, Leshan Normal University, Sichuan, China. Her research interests include English teaching and American literature.