Exploration on English Task-based Learning Teaching Mode—from a Perspective of New Curriculum Reform

Tingjuan Ma¹, Jie He

Abstract

Task-based learning teaching (TBLT) is a recent popular language teaching mode which is based on learning tasks as the center, promoting learners to acquire language knowledge in the course of finishing learning tasks, and educating their language communication abilities. As a matter of fact, it is further development and improvement of the communicative language teaching (CLT). On the base of theories of TBLT, this paper simply explores connotation and types of learning tasks, design procedures and principles of learning tasks and common problems designing and fulfilling learning tasks.

Keywords: TBLT, English teaching, teaching strategies, learning interest

I. INTRODUCTION

Krashen (1975) states that adults learn a second language through two ways. That is language learning and language acquisition. Language learning is a conscious process, in which learners grasp related language knowledge by virtue of instructor’s instruction, learner’s conscious practice and memory in class. However, language acquisition is a subconscious process, in which learners naturally acquire language just as children acquiring their mother tongue. Natural acquisition is main approach of foreign language learning. Under the circumstances of target language, language learners should focus on language meaning more, but not language forms. Based on Krashen’s Input Hypothesis Theory, Long (1983) puts forward Interactive Hypothesis Theory. He emphasizes that variation and interaction is an important feature of language acquisition, in the course of which it makes language input and output understandable. The Cognition Method proposed by Skehan (1996) makes TBLT further develop and improve. Firstly, the second language learning has a close relationship with human cognition, cognitive process is the one of processing information and language learners pay more attention to language meaning itself during the course of language performance. Secondly, second language learning and performance must make analytical system and lexical system of language learners coordinated development. Thirdly, language learning and language potential have quite close relation. Fourthly, he believes that TBLT is an efficient approach of the second language learning. Meanwhile, he stresses that reasonable design of teaching tasks should be under the communicative context, and learner’s attention should be scientific allocated in the course of completing learning tasks, which can make linguistic competence of language learners improve and develop. In addition, TBLT should fully reflect theories of constructivism and humanism and it realizes the aim of people oriented and focusing on individual learners.

II. The Connotation and Types of TBLT

1. The Connotation of Tasks

In language teaching, the purpose of proposing tasks is to make it clear with activities and exercises. In communicative language teaching, an activity is a situational learning of language items between tasks and exercises. An exercise regards language form such as pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar as a breakthrough point, and emphasizes repeat, emersion and imitation of vocabulary and grammar; while a real task focuses more on language meaning and linguistic performance.

¹Baoji Vocational Technology College, Baoji Shaanxi 721400, China
Therefore, a learning task should have its purpose, context, procedure, result, value, operability, otherness, practicality and authenticity. Instructors should make learners understand why they should take on a learning task in designing a task. A task may be true, virtual or imaginary, in which elements such as places, time and participants for finishing a task and relations among them should be included. During the course of fulfilling the task, instructors should try to make learners use learning strategies such as inference, inquiry, conceptualization, communication and so on. Learners should report how they fulfill the task and a task must have the value of fully improving learners’ comprehensive quality. Each task should be within learners’ ability and it is not only related to learning contents but also challenges learners’ mastered language ability. In the meantime, those challenges may be about knowledge, ability, information and culture. A task should give first place to a communicative task and give second place to a non-communicative task.

2. Types of Learning Tasks

TBLT stresses that the language learning must advance gradually in due order. If so, a task chain should be arranged reasonably and difficulty of a task also should be analyzed. Skehan divides tasks into teaching tasks and real life tasks. Willis (1996) believes that there are six kinds of learning tasks. (1) Listing tasks: learners under the instructor’s request finish related learning tasks. For example, according to certain logical relation, instructors ask learners to list related facts. Listing tasks should be various, which can stimulate learners’ learning interest. In reading, instructors can use information transfer mechanism to help learners transfer text information into graph and table, which can reduce difficulty of reading tasks. Learners can use ways of individuals, pairs, groups and the whole class. Meanwhile, they can use their own knowledge to analyze and summarize related topics. (2) Sorting tasks: learners summarize and clarify what they are learning. This kind of learning tasks requires learners to sort and summarize articles, actions or events according to certain consecution, otherwise clarify and combine articles, actions, events and so on according to personal judge and certain standard. (3) Comparing tasks: this kind of learning tasks requires learners to compare and contrast objective things, specific actions and visible articles by mean of their related knowledge, find their differences and similarities and understand their nature. (4) Problem-solving tasks: the purpose of this kind of learning tasks is to check and know learners’ mastery of knowledge, level of knowledge application, ability of analyzing and judging problems and ability of solving problems. That is to say, to know learners how to solve practical problem by mean of their own knowledge. (5) Experience-sharing tasks: learners communicate their own learning experiences and life experiences with others in English, which can promote the improvement of learning ability through sharing personal experiences. (6) Project tasks: instructors require learners to perform and act what they have learned in the form of special project or meeting summary. The above six kinds of tasks follow the principle from easy tasks to difficult ones.

III. Procedures and Principles of Constructing TBLT

1. Procedures of Constructing TBLT

We believe that instructors should design learning tasks from five aspects of deciding task object, selecting task contents, setting task means, considering task environment and choosing task evaluation means. When instructors construct the above five procedures, they firstly should consider learners’ learning needs, learning interest and learning ability. Secondly, according to those topics that learners are interested in, instructors design as many communicative tasks as possible, which are related to those topics. When instructors select communicative tasks, they do remember that learning tasks should be communicative and object-oriented. Thirdly, after deciding possible communicative tasks, instructors should comprehensively evaluate education value of those learning tasks. That is, instructors should think about whether those tasks can satisfy learners learning needs, learning interest and learning ability, and whether learners have enough learning resources and time to complete those tasks. On the base of evaluating those tasks, instructors may adjust revise and delete some tasks. Meanwhile, instructors should arrange for tasks in the light of different difficult degrees.
Fourthly, instructors should select language items which must be used to complete tasks. When instructors decide whether to accept, refuse or revise some tasks, they should consider language difficulties, think about when those decided communicative tasks should be used and make clear what language points may be needed and what language skills may be trained during the course of completing those tasks.

2. Principles of Constructing TBLT

1) **Learning within Doing Principle.** Instructors need to design tasks from the angle of learners’ learning. Humanism stresses the importance of psychological elements in the course of learning. Therefore, instructors must pay more attention to learners’ wish, emotion, needs, and sense of worth (Zhang, 1999). TBLT comes into being on the base of fully considering learning needs analysis of learners. In teaching, instructors not only completely consider learners’ learning needs, but also focus on society requirements towards learners’ learning ability because teaching activities which can satisfy learners’ needs can efficiently promote learners to actively participate in various classroom teaching tasks, stimulate their learning interest, enhance their consciousness to take part in classroom teaching and improve their learning effect.

2) **Authenticity principle.** Various tasks designed by instructors should be close to learners’ life, reality, and society. Learning activities should arouse learners’ echo, stimulate learners’ desire for obtaining knowledge and performance and make learners want to say something and have the ability to say something.

3) **Cooperation principle.** In TBLT, compared with the whole class activities, group activities and pair activities can arouse and stimulate learners’ enthusiasm of using language, while group activities can create chances for learners from different language background and linguistic levels.

4) **Hierarchical principle.** When instructors design learning tasks, they should follow the principle from the easier to the more advanced, from the simple to the complex, and all linked with one another. Furthermore, tasks’ requirements to learners should be carried out layer upon layer and satisfy different learning abilities’ learners, which is consistent with the stratified teaching mode. This kind of teaching method can make each learner have something to do, do it well, and accumulate learning experience by finishing different tough tasks (Xu, Liu & Liu, 2005).

5) **Autonomy principle.** TBLT should express the principle of learner-centered and learning-centered, which can make learners experience active and exploratory cognition experiment. In such experiment, learners can learn how to creatively use language and they focus on the process of using language but not the result.

6) **Domination principle.** Instructors should play different roles from the construction of learning tasks to the performance of them and they should be designers, organizers, prompters, instructors, monitors, participants, helpers, and evaluators of learning activities. In a word, they should help learners to practice and improve their comprehensive language use ability.

IV. Problems for Designing TBLT Activities

1) **Instructors usually are not sure about the difficulty and form of designing tasks.** Tasks are not linked with the same hierarchy and the complex degree of tasks is increasing with the rising of hierarchy. If tasks are too easy, learners can quickly finish them and little by little lose their learning interest. However, if tasks are too difficult, learners will spend much time and energy to finish them and enhance the pragmatic difficulty when they report or show their learning achievements, which can dampen their learning enthusiasm.

2) **The systematicness and continuity of tasks are hard to control.** Because of learners’ heavy learning tasks in China, various subjects and topics for each unit, learners take up other subjects’ time to finish those learning tasks assigned by instructors. Moreover, learners have not enough learning energy, which causes instructors to be in a dilemma in selecting teaching methods. Therefore, many tasks needed to complete cannot be realized.

3) **Independent thinking of individual learners is hard to be ensured.** TBLT activities
particularly emphasize cooperative learning by pairs or groups. Quite a few tasks are naturally accomplished in the form of pairs or groups. Thus, to some extent, the independent thinking ability of learners is weakened and the consciousness of relying on others is enhanced during the course of accomplishing those learning tasks.

4) “Doing” and “learning” are hard to cover simultaneously. In TBLT, a number of learners only focus on the “doing”. That is to say. They only put their energy into how to accomplish those tasks, but neglect the “learning” in tasks, the result of which makes learners do just for doing and tasks just for tasks and not realize the purpose of TBLT for doing things with languages.

V. Conclusion

As a matter of fact, it is further development and improvement of the communicative language teaching (CLT). On the base of theories of TBLT, this paper simply explores connotation and types of learning tasks, design procedures and principles of learning tasks and common problems designing and fulfilling learning tasks. We believe that instructors should design learning tasks from five aspects of deciding task object, selecting task contents, setting task means, considering task environment and choosing task evaluation means. This paper consider the issue from different perspectives to provide the new idea of making the issue more effective. In the future, more related research will be considered.

References