

A Study on the Challenges of Implementing Task-Based Language Teaching in Chinese EFL Classrooms: A Literature Review

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Abstract: This study aims to explore the challenges of implementing Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in Chinese English classrooms. Introduced relatively recently in China, TBLT has its roots in Western pedagogical practices. The research serves multiple stakeholders, including policymakers, educators, and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. For policymakers, the findings may inform decision-making processes regarding curriculum frameworks and instructional strategies. Educators can utilize the insights gained to further investigate and develop strategies for effectively implementing TBLT in Chinese educational settings. The ultimate goal is to empower teachers to leverage TBLT, thereby enhancing the English proficiency of learners. The paper concludes with a series of recommendations to improve the effectiveness of TBLT. Despite its advantages, TBLT currently faces sub-optimal implementation in Chinese English classrooms, requiring significant reforms to realize its full potential.

Keywords: Task-Based language teaching, challenges in pedagogical implementation, English language teaching, EFL learners

Introduction

In recent years, English has become one of the most critical subjects in China's educational curriculum. Recognizing the importance of effective English communication skills, the Chinese government introduced the National English Curriculum Standards^[1], which have been implemented in public schools since 2001. The curriculum explicitly endorses student-centered Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) as a pedagogical approach to enhance English language proficiency^[2].

This study focuses on TBLT as a framework for teaching English to EFL learners and critically examines its implementation challenges in Chinese classrooms. Integrating TBLT into China's educational context may encounter obstacles that diminish its efficacy. The paper first explores the conceptualization and application of TBLT, then analyzes the broader context of English language teaching in China, including the prevalent exam-oriented education system, large class sizes, and teachers' beliefs about TBLT and their limited understanding of "tasks."

Finally, targeted recommendations are proposed to enhance TBLT implementation in Chinese English classrooms, addressing systemic barriers that currently hinder its success.

1. The Concept and Application of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)

TBLT is an innovative pedagogical approach that promotes language learning through meaningful tasks, enabling

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authentic language use. It posits that educators should facilitate meaningful classroom activities, allowing learners to achieve specific communicative outcomes through processes such as practice, participation, interaction, modeling, experience, and collaboration^[3].

At the core of TBLT is the "task." However, the field of language teaching lacks a universally accepted definition of "task"^[2]. Existing literature offers varied definitions, but a consensus exists: tasks are activities designed to help learners achieve communicative goals. Willis^[4] describes tasks as essential activities for achieving communicative purposes, while Nunan^[5] emphasizes that tasks prioritize meaning over linguistic form. Both scholars agree that tasks are meaning-centered.

Long and Crookes^[6] provide another definition, highlighting that tasks mirror real-world activities. Ellis^[7] outlines specific criteria for tasks:

1. Focus on meaning rather than linguistic form.
2. Contain a "gap" requiring completion (e.g., information exchange or opinion expression).
3. Rely on learners' resources without explicit linguistic guidance.
4. Aim for outcomes beyond mere language practice.

Despite consensus on key components, Nunan^[8] notes the difficulty in distinguishing tasks from exercises, a view echoed by Ellis^[7], who acknowledges conceptual overlaps. Scholars' interpretations of "task" often reflect divergent perspectives in the field.

TBLT's rationale is that well-designed tasks engage learners actively, enhance their understanding of language functions, and improve communicative competence. This interactive engagement provides opportunities for purposeful language use and feedback, enabling learners to identify gaps in their proficiency.

As a pedagogical framework, TBLT can be structured and implemented in various ways. Three primary approaches exist in language education:

1. Task-Supported Teaching: Integrates tasks into traditional curricula to supplement form-focused instruction^[5].
2. Task-Referenced Teaching: Assesses students based on tasks, encouraging educators to incorporate similar tasks into teaching^[2].
3. Task-Based Teaching: Designs entire curricula around tasks, making them central to learning outcomes^[4].

In summary, TBLT is a dynamic and flexible approach that prioritizes meaningful engagement through tasks, fostering effective communication and language use.

2. The Context of English Language Teaching in China

Historically, English Language Teaching (ELT) in China has been teacher-centered, textbook-driven, and memorization-focused^{[9][10]}. This framework emphasizes reading comprehension and grammar instruction while neglecting communicative skills, particularly listening and speaking.

Before the 2001 curriculum reform, prevalent methods included the Audio-Lingual Method, Communicative Language Teaching, and Grammar-Translation Method. The revised curriculum introduced student-centered TBLT to enhance engagement and practical language use^[1].

Confucian traditions deeply influence Chinese education, emphasizing hierarchical teacher-student relationships where teachers are authority figures^[11]. Students are expected to adopt passive, receptive roles^[12]. This cultural backdrop, combined with traditional teaching models, limits Chinese EFL teachers' adoption of interactive methods like TBLT^[13]. Traditional approaches dissect language into discrete components (e.g., grammar rules), prioritizing form over meaning and hindering effective communication^[2].

Literature reviews reveal cross-cultural challenges in TBLT implementation. For example:

Greek secondary teachers' limited understanding reduced TBLT adoption^[14]. Japanese English teachers preferred structured activities over TBLT^[15]. Korean EFL teachers cited time constraints and grammar-focused assessments as barriers^[16]. In Hong Kong, challenges included large classes, inadequate resources, and mixed teacher perceptions^[17].

These findings underscore the role of contextual factors in TBLT implementation. In China, three major obstacles hinder TBLT: large class sizes, the exam-oriented system, and teachers' limited understanding of tasks.

3.1 Large Class Sizes

Large classes (often 50-60+ students) complicate TBLT's emphasis on interaction and collaboration. Research in Hong Kong confirms that class size significantly impacts participatory learning^[18]. Smaller classes (<30 students) foster higher engagement and peer support, whereas large classes often force teachers to default to teacher-centered methods^[1].

China's growing student population exacerbates this issue, with student-teacher ratios reaching 1:100 in some regions^[2]. This environment poses unique challenges for TBLT, which relies on interaction.

3.2 Exam-Oriented Education System

China's exam-driven system, rooted in Confucian and imperial examination traditions, prioritizes rote memorization and grammar-translation skills over communicative competence^[21]. Since the reinstatement of the National College Entrance Exam (Gaokao) in 1977, English education has focused on test performance, creating a disconnect with TBLT's communicative goals^[22].

While English is recognized as linguistic capital, teaching remains exam-oriented, emphasizing form over function^[23]. Reforms are hindered by resource disparities between urban and rural areas; The Gaokao's role as an equalizer for disadvantaged students; The efficiency of standardized testing for mass evaluation.

3.3 Teachers' Beliefs and Understanding of TBLT

Studies reveal limited TBLT understanding among Chinese teachers, Hong Kong teachers viewed TBLT as time-consuming and misaligned with exams^[17]; Fujian educators equated "tasks" with oral activities, overlooking broader definitions^[24]. In Beijing, 17% of teachers doubted TBLT's efficacy, 33% implemented it under duress, and 50% embraced it enthusiastically^[25]. Misconceptions persist even in other contexts (e.g., Canada)^[26], highlighting the need for localized adaptations^[27].

Conclusion

TBLT faces significant implementation challenges in China due to large classes, the exam-oriented system, and teachers' mixed perceptions. However, strategic reforms-such as infrastructure investment, teacher training, and curricular alignment-could foster a more conducive environment. Specific recommendations include:

- 1.Reduce Class Sizes: Allocate resources to lower student-teacher ratios
- 2.Reform Assessments: Balance exams with communicative competency evaluations
- 3.Teacher Training: Provide professional development on TBLT theory and practice
- 4.Contextual Adaptation: Tailor TBLT to China's cultural and educational realities

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