

Research on Challenges of Task-based Language Teaching Implementation in Chinese Senior High School EFL Writing Course

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Abstract: The National New Curriculum for China senior high school students intends to integrate information communication technology into English classes to cultivate students' English competence further. Technology-mediated TBLT, as the merger of task-based language teaching and ICT fits in the modern instruction paradigm. However, as a new teaching pedagogy, its implementation in EFL teaching has met some obstacles. Building on this, the study attempts to probe the current technology-mediated TBLT implementation in senior high school EFL teaching in a specific writing course. Moreover, the study aims to investigate the EFL teacher's and students' perceptions and implementation, as well as factors that impede the technology-mediated language teaching. The findings reveal that EFL teachers have a high perceptual understanding of the technology-mediated TBLT at the theoretical level. However, the discrepancies between perceptions and implementation are the main factors that impede its development. Meanwhile, EFL teachers are insufficient in ICT skills and are concerned with the current EFL teaching contexts, which also affects the implementation.

Keywords: task-based language teaching, EFL learning, information and communication technology

1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, task-based language teaching has been a prominent approach in second language acquisition and has been promoted and further developed in writing courses in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms in China (Cai, 2001)^[1]. Due to the outbreak of COVID-19, many schools in China had to choose to offer online courses for students. TBLT, as the primary pedagogical of English teaching in China, is undoubtedly applied in online teaching contexts (Wang and Lin, 2019)^[2]. However, how to improve students' language competence, especially in the writing aspect under the assistance of digital technology and how to better integrate TBLT with information and communication technology (ICT), has been a significant problem to be solved.

This research aims to investigate the potential challenges in implementing the technology-mediated TBLT in senior high school EFL writing teaching contexts and explores countermeasures to improve the current situation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Current Situation of the application of technology-mediated TBLT in senior high school English lesson

The Ministry of Education in China has deepened the educational reform with time. Optimizing the quality of second language teaching has become the fundamental educational development strategy in the 21st century. According to the National Curriculum of Senior High School English Teaching and Guideline for Middle School English Teaching and

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Learning issued by the Ministry of Education in 2023, the integration of information technology in EFL teaching has been emphasized in an important position. The syllabus further proposes a fusion between language learning and modern digital technology for effective second language teaching and learning.

To further promote the integration of information and communication technology in English language teaching, various policies for syllabus reform have been established (Chen and Wang, 2016)^[3]. “Internet Plus teaching” is one of the teaching models introduced in the current education reform, to establish various internet platforms and ICT of promoting the deep integration of technology in language teaching (Huang, 2018)^[4]. On the other hand, some internet platforms designed for EFL learning also scaffold teachers to change the traditional way of teaching. For example, the MOOCs platform provides a variety of digital teaching and learning resources and services, enabling students to study anytime and anywhere.

2.2 Methodological framework of technology-mediated TBLT

Richards and Rodgers (2014)^[5] proposed a model to conclude the elements contained in a language teaching pedagogy through approach, design, and procedure these three dimensions. In this model, the approach is related to the theory of second language acquisition of pedagogy, and the design refers to the general and specific objectives of the pedagogy and the role of teachers and learners during the learning process (Richards and Rodgers, 2014)^[5]. In technology-mediated TBLT, it shares the same approach as the TBLT, in which the primary focus is meaning-based and supplemented by language forms (Faez and Tabakoli, 2019)^[6]. At the design level, technology-mediated TBLT has greatly expanded TBLT. Since the goal of TBLT is to scaffold students in dealing with real-life tasks, the syllabus and textbooks are composed of different types of pedagogical tasks resembling what learners need to do in real life. The role of teachers is more to select different types of tasks and find relevant teaching materials as resources (Richards and Rodgers, 2014)^[5]. In technology-mediated TBLT further integrated with ICT, the Internet provides more information resources and enriches teaching materials.

At the procedure level, technology-mediated TBLT is also demonstrated in three stages: pre-task, task (cycle), and post-task. Based on the pedagogical framework proposed by Willis (1996)^[7], Baralt and Morcillo (2017)^[8] demonstrate a methodological framework for how to better apply TBLT online via video-based interaction as follows:

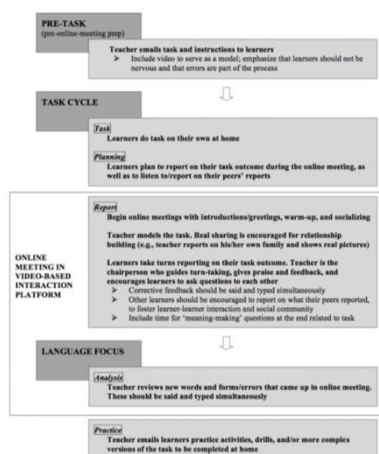


Figure 1. The technology-mediated TBLT methodology framework (Baralt and Morcillo, 2017, pp.36)

2.3 Challenges in the implementation of Technology-mediated TBLT in China

TBLT has been a prominent approach to language teaching in the West since 1980 (Ellis, 2003; Iveson, 2015)^{[9][10]}. Simultaneously, TBLT has been rapidly developed and has become the prominent approach used in second language teaching in China's EFL curriculum after the reform of English education in 2007 (Zhang and Huang, 2013; Zhang and Borg, 2014)^{[11][12]}. However, due to the influence of traditional approaches to English teaching, the development and implementation of TBLT still face many challenges in both the classroom and the online context in China. According to the previous study, the predicament of TBLT may be attributable to various factors. From the teacher dimensions, the

misconception of the TBLT has hindered the implementation of this pedagogy in China (Zhang and Borg, 2014)^[12]. For example, some EFL teachers in China are confused about the distinction between task and classroom activity, thus struggle to design meaningful tasks for EFL lessons (Hu, 2013)^[13]. Compared to traditional face-to-face teaching, online language teaching demanding for teachers cognitively, and it cannot be simply translated from the face-to-face lesson (Nielson, Gonzalez-Lloret and Pinckney, 2009; Tomei, 2006)^{[14][15]}. Technology-mediated TBLT also works differently in the daily teaching context. Some tasks suitable for face-to-face content do not always work well under online teaching (Baralt, 2013; Baralt and Morcillo, 2017)^{[16][8]}. Therefore, it requires teachers to acquire knowledge about technology-mediated TBLT.

Furthermore, teachers' willingness to apply this pedagogy also causes barriers to implementation. English language teaching in most Asian countries is dominantly teacher-centred, and teachers have a strong sense of being the authorities of the classroom and adopt more textbook-directed ways (Zheng and Borg, 2013; Hu, 2013)^{[12][13]}. However, TBLT promotes a learner-centred and communicative classroom in which the teacher's primary role is task selector and plays as resource and monitor (Faez and Tabakoli, 2019)^[6]. This conflicts with the rationale of TBLT to help students improve communicative competence through interaction.

3. Methodology

This research is conducted and utilizes qualitative methods to collect data in one Chinese Senior High School Grade 2 Class. By generating in-depth data from a small sample of participants in this study to discuss the perceptions from various groups and explore the problems encountered by various groups in China EFL teaching.

- a. What hinders the implementation of TBLT in online EFL writing contexts?
- b. What suggestions can be provided to change the current situation?

Two types of instruments are operated to collect the data: semi-structured interviews and classroom observation as supplementary evidence. According to the semi-structured interview, further questions will be asked related to participants' answers to investigate deeper into their attitude and understanding of the technology-mediated TBLT. Combining semi-structured interviews and observation of the class could overcome weaknesses and problems from a single method to help develop a comprehensive understanding of the implementation situation of TBLT and the obstacle in the China online EFL teaching context.

4. The Analysis of Data

4.1 Students' perception of implementation technology-mediated TBLT

Ten students participated in this interview. Due to the impact of COVID-19, the teaching period in one semester was mainly based on online courses. After they experienced a semester of online EFL learning, in terms of the usefulness of training their writing ability assisted by mobile and technology, all three students responded positively. They believed that in the online class, computer and mobile technology should be combined. It helps to improve their creativity in writing courses. In addition, the resources provided by teachers are more diversified, and related resources will be sent to them before and after class to help review what they have learned.

In terms of their satisfaction with the combination of TBLT and technology in the teacher's online courses last semester, only half students pointed out that the teacher organized online lessons very effectively, and the content was very interesting. The other five students were, to some extent, dissatisfied with the online courses. The negative feedback from students mainly comes from the set of tasks, classroom management, and problems related to the use of technology.

4.2 The implementation of technology-mediated TBLT in the online writing course

The online writing course was conducted to help students prepare for their upcoming College Entrance Examination. The English test for this is a large-scale standardized test that aims to evaluate students' language proficiency. The writing test asks students to write an 80-word composition related to some hot social issues to express their viewpoint and opinion. Therefore, in order to allow students to adapt the test model, the teacher selected a writing topic from previous years as the task of this online course. The writing task was to ask students to produce a short essay on reducing carbon emissions based on their viewpoints.

There were 35 students and a teacher in this online lesson, and the whole lesson was organized in Tencent meeting for

around 2 hours. The online writing course attempted to use technology-mediated TBLT in the whole lesson and using authentic material about the news of the carbon emission situation in China. Besides the reading materials, the teacher also provided a writing sample about the suggestion on dealing with carbon emission sent to students via E-mail before the lesson. Particularly, through the observation, the technology has excellently integrated with some classroom activities at pre-task and during-task phases. For example, before the lesson began, the teacher first shared with students a two-minute video about what carbon emissions are and then let students guess the topic of today's lesson. This primarily motivated students to engage in classroom activities and raised their interest to learn. Another great example can be found in the during-task phase, the teacher has created a collaborative mind-map in an application called X-mind and sent the link in the chat boxes, asking students to write down their ideas about reducing carbon emissions. This helped in collecting and generating students' different viewpoints in a more direct and clear way.

However, there also encountered some problems in this lesson. Through the observation, I found that although the teacher has merged the information technology as tool in the instruction process, it mainly appeared in the first two phase. In the final post-writing phase, the teacher only provided oral feedback but not assisted with the online platform to collect peer feedback and send the written feedback. In addition, due to the unfamiliarity with the teaching platform, teachers waste about 5 minutes to figure out how to create different breakout groups. Also, the teacher did not participate in the group discussion of students and played as a resource and monitor since she did not know how to leave the main chat room and join different groups.

5. Discussion

5.1 Attitude toward the approach

The findings regarding the approach level, teachers and students share their concern about the information technology integrated with TBLT. They hold a positive attitude toward this is in line with previous research. According to the previous studies, they discovered that to incorporate the rapid development of digital technology, teachers are aware of driving transformation in language teaching and learning (Grgurović, Chapelle and Shelley, 2013; Compton, 2009)^{[17][18]}. In this research context, the teachers also show their desire to adopt new EFL teaching methodologies to better scaffold students' learning in the online courses. They hold the perceptions that information technologies widen the development of TBLT, which could facilitate students to engage in doing the task through various ways based on technology (González-Lloret and Ortega, 2014)^[19]. More specifically, with the assistance of technology in teaching, students can obtain more varied teaching materials.

5.2 The design and procedure of technology-mediated TBLT lesson

For teachers, understanding the reciprocal interaction between technology and TBLT can be further revealed in design and procedure. According to the model of Richards and Rodgers (2014)^[5], the design dimension of technology-mediated TBLT refers to the choice of tasks, the roles of teachers and learners play, and the objectives of the lesson. The procedure dimension focuses on the concrete action teachers take in their lessons (Richards and Rodgers, 2014)^[5]. The design and procedure level combines teachers' knowledge of the approach and practical wisdom.

Besides teachers' support to assist with the technology in their EFL writing lesson, the research also shows that teachers have a corresponding study of the technology-mediated TBLT. Through the interview, both teachers shared their perceptive about designing the technology-mediated tasks for their online writing class as communicative-oriented, which fit Ellis's (2003)^[9] task definition. Despite the textbook still being used as the core teaching material, two participants support extending teaching materials through digital materials. In addition, both participants use technological support in their online teaching to some extent, which indicates that teachers' perceptions of the status quo are reflected in the design and procedure of their writing lessons. This all reflects that the participants in this study have adequate knowledge of technology-mediated TBLT. On the contrary, previous studies have revealed that teachers' unfamiliarity and misunderstanding of this pedagogy have become one of the main problems that impede the pedagogy's implementation and development (Zhang and Borg, 2014; Hu, 2013)^{[12][13]}. This conflict is because the participants in this study often consult relevant literature and studies to learn teaching pedagogy and teaching techniques. One of the teachers in this study seeks

to learn a technique that could improve her online language teaching and then acquire a series of knowledge of technology-mediated TBLT.

6. Conclusion

The task-based approach has been introduced and practised in China for over two decades. EFL teachers have a fairly good grasp of task-based language teaching pedagogy. The infusion of technologies useful for language teaching when undergirded by programmatic TBLT constitutes technology-mediated TBLT (Gonzalez-Lloret, 2014)^[19]. Therefore, through the findings, the data released a high level of perceptual understanding of technology-mediated TBLT. However, on implementation, EFL teacher also needs to take the ICT environment into consideration. Due to the limitation of digital resources and relevant training, they are unable to conduct the technology-mediated task in a comprehensive atmosphere, and instead, most college EFL teachers use traditional tasks through technological tool-aid.

The disparities between perceptions and implementation are inspected in detail. As the vital concept of TBLT, college EFL teachers show a detailed understanding which results in misuse of the task. Some teachers use task suitable for face-to-face teaching, but do not have similar good results in online courses. Tasks in such form are similar to traditional TBLT, but more complementary and less structured tasks formation, and affordances in the technology-mediated environment (González-Lloret, 2017)^[20]. Meanwhile, “learner-centeredness” is a crucial disparity. In technology-mediated TBLT, students are encouraged to use their resources to accomplish the task in the online context. However, college EFL teachers in China tend to circumvent these aspects to claim the leading role in class. Last but not least, although teachers all believe they should integrate technology during all teaching phases to cultivate students’ language competence. Nevertheless, due to the schedule and classroom management, teachers fail to better integrate technology for students’ learning and achieve the objectives of teaching.

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