

Exploring College EFL Teachers' Perceptions and Implementations of Task-Based Language Teaching: A Case Study in Glee Education University in China

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Abstract

This study aims to explore college EFL teachers' perceptions and implementation of Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in teaching reading part of Basic Comprehensive Course at Glee Education University (pseudonym) in China. Eight lecturers and eight English major students were involved in this study. The data of the study were collected through focus group interviews from the lecturers and students separately. The overall findings of the group focus interviews show that there were gaps between lecturers' perceptions and implementation of TBLT in teaching reading. Specifically, (1) the communicative principles of TBLT were commonly approved; (2) a moderate lack of knowledge on the fundamental concept and its way of operation was detected in comparison with their familiarity and approval of TBLT main principles; (3) discrepancies were observed between theoretical understanding and classroom practice; (4) low satisfaction from students upon lecturers' implementation of TBLT in the class. These findings were discussed and their implications were suggested in language teaching.

Key words: task; Task-based Language Teaching; perceptions; classroom implementations; EFL college teachers

Introduction

Since the early 20th century when English Language Teaching (ELT) in China entered into the formal educational system, Chinese ELT practitioners and researchers have been seeking the best method for English language teaching. Like many other language teaching innovations, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has been applied to the English language curricula in many countries across Asia including mainland in China, Japan, and Korea and so on (Butler, 2011;

Littlewood, 2007). TBLT as the top-down teaching method advocated in China, it is written and promoted in a series of English curriculums from basic education to tertiary education by Minister of Education (MOE), like English syllabus for full-time junior secondary schools (2000), English syllabus for full-time senior secondary schools (2000), College English teaching guide (2015 draft). Besides, TBLT is also advocated in the Curriculum for English Major in the Tertiary Education (CEMTE 2000). One of the main aims of the CEMTE is to cultivate students' comprehensive ability to do things with English in real life situations and context. In order to achieve the targets of CEMTE, TBLT is advocated as the method to emphasize both the procedure and product of students' learning in the English classrooms (MOE 2001). TBLT which is derived from the communicative language teaching is used to provide learners with real opportunities to use the target language in the classroom, especially for the English as a foreign language (EFL) context, where learners have limited accessibility to use the target language on a daily basis (Jeon & Hahn, 2006). Task, as the core of the teaching method, has different definitions based on the different researchers' opinions. According to Long (1985), the task is a piece of work undertaken for oneself or others, freely or for some reward, just like the things people do in their daily life. Nunan (2004) defined it as the real-world or target task which is used beyond or out of the classroom. Compared with the tasks used outside the class, Nunan (2004) described a 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. Based on Rod Ellis' (2003, 2009, 2012, 2013) generalization of the task features, there are four key criteria of the task: a) The primary focus should be on 'meaning'; b) There should be some kind of 'gap'; c) Learners should largely rely on their own resources; d) There is a clearly defined outcome other than the use of language. Thus, when performing a task, learners are not primarily concerned with using language correctly but rather with achieving the goal stipulated by the task. When the teachers design and implement the tasks in the classroom, they need to take the criteria into consideration to motivate learners to do the tasks actively.

Contrast with the promotion of TBLT in the policy, pedagogical practice in many Chinese EFL classrooms have not changed fundamentally, especially in some socio-economically less developed regions (Hu, 2004; Xie & Chen, 2019). There are usually four factors influencing the

students learning in the class: teachers, students, textbook and the environment. Among the factors, teachers play a crucial role in the implementation of TBLT in the actual classrooms. Ellis and Shintani (2013) note that key difficulties that teachers may experience with introducing TBLT into their classrooms may relate to problems firstly, in understanding what a task and/or a task-based approach to language teaching really is and, second, to problems in implementing a task-based approach in a particular context. Based on the principles of TBLT raised by Ellis (2009), one of them is that teachers need to have a clear understanding of what a language task is. Andon and Eckerth (2009) also point to a relationship between the successful implementation of TBLT and teachers' knowledge of the concepts of a task and task-based teaching. Butler (2011) pointed out that teachers are often not certain about how they are to realize TBLT in their classrooms, and unclear about whether, how, to what extent TBLT fits their existing beliefs and practices. Luo and Yi (2013) has conducted a research on the development of TBLT in China from 2001 to 2011 focusing on the situation, predicament and future of TBLT applied in China, they pointed out one of the reasons that TBLT was not practiced well was that teachers have few chances to get qualified and methodical training. Consequently, it impacts teachers' implementation of TBLT in the class because teachers don't have clear understanding on the essence of task and TBLT, even have misconception about TBLT. What mentioned all show that there is a gap between what teachers know about TBLT and what they implement TBLT in the class. Thus, in order to apply TBLT effectively and successfully in the practical classroom, it is necessary to explore teachers' understanding and perceptions on TBLT to provide the appropriate assistance and training to the teachers that they could design suitable tasks to achieve the teaching goals in the English classes.

In light of this, the study aims to explore college EFL teachers' perceptions of task-based language teaching based on investigating their understandings of TBLT concepts, TBLT implementation, and the feedback from students upon their implementation in teaching reading part of Basic Comprehensive Course. The context of the study is Glee Education University (GEU pseudonym) in China. The Basic Comprehensive Course (BCC), as the core course, for English majors in GEU was chosen as one of the 100 key courses under the construction of the 'Double First-Class Project' in Guizhou province. The college teachers who taught BCC were asked to apply TBLT in the class from 2018 by using the new English textbook "Communication English for Chinese learners (CECL)" which includes a series of tasks in each unit for English majors to use the language.

As a newly introduced teaching method in the BCC, teachers' own understanding of TBLT is fundamental to the success (or lack thereof) of TBLT (Jeon & Hahn, 2006). In order to realize the goal of exploring college EFL teachers' perceptions of TBLT, finding out how their perceptions impact their implementation in the class, and identifying challenges and possibilities in the implementation of TBLT, the following four questions are raised:

1) What are EFL teachers' understandings of TBLT in teaching reading part of Basic Comprehensive course at Glee Education University?

2) What is EFL teachers' implementation of TBLT in teaching reading part of Basic Comprehensive course at Glee Education University?

3) What are the differences between their understandings and implementations of TBLT in teaching reading part of Basic Comprehensive course at Glee Education University?

4) What is the students' reflection on the implementation of TBLT in teaching reading part of Basic Comprehensive course at Glee Education University?

Through the study, it will provide insight for teachers to design and implement any real communicative tasks, which are critically important for EFL learners in order to experience meaningful language use. It will also contribute to facilitating EFL teachers' practical application of TBLT techniques, thereby improving the learners' integrated abilities in reading and communication.

Research Methodology

This study is a case study because it was limited to the special situation in a university in China which was under the process of the reform of teaching method in a special English course "Basic Comprehensive Course" for English majors. The case study is an in-depth study of a particular situation that leads to further understanding of the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2002). Hence, there is a case to be explored to understand further by gathering insights of the phenomenon and the complex interrelationship among all aspects (Stake, 1995). This qualitative research uses a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific settings by using

group focus interviews to get to know the participants detailed understandings of TBLT, for qualitative research is "any kind of research that produces findings not by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification" (Stake, 1995).

Based on the features and procedure of the case study, this study was limited to the context of the learning English as a foreign language, specific place and the participants there. There were eight students and eight lecturers of Basic Comprehensive course enrolled in this study. The group focus interviews were employed here to collect the data on what lecturers' understandings of TBLT are, how they implemented TBLT in BCC class, what students' feedback on lecturers' teaching, for there are only eight lecturers applying TBLT in teaching BCC for English majors in the context. The focus group interviews usually are used to interview a small group of people ranged from 6 to 9 to explore interviewees' attitudes and perceptions, feelings and ideas about a topic (Dilshad & Latif, 2013). Particularly, focus groups are predominantly beneficial when a researcher intends to find out the people's understanding and experiences about the issue and reasons behind their particular pattern of thinking. (Kitzinger, 1997). The interviews were conducted in Chinese for focus group may be held in mother tongue of the subjects (Rice and Ezzy, 1999). All the content of the interviews were digital recorded by tape recorder. The researcher transcribed and translated into Chinese.

Findings and Discussions of the Interview on the teachers' perceptions and implementation of TBLT in Teaching Reading

Based on data collected from the group focus interviews on EFL college teachers and students who are in two of the interviewed teachers' classes, the findings and discussions of the research questions are in the following.

Research question1

What are EFL teachers' understandings of TBLT in teaching reading part of Basic Comprehensive course at Glee Education University?

1) The thematic analysis of the interview responses demonstrated that the college EFL teachers had a common opinion that task is communicative goal directed (Jeon & Hahn, 2006). When the teachers design the tasks in the reading part of BCC, they would consider designing the tasks or

activities to encourage students to speak or communicate between teacher and students, or students and students in the class, like discussion in groups and oral presentation.

‘... because the textbook is named 'Communication English for Chinese Learners' which means I should set the goals to cultivate students communicative competence through the whole teaching procedure.’ (L3)

‘After reading a passage, I usually ask students to summarize the main idea of each paragraph themselves by group work.’ (L4)

‘For Basic Comprehensive Course I, I focus on the students' listening and speaking abilities when I apply TBLT ... I mean I like organizing the pair work or group work to make students speak more in the class. What I want to do in the class is to motivate students' output after they receive enough input.’ (L6)

‘I usually ask students to answer my questions to check whether they have comprehended the content of the reading materials.’ (L8)

All the interviewed teachers had the same opinion on setting communicative goal when teaching reading of BCC, because communicative language teaching as the primary and popular teaching method has been implemented in English classroom from primary to the tertiary level of education for a long time that teachers were familiar with it (Li, 2001). TBLT, as the development of communicative language teaching, has the same feature in emphasizing communicative activities in the authentic context.

2) EFL college teachers were lack of knowledge on the vital concept of TBLT. EFL college teachers expressed that they didn't know too much about task and TBLT directly in the interviews. When answering the questions ‘How do you understand the task?’ and ‘What are the features of task do you think?’, what they told about task and TBLT was fragmented.

‘To be honest, I don't know too much theory and definition of task and TBLT. I think a task is a kind of assignment in teaching.’ (L1)

‘I think a task is a kind of teaching activities the teacher design based on the teaching materials to achieve the teaching goals. Task-based language teaching is the implementation of all these activities. It emphasizes the principle of ‘learning by doing’.’ (L3)

‘I am not familiar with the detailed knowledge of task or TBLT. I apply it in the classroom because I was demanded to implement it in the class.’ (L4)

‘I don't know much about the teaching method because my major was not pedagogy or teaching during my master study. I usually ask my students to do the tasks in reading like answering the questions about the content of the passage or doing reading exercises in the textbooks.’ (L8)

3) Some of EFL college teachers had misunderstanding of the task. Two of the interviewees treated the task as kind of activities that teacher ask students to do in the class which is no different from the activities or exercises in the class.

‘Before reading the passage, I usually ask them some questions about the content of the reading passage as a task, then let them answer my questions when finishing reading.’ (L4)

‘In teaching reading, I will assign a task to ask students to read a passage in a certain time to practice their reading speed.’ (L8)

Through the lecturers’ responses, it is clear that they failed to make a sufficiently clear definition of a ‘task’ to distinguish it from other kinds of instructional activities (Ellis 2009). The reasons why EFL college teachers have not fully understood what task and TBLT is may be because they haven't got enough teacher training before the reform of the teaching method in GEU. They have had only two short term teaching training for three days and seven days respectively. Additionally, it may be influenced by traditional teaching methods. Traditional teaching methods are deeply ingrained in the current teacher thinking, as most of them are learners who have been trained in traditional grammar and translation methods since childhood, and are familiar with the PPP model (Xie & Chen, 2019). Richards & Renandya (2002) demonstrated that the procedure of PPP model is a presentation of the language points the teacher chooses, students practice the language points under the teacher's control, and production of using language students have learned in a specific context. It focuses on the accuracy of language form.

Research question 2

What is EFL teachers' implementation of TBLT in teaching reading part of Basic Comprehensive course at Glee Education University?

Teachers followed the tasks appeared in the textbooks, sometimes adapted some tasks according to the time limitation in the class and their teaching experience. The textbook used in BCC is 'Communication English for Chinese learners' (CECL). It is edited and revised under the rule of task-based language teaching approach of communicative teaching method and has long

been applied to communicative class in Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, with the aim to equip students with both language knowledge and ability to use that knowledge (Wei & Xie, 2014). Before every unit in the teacher's book, instructions including task sets, task function and objectives are drawn up. Besides, there are series of tasks that students could do in each unit. The most striking feature of this textbook is that it focuses on how to develop students' ability to use language effectively in real-life conditions and provides some practical opportunities to help them achieve this goal (Wu, 2017).

'I usually follow the tasks in the textbook and ask students to do the tasks one by one. Sometimes I omit some tasks or combine some tasks in the textbook. I feel the content and tasks in the textbook are very good. It is beneficial to develop students' communication ability.' (L3)

'Basically, I usually utilize the tasks in the textbook directly, because I think the tasks in the textbook are well-designed which are suitable for the students'. (L7)

There are plenty of materials, including lesson plan, language illustration, extra reading materials, and online resources for teachers to choose and refer when they design their tasks and lesson plan. They think there is no need to design their tasks or teaching procedure because the textbook has already arranged the procedure of the teaching they agreed with.

Research question 3

What are the differences between their understandings and implementations of TBLT in teaching reading part of Basic Comprehensive course at Glee Education University?

Discrepancies are existing between EFL college teachers' theory understanding and classroom practice, especially on focusing on meaning and relying on learners' resources based on Rod Ellis' task criteria (2003, 2009, 2012, 2013). There was also mismatch between the understanding of the features of the task and the real implementation in the classroom.

1) Teachers still focus on the form of language than focus on the meaning of language

For the teachers in teaching reading part of BCC, what they plan is to motivate students to speak more in the class instead of explaining vocabulary and grammar by teachers in the class. However,

students who were in the BCC class said that one of the main parts in teaching is teachers spent much time on vocabulary and grammar instruction.

‘I don't express vocabulary or grammar in the class. I ask students to learn it by themselves. I just explain some words and expressions they asked me or I felt difficult for them to comprehend in the class.’ (L3)

‘The main activities in teaching reading were to ask students to read and find out the message and knowledge about foreign culture. I usually ask students to summarize the main idea of each paragraph and whole passage of the reading materials. I like to let them work in pairs or groups to discuss. Actually, I don't explain the vocabulary or grammar points that much. I just ask students to learn the vocabulary by themselves as homework. What I emphasize is how they could use language to do things.’ (L6)

Through the teachers' description, teachers usually motivate students to learn vocabulary and grammar by themselves instead of teachers' explanation in the class. Contrast with the teachers' expression, and the students interviewed mentioned that teachers would spend much time teaching vocabulary and grammar. Consequently, students have few chances to take part in the speaking activities because of the limited time after language instruction in the class. Teachers still paid more attention to the form of language than on the meaning of language.

‘I should teach them the vocabulary and grammar to help them comprehend the texts because the content is difficult for the students to understand. If they cannot get the meaning of words or analyze the sentence structure, they couldn't understand the content or answer the questions in the reading exercises.’ (L8)

2) Class is not student-centered to some extent

Mentioning the teachers' opinions on task and TBLT, the teachers agreed that one of the features of TBLT is student-centered, while teachers didn't realize the idea in the actual class.

‘When I feel students have difficulties in comprehension of the reading materials, I will not change the tasks I have designed. If so, I couldn't fulfill my teaching goals set in the syllabus.’ (L6)

‘Students could take part in the tasks actively, but with poor performance. The reason is that students are lack of enough vocabulary and background information about a foreign culture that they couldn't express clearly or fluently in the class.’ (L8)

In this case, teachers seem to ignore the students' needs and language level when implementing the tasks in the class. The main element that influences the effectiveness of task implementation is that students were lack of background knowledge about the text they learned in the textbooks. What they chose and taught in the class was based on the content of the textbooks and their teaching experiences. However, Nunan (2004, 14) pointed out the key difference between traditional teaching and student-centered teaching is that 'information about learners and, where feasible, from learners will be built into all stages in the curriculum process, from initial planning, through implementation, to assessment and evaluation'. Hence, when choosing and designing tasks in the class, teachers should consider the learners' needs and information about learners.

Research question 4

What are the students' reflection to the implementation of TBLT in teaching reading part of Basic Comprehensive course at Glee Education University?

Students' satisfaction on teachers' implementation of TBLT is low, namely, including lack of student-centered features, fewer chances to participate in the interaction, low motivation to communicate with the teacher and other students in the class.

‘I like to take part in the activities which is similar or same to the daily life in the real world that I can practice my oral English more, not the activities like asking and answering the questions only about the content of the text we have learned.’ (S2)

‘I'd like my teacher to encourage me a lot when I speak out my ideas in the class. I still remember for the first weeks in my teacher's class, she pointed out my mistake directly when I answered her questions which made me depressed. From then on, I seldom spoke my ideas in the class because I was afraid of making mistakes again.’ (S4)

‘I hope my teacher could create more chances for us to use the language to communicate with others in the class, because we don't have many chances to speak English in our daily life.’ (S5)

‘I still feel that my oral English is not good enough. My teacher has taught me many useful English expressions in the class, but I don't have many chances to use them in the communication in and out of the class.’ (S7)

According to students' responses to teachers' implementation of TBLT in the classroom, they are eager to use the language they have learned in the authentic context and communicate more instead of lecturer's instructions in the class. From this aspect, the tasks teachers design and implement in the class haven't satisfied students' demands. One of the reasons might be that lectures usually follow the tasks assigned in the textbooks directly without considering the students' needs, current English level, and background knowledge. It implies that teachers should understand the conception and features of task and TBLT clearly and genuinely as well as implement the tasks under the students' needs. In addition, it is also necessary for the teacher to help learners build confidence by encouraging them to learn how to deal with tasks and use collaborative skills in task-based performance (Jeon & Hahn, 2006).

Conclusion

In the Chinese EFL context, in which learners don't have much contact with native speakers of English, the focus of language teaching has been placed on changing the classroom practice from the traditional passive lecture to more active group learning so that learners can be more easily exposed to target language use. Thus, many teachers have had an increasing amount of interest in using TBLT as an instructional method, chiefly because they believe task-based learning has specific benefits for increasing learners' communication skills and interaction.

The overall findings of the group focus interviews show that there were gaps between their perceptions and implementation of TBLT in teaching reading. Specifically, (1) the communicative principles of TBLT were commonly approved; (2) a moderate lack of knowledge on the fundamental concept and its way of operation was detected in comparison with their familiarity and approval of TBLT main principles; (3) discrepancies were observed between theoretical understanding and classroom practice; (4) low satisfaction from students upon teachers' implementation of TBLT in the class. The teacher, who wants to try implementing TBLT successfully, is required to have sufficient knowledge about the instructional framework related to its plan, procedure, and assessment (Jeon, I. & Hahn, 2006). Besides the teachers' clear understanding on task and TBLT, it is also necessary to make sure that they will implement the task teaching effectively through the whole process to fulfill the criteria of the task. Hence, it is urgent for EFL college teachers in the context to get professional teacher training which could help

them understand the definition and theory of TBLT clearly. Besides, they also need the guide and support to know how to design tasks in the lesson plan and how to motivate students to do the tasks effectively in the class.

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