

Application of Task-Based Language Teaching in College Oral English Teaching

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Keywords: Tblt, English teaching, Oral english skills

Abstract: Nowadays, there are still many problems in college oral English teaching. In order to solve the problems brought by traditional oral English teaching, a lot of new teaching methods have been developed. Task-based approach, as one of the representatives, is centered in “task”, and focuses on raising the students’ ability of using English. Therefore, TBLT can be applied to developing college students’ communicative abilities, particularly in improving students’ speaking abilities through continuous practice. This paper attempts to study the efficiency and effectiveness of using TBLT in Chinese oral English teaching.

1. Introduction

1.1 Significance of Oral English Teaching

Nowadays, communication plays a more and more crucial role in society, so oral English is very important in successful communication. With the development of the policy of reform and opening-up, great improvement of English teaching has taken place in China, the students’ enthusiasm of learning English runs higher. But many students regard oral English as a difficult thing. How to improve the students’ oral language has long been a headache for the English teachers.

Chinese is quite different from English in many ways, so speaking is a difficult skill for English learners. Students have to deal with the differences when they use the language. And students often have a small vocabulary of English words when they begin to learn to speak English. It is very hard for them to utter a whole sentence correctly. Therefore teachers must incorporate into their class activities, provide a relaxed atmosphere, which enable their students to speak English.

The goal of learning a new language is to be able to produce that language for a “real-life” communication. When students speak, they produce new sentences, not merely repeat what they have learned. Through speaking, it is easy for students to realize they are practicing what they have learned and realize they are making progress. Then they will have a sense of success in learning.

Speaking also can provide variation in the classroom routine. Usually a lot of time has been put into practicing listening, reading and writing skills. And the class is quite teacher-centered. But speaking can change it into a student-centered one. Pair work or group work can be introduced in classes. Students will feel freer in learning the language. Teacher may change his role from a controller to a conductor.

1.2 The Present Situation of Oral English Teaching

There are two main approaches in the teaching of oral English currently in China. Usually the English teachers teach the students in a traditional way which is called the PPP (presentation, practice, production) approach. Firstly the teacher explains the vocabulary, structures, and grammar items to the students; then the teacher asks the students to do mechanical drills; and finally the teacher arranges the students to do some activities so as to make the students practice using the target language. English learners have proved that this method is not ideal to improve students’ oral English.

This traditional approach has many deficiencies that lead to the problems in oral English

classroom. The traditional oral classroom pays too much attention to language forms and grammatical rules, however, very little attention to communicative competence. Learners study grammatical rules and vocabulary mechanically, whereas they cannot correctly apply what they have learned to the real communication. And most of the vocabulary they have learned in class is not useful in real life.

The traditional classroom tends to be one-way communication or teacher-centered: A teacher controls the teaching procedure from the beginning to the end, and students rarely have opportunities to express their own ideas and to do creative activities. The traditional teacher is the authority; whereas the students do as he says so they can learn what he knows. Most of the interaction in the classroom is from the teacher to the students. There is little student initiation and little student-student interaction (Larsen-Freeman, 1986: 129). So the teacher plays an active and most important role in the traditional class: he controls the direction and progress, supervises and corrects students' behavior; conversely the students are passive, having little chances to raise questions or express their own ideas. Teachers do not encourage interactive activities among students, because this may produce errors (Richard and Rodgers, 1986:38).

On the other hand, some teachers carried out their researches on the task-based language teaching (TBLT) and reported its effectiveness in the oral English teaching. Task-based language teaching has emerged since the 1980s to challenge the traditional PPP approach. TBLT refers to an approach based on the use of tasks as the core unit of planning and instruction in language teaching. It emphasizes that the students should learn a language by doing things and using the language rather than by doing mechanical exercises.

Task-based language teaching is becoming a trend in English teaching these days. Many schools have been trying the task-based language teaching approach for a more effective and innovative teaching. Over the past thirty years language teachers have witnessed dramatic changes in the ways that languages has been taught. The focus of instruction has broadened from the teaching of discrete grammatical structures to the fostering of communicative ability. Creative self-expression has come to be valued over recitation of memorized dialogues.

2. Definition of Task-Based Language Teaching

2.1 A Brief Review of Task-Based Language Teaching

“Task-Based Language Teaching”(TBLT)is an important communicative language teaching approach, which was put forward in the 1980s by researchers after lots of research and practice. Task-based Teaching is also called task-based language teaching or task-based approach which can be regarded as a development within the broader “communicative approach”. It means that teaching in classroom is mainly organized through tasks, which do not only focus on language form but also on language meaning, and learning language is also driven by tasks. At the same time,many other factors are considered, such as emotion, cognitive ability, etc. In brief, task-based teaching is to get students to learn the language by doing the task and using the language.

In class of TBLT, the students cooperatively carry out the assigned tasks by the teacher by discussing, explaining or other means of negotiating. During the course, the team members receive the academic and emotional support that helps them to deal with difficulties and obstacles. Meanwhile, in a well-structured cooperative task with a genuine information gap, learners are required to contribute to the development of an oral, written or other product which represents the group's efforts, knowledge and perspectives.

2.2 Theoretical Foundation

2.2.1 Social Constructivism

TBLT use the ideas of “learner-centered” and “people-oriented” as its core. Constructivism views knowledge as a constructed entity made by individual learners through a learning process. Marion Williams & Robert L .Burden (1997) said that learners make their own personal sense of learning tasks, their environment, the teacher and the actual process of learning. The learning occurs

through social interactions within a social environment. They also identified four key factors as part of the dynamic and ongoing process. The four key factors are: teachers, learners, tasks and contexts. Obviously, teachers and learners are the most active and important factors among the four factors. Tasks are normally designed or selected by teachers to achieve some goals which implicitly reflect their beliefs about teaching and learning. So tasks can be seen as an embodiment of the theories of learning held by teachers. Learners will then interpret tasks in ways that are meaningful and personal to them as individuals, that is, they construct their own meaning from, or make their own sense of the tasks.

2.2.2 Theories of Second Language Acquisition

Input Hypothesis states that “acquisition” takes place as a result of the learner having understood input that is a little beyond the current level of his competence. According to Input Hypothesis, input is very important to foreign language learning. One ought to keep the purpose of language in mind: Language is about communication, TBLT approach attaches great importance to the illustration. When teachers design tasks, the task’s difficulty must be a little beyond the learners’ level.

2.3 Principles of Task-Based Language Teaching

With the development of the TBLT, the researchers suggest the principles of the implementation of it based on the theories and the investigation.

2.3.1 Willis’ Principles of Task-Based Language Teaching

Willis offers five principles for the implementation of a task-based approach. These provide input, use, reflection on the input and use, and some attention to affect:

- (1) There should be exposure to worthwhile and authentic language.
- (2) There should be use of language.
- (3) Tasks should motivate learners to engage in language use.
- (4) There should be a focus on language at some points in a task cycle.
- (5) The focus on language should be more and less prominent at different times.

2.3.2 Nunan’s Principles of Task-Based Language Teaching

Nunan suggests that tasks should be designed from simple to complex, from easy to difficulty to master the language, use it by doing practicing, finishing tasks, and finally attain the goal. The tasks should be close to real world and should enable learners to solve practical problems in their real life. He puts forward the following principles:

(1) The authenticity principle

It contains two respects, first is that the language materials which be taught must be real as possible, second is that designing task must provide clear and real language information to the learners. The task must be contacted with the students' real language and social life.

(2) The form-function principle

The relationship between linguistic form and communicative function are clear to the learners. The teachers and learners can be clear at a glance. The meaning versus form debate is no longer a discriminating factor among teaching approaches because meaning and form are assumed to be essential for learning.

(3) The task dependency principle

A series of tasks in a lesson or unit of work forms a kind of pedagogical ladder, each task representing a rung on the ladder enabling the learner to reach higher and higher levels of communicative performance.

(4) Learning by doing

Learning by doing motivates students to fulfill their potential. Learners master the language by using it communicatively in the classroom, although they still have to learn grammar and memorize vocabulary.

(5) Scaffolding

Scaffolding is a process of “setting up” the situation to make the child's entry easy and successful and then gradually pulling back and handing the role to the child as he becomes skilled enough to manage it (Nunan 1999:78).

3. Application of Tblt to Oral English Teaching

In order to test whether TBLT is good to enhance learners’ speaking ability, I had an experiment that lasted one semester. Here is a report about the process of the experiment:

3.1 Hypothesis

Based on the theories constituting the theoretical foundations of TBLT, the author proposes the following hypotheses that the employment of the TBLT in the oral English teaching in the experimental class will improve the English speaking skills of the students effectively.

3.2 Subjects and Treatment

The subjects in this research are 70 (27 males; 43 females) Service Class students studying in Nanjing Agricultural and Forestry Vocational School. The subjects were divided into two classes after they were enrolled to the school. Two classes were then randomly assigned to using either task-based teaching method or traditional PPP teaching method. Class A with 35(14 males,21 females)students were lectured with the task-based teaching approach, for experiment, and the other one Class B with 35(13 males,22 females)students was lectured using the traditional teaching approach as control. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 20, with the majority (88%) being 18. In order to see whether the students in the two classes are of the same oral English proficiency before the experiment, the author gave the students of the two classes an English oral test. The results of the test showed that the participants in the two classes were at the same oral English proficiency. I was responsible for both classes, and did not favor one or discriminate against the other. Meanwhile, the teaching content and teaching hours will be the same. Only the teaching methods will be different. So, the teacher, the students and the time of the experiment will be all relatively stable without outside interference.

3.3 Instruments

During the research, I mainly use the instruments of two oral tests. The pretest and posttest were employed to find out whether there were any changes in the participants’ oral production after the experiment. Three teachers who had never taught the subjects English made the oral test questions. Before the tests, the author had made clear that none of the participants had ever taken these oral test questions. So the validity, objectivity and reliability of the pretest and posttest could be guaranteed (The concrete oral test questions in the two tests can be found in Appendix I and II).

3.4 Experimental Procedures for the Task-Based Teaching Approach

Before the start of the experiment, the teacher needs to explain the program to students. All students should be clear about the objectives of the research and their relevance to the program and the institutional contexts.

During the experiment, the author taught the experimental group with the TBLT approach, while taught the control group with the traditional PPP approach. In the control group, the author firstly presented and explained the new words and expressions and structures. After doing that, the author analyzed the text and explained the important grammar items in the text. Secondly the author arranged the students to do some mechanical exercises to make the students consolidate their language knowledge that they have just learned. Thirdly the author asked the students to do some activities using the vocabulary and structures learned in this lesson.

In the TBLT lessons, the author taught the students according to Willis’ principles of task-based language teaching. The lesson consists of three stages. At the pre-task stage, the author told the students what tasks they should do in this lesson and gave them some background knowledge and vocabulary so as to facilitate the students to accomplish the task. At the task cycle stage, the author

asked the students to do the tasks. Then the students were asked to plan to report the result of their tasks to the whole class. Later on, the author selected some groups to report the result of their tasks in front of the whole class. At the language focus stage, the author analyzed the reporters' language and gave necessary corrections. Then the students were arranged to do some language exercises to learn to use and memorize the useful words, phrases, structures and grammar rules so as to consolidate their mastery of the language form.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Data Analyzing Device

To investigate whether there are some significant differences in oral English teaching with the two approaches, mean score, standard deviation, T-test and Z-test were employed in the present experiment.

Mean score is the arithmetic average of a set of scores. It is the most commonly used and most widely applicable measure of the central tendency of a distribution (Richards, J. Platt and H. Platt, 2002: 228). Mean score takes into account all the scores in a group.

Mean difference: the mean for one group minus the mean for the other group. Standard deviation is the commonest measure of the dispersion of a distribution, that is, of the degree to which scores vary from the mean. It is defined as the square root of the variance.

T-test: the probability of obtaining results as extreme as the one observed, and in either direction when the null hypothesis is true. A two-tailed significance level tests a null hypothesis in which the direction of an effect is not specific in advance.

Z-test: it is used to test whether there is significance between the percentages of two or more samples.

4.2 Analysis of Pre-Test Data

Before the experiment, the experimental class and the control class received a speaking skill test. During the test each student was given similar instructions and amount of preparation time. The first item was a short passage for students to read. It mainly assessed their pronunciation, intonation and fluency. The second one was that a pair of students was given a certain situation to make up a dialogue, prepared for 3 minutes and then acted the situational dialogue out. It mainly assessed conversational strategies, intelligibility and fluency. The third one was that the student was given a topic, prepared for 3 minutes and then talked on the topic for 1 minute. It mainly assessed their oral competence. The results of pre-test were listed in the table 4.2. Through two independent-samples t tests, we can see that there was no significant difference ($t < 1.96$) between the experimental class and the control class in terms of the speaking skills (read a short, situational dialogue, and talk on a topic). Table 1 informs us that mean cores of the experimental and the control classes for speaking skills, reading a short passage and situational dialogue are similar. And the t-value is 0.222, 0.457 and 0.672, which are much lower than the critical value (1.96). Therefore a conclusion can be drawn that there is no significant difference between the two groups, which indicates that they learn speaking English from almost the same starting point.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics Of the Speaking Skills of the Two Classes Based on the Pre-Test

Speaking skills	Classes	n	X±s	t
Read a short passage	Experimental class	35	73.82±8.91	0.222<1.96
	Control class		74.23±8.16	
Situational dialogue	Experimental class	35	71.76±6.09	0.457<1.96
	Control class		72.48±8.34	
Talk on a topic	Experimental class	35	70.75±7.82	0.672<1.96
	Control class		71.99±9.22	

(n indicates the sample size, namely the number of the students in classes; X indicates arithmetic mean and s indicates standard deviation; t indicates t-value;)

4.3 Analysis of Post-Test Data

After one semester of the experiment, the experimental class and the control class received oral test again. The results were listed in table 2, which is observed that both of these two classes have made much progress. The mean scores not only of the experimental class but also of the control class are much higher than those of pre-experiment. Through two independent-samples t tests, we can see that there was no significant difference between these two classes in terms of reading a short passage. From the table we can see the mean scores of the experimental group for speaking skills in terms of situational dialogue and talking on a topic are 83.77 and 82.31 points higher than that of control group (78.73, 76.39). And t-value 2.979 and 3.442 were much higher than the critical value 1.96. Thus, it shows that there was significant difference between the experimental class and control class in terms of situational dialogue and talking on a topic. And the standard deviation (7.29, 7.27) of the experimental group is lower than that (8.36, 8.62) of the control group. To be specific, the experimental group performs better than the control group in post-test. Therefore it can be concluded that the TBLT is more effective in improving the students' speaking skill than the traditional method.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics Of the Speaking Skills of the Two Classes Based on the Post-Test

Speaking skills	Classes	n	X±s	t
Read a short passage	Experimental class	35	87.43±9.35	0.453<1.96
	Control class		86.42±9.06	
Situational dialogue	Experimental class	35	83.77±7.29	2.979>1.96
	Control class		78.73±8.36	
Talk on a topic	Experimental class	35	82.31±7.27	3.442>1.96
	Control class		76.39±8.62	

(n indicates the sample size, namely the number of the students in classes; X indicates arithmetic mean and s indicates standard deviation; t indicates t-value;)

The data suggest that TBLT is feasible for the English learners in this school to improve their speaking skill.

□ 5. Conclusion

Language learning is a dynamic process, which means one approach cannot solve all problems. The results of the research indicated that the framework of task-based language teaching approach with clear steps was easy to implement. Students could have a natural acquisition of the English in the process of solving problems and implementing tasks. The application of task-based learning in colleges was feasible and effective.

Task-based language teaching approach is effective in motivating students to foster their communicative abilities and learning capability: the ability to negotiate meaning and express meaning. The students can improve their skills and abilities including not only language skills, but also other skills and abilities, especially creative thinking ability, cooperative ability, skills for speech and the abilities to obtain information. All these activities are helpful to cultivate students' comprehensive ability.

Task-based approach is likely to create an active atmosphere in class, because activities require students to participate, that is, students are supposed to be active participants instead of passive receivers. Different activities attract students' attention and arouse their interest in the learning process. Meanwhile, activities offer students opportunities to practice, such as role-plays, games, dramas, discussions, debates, etc. seem to share the most important characteristics of communication, which have proved to be effective in motivating students and in cultivating their communicative competence.

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