

Challenging Common Accepted Barriers of Implementing Task-based Language Teaching in EFL Classroom in China

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Abstract. As time goes on, researchers and educators have already realized the deficiencies of using grammar-translation method in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). The advantages of applying Task-based language teaching (TBLT) in English classes in China have gradually emerged. Nonetheless, applying TBLT in English classes in China still encounters obstacles. The common accepted elements that will hinder the process of implementing TBLT in EFL classroom in China include teachers' quality, teachers' teaching willingness, absent of the evaluation system of TBLT, and students' imbalanced language proficiency. In this paper, the author will challenge these common accepted barriers, explain why teachers' quality is not one of them, and summarize that the teaching materials and the large class size are other predominant barriers for the use of TBLT in China. Based on these facts, to applying TBLT successful, it is a necessity for educators in China to make changes to the College Entrance Exam system and solve the problem of the large size.

1. Introduction

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is a useful language teaching method in English classes as well as in the discipline of second language acquisition (SLA) [1]. TBLT has become a predominant teaching approach in a lot of countries due to its in-negligible advantages in language learning. Nowadays, researchers and teachers start to realize the shortages of traditional teaching approach in China and they are eager to apply TBLT in English classes in China to improve students' learning efficiency. The New National English Curriculum in China in 2001 advocated TBLT as a new teaching approach and proposed to implement TBLT in teaching English in public schools [2, 3]. The original intention of this proposal is that educators believe TBLT can help students develop their language skills and improve their abilities to communicate in real situations. However, the implementation of TBLT in Chinese English classes has encountered difficulties and did not achieve educators' anticipations.

In China, grammar-translation method is the dominant way to teach English as a foreign language (EFL) [4]. Grammar-translation method is the earliest and most popular teaching approach in English classes in China. Teachers have been applying this method since the last century. Explaining grammar, using translation in practice, and emphasizing reading and vocabulary are the main characteristics of grammar-translation method [5]. At the early stage, translation, vocabulary and sentence practice were useful and easy for students to acquire language ability because at that time teachers just focused on students' reading and listening skills. Nonetheless, the shortages of grammar-translation method gradually emerged. Liu proposes that as for traditional English classes in China, teacher is the center of the class while students are listening and taking notes [4]. Since there are few opportunities to use English in practice, these students are just good at listening and reading yet lack the ability of speaking and writing, which leads to unbalanced overall language skills [6].

Furthermore, in grammar-translation method, students often feel stressed and bored when they learn grammar rules and remember vocabulary. As a result, students lack motivations and may easily be distracted to do irrelevant things, for instance, lots of students are on their mobile phones in English classes, which is a very common scenario in China these days [5].

Compared with grammar-translation method, TBLT teaching approach has its own advantages which is able to make up for existing problems in grammar-translation method. TBLT treats tasks as a main tool for constructing knowledge and practice using language and engaging students in performing meaningful tasks to improve language learning [7]. A simple activity in task-based classroom can make students actively engaged in class [8]. Consequently, students would increase their interests, enjoy the language learning process, and become active participants in task-based classroom [6].

These tasks designed in task-based classroom which reflect the real-world providing learners an efficient way to learn language. It gives students the opportunities to enjoy accomplishment within tasks and practice language while delivering oral messages [9]. Jeon and Hahn [10] think that TBLT offers students meaningful material and creates communicative activity to push them to use the target language. Learners would acquire language more efficiently when they are exposed to meaningful activities.

2. The Generally Claimed Obstacles for Implementing TBLT in EFL Classroom in China

Although many teachers and researchers admit the advantages of TBLT and want to apply it in Chinese English classroom, there are some generally claimed obstacles: teachers' teaching ability to hinder TBLT, teachers' intention of applying TBLT, absent of clear evaluation system of TBLT, and students' imbalanced language proficiency.

Firstly, teachers' quality is a factor that hinder the applying of TBLT in China [11]. They believe that those teachers have limited understanding of TBLT and of how to implement TBLT in EFL classroom. Applying TBLT teaching approach in China may pose challenges and conflicting for instructors because it requires teachers to acquire knowledge about TBLT approach, be able to design useful tasks and manage the whole class during implementation [2]. Even though teachers advocate new curriculum and want to add TBLT in their classes, they cannot guarantee that applying TBLT will have positive influence on students because they have little knowledge about using TBLT in real context. Hu claims that applying TBLT requires well-trained teachers who have high-level communicative competences in English [2]. Teachers who lack practical techniques for implementing task-based teaching need deep trainings to master this approach, such as design, planning, evaluating, and so on [12].

Furthermore, teacher' willingness causes the barriers of applying TBLT in China. Teachers feel more comfortable using grammar-translation method [11]. It provides Chinese English teachers a sense of security because it makes it easier to manage students and keep their authorities [5]. Using grammar-translation method, teachers teach mainly based on textbooks and exercises. However, as for using TBLT, teachers have to spend extra time to design tasks after class, manage activities in class, and answer students' unexpected questions.

Thirdly, the evaluation system in TBLT class impede teachers implementing this teaching method. Hu mentions that TBLT has differences with traditional teaching method which cannot simply evaluate through examinations and scores. Diverse tasks are the main part of classes with TBLT and students' performances in these tasks are the significant proportion of its evaluation system. As a result, it is hard for teachers to assess students' performances in TBLT teaching objectively, visually, and impartially [2]. Cheng and Moses in their experiments shows that 61.9% teachers lack of self-confidence to assess students' performances in TBLT [12].

Also, students' imbalanced language proficiency is another barrier in TBLT class. It is common that there are gaps of students' language proficiency in a class due to their different learning backgrounds. The task that part of the students feel easy is possible difficult for others. Cheng and Moses in their paper mention that students lack of confidence to speak English in TBLT classes because they are afraid of competition and making mistakes [12]. Liu in her paper also mentions that in TBLT class, students feel difficult to express ideas in English and they prefer to use Chinese during discussion, which is opposite to the intention of guiding students to practice English in real situation [4].

3. My Challenge to the Predominant Barriers of Using TBLT in EFL Classroom in China

Researchers provide several general claimed reasons which cause the barriers of applying TBLT in China. By contrast, the author will challenge these predominant barriers and propose other obstacles. First of all, the author believes that the teachers' quality does not hinder TBLT in China. However, the author thinks that the teaching materials and the large class size are two other factors hinder the process of implementing TBLT in China. The assumptions are based on one current situation. In Beijing, some public schools and private schools advocate TBLT in English classes. Nevertheless, the implementation of TBLT encounters less barriers in private schools and most of the private schools have successfully applied TBLT in their English classes. To support the ideas, the author would compare the current teachers' quality, the teaching curriculum, and the class size in public schools and private schools to evidence if these three reasons result in discrepancy of applying TBLT in EFL classes between these two types of schools.

3.1 The Challenge to the Misconception of Teachers' Quality

To begin with, we will talk about the teachers' quality. Some researchers believe that TBLT cannot be applied successfully in public schools because the teachers in private schools have higher ability to use this teaching approach than those in public schools. Nevertheless, the following three points can prove that this is not a barrier for applying TBLT in China.

Firstly, teachers in both public schools and private schools have similar training before graduating from university, where they experience the same educational system and training to improve their teaching skills. They are offered the same courses whether they major in English education or English language, rather than being differentiated into 'public school teachers' or 'private school teachers'. Therefore, as they gain the same knowledge of TBLT and experience the same training programs, there will not be any big discrepancies of their ability when applying to TBLT.

Secondly, the recruitment process is similar no matter in public schools or in private schools. All teachers have to complete the same recruiting process. Whether teachers are able to apply TBLT into their teaching practice is not a criterion in both private and public schools. It does not necessarily mean that teachers who are hired to teach in private schools are better at applying TBLT in English classroom.

Thirdly, the teachers at public schools enjoy better welfare and greater financial security than the teachers in private schools because they are treated as civil servants. If teachers work in public schools, they are able to solve the household registration issue, enjoy better social welfare, stable income and higher social status. This causes severe competition for securing a job in public schools. Consequently, public schools set higher requirements for recruiting new teachers. For example, in Beijing, although key public senior high schools require teacher to hold a master's degree, most teachers who get into these schools have doctor's degree. If they fail to have these degrees, public schools would not give them chances to be interviewed. By contrast, in private schools, there is no strict requirement for degrees. As long as teachers pass the interview, they could get a job in a private school.

3.2 Other Reason of Hindering TBLT in EFL Classroom in China

Although researchers summarize that teachers' teaching willingness, absent of the evaluation system of TBLT, and students' imbalanced language proficiency are the common accepted obstacles of implementing TBLT in EFL classes in China, the author also proposes that the teaching materials and the large class size are other reasons of hindering the process.

3.2.1 The Teaching Materials

The differences in the teaching materials in public schools and that in private schools contribute to the diverse results of applying TBLT. In public schools, teachers use standard textbook issued by the government. On the contrary, private schools design their own books which may be introduced from foreign countries. How to design appropriate tasks and obtain authentic task-based materials are two more difficulties to apply TBLT [10]. Researchers cannot ignore the importance of teaching materials

in TBLT. In this paper, the author would discuss teaching curriculums from two sides to prove its role as a barrier in applying TBLT.

Firstly, the editors of textbook in public schools have the capability of designing TBLT in textbooks for there are already TBLT activities in current English textbook. These textbooks are divided into varied topics, such as hobby, sports, movie, and so on. Editors combine target language with specific area. Then they would create authentic context for students to practice the target language. We can find an example in the textbook. The editor creates a situation where Peter is a student from England. He writes a letter to explain his hobbies. Learners need to write a reply to pen-friend Peter to express their feelings and discuss their own hobbies. This activity is one kind of TBLT. There are some other activities like this in textbooks. Consequently, we can find that curriculum's designer in public schools have the awareness to follow National English Curriculum in China in 2001.

Furthermore, the main obstacle is how the curriculum is actually implemented by teachers. Because of different teaching goals, public and private school teachers select different teaching methods. Most of the students in public schools prepare for the college entrance examination. Instead, most of the students in private schools prefer to study abroad. As a result, for public schools, although teachers have three years to cover the content of the textbook, they usually finish new knowledge within two years, because they must spend one year in guiding students to review knowledge and prepare for the college entrance examination. Therefore, even though there are designed TBLT activities in textbook and teachers have the ability to apply it, they do not have enough time to really manage the tasks in their classes. Compared with using language into practice, preparing the College Entrance Examination is the priority for students and teachers. By contrast, in private schools, teachers and students do not have such stress of the college entrance examination. Therefore, they have more freedom to design and apply TBLT, which helps students to know how to use target language in real situations and motivates them to acquire language through completing tasks.

3.2.2 The Large Class Size

Researchers claim that the large class size is a barrier for applying TBLT in China because crowded classrooms do not allow students to have such interactions with TBLT [12]. The differences in the class size between public schools and private schools are a good example. In China, recent research shows that there are usually 40 to 70 students sitting in one classroom in public schools, while the class size in private schools is around 20 students. There is a huge gap in the class size of private and public schools. The large size of class becomes a barrier for using TBLT [12].

For the process of applying TBLT, the large class size causes difficulties. In TBLT classrooms, teachers need to walk around, observe students' performances, guide them find answers, and provide feedbacks. Consequently, it is more appropriate to have smaller class size to implement TBLT as it is hard for teachers to manage too many students at the same time while doing task-based activities.

Moreover, in the process of assessment, it is hard for teachers to evaluate students' performances in the large class size while applying TBLT in classrooms. The main assessment in TBLT cannot be the scores of examinations as the main evaluation that appears in grammar -translation teaching method. In TBLT classrooms, teachers need to observe students' performances when students discuss with each other, express ideas, exchange information, and complete tasks as a group. These details decide whether students really participate in TBLT classrooms and whether they are able to achieve teaching objectives. If teachers apply TBLT in a large size class that consists of 70 students, managing classroom discipline would cost them most of the time. They seldom have time to assess students' performances and provide feedbacks. Naturally, the teaching efficiency of TBLT is lower.

In China, the large class size has become a challenge for TBLT for a long time which leads to lower teaching efficiency in TBLT classrooms. Although researchers want to find the solution of this barriers, due the educational policy, few researchers talk about this sensitive question to find why this phenomenon occurs. As an experienced educator, the author believes that it is the unequal educational resources that contribute to this phenomenon. The differences between key middle schools and ordinary secondary schools is huge. Studying in key middle schools means that students have more possibility to get into a good college and find a better job in the future. Therefore, parents

go out of their way to send their children into key middle schools. Gradually, the number of students in key middle schools become higher. Meanwhile, those key middle schools do not want to hire more teachers to support huge students. If they decide to employ a teacher, they must provide welfare, salary, register permanent residence, and housing allowance. These are huge fiscal expenditure for those schools. As a result, the issue of staff-student ratio cannot be resolved within a short period even though educators realize that the large class size results in the barriers of applying TBLT

4. Conclusion

There are some barriers of applying TBLT in EFL classrooms in China, however, the author believes that researchers and teachers have already admitted the advantages of applying TBLT and they try to find solutions to implement TBLT successfully in China.

The first step that educators are doing to solve the barriers of using TBLT is to design a new assessment system for the College Entrance Exam. College Entrance Exam including such a huge population causes new dilemmas [13]. It contributes to negative school cultures and instructional programs [8]. All current teaching objectives and courses have to follow the rules of the College Entrance Exam. If the knowledge is irrelevant with the College Entrance Exam, teachers prefer to avoid spending time on designing it and students would not like to practice it as well. This naturally impact the implementation of TBLT in Chinese English classrooms. By contrast, now educators changed parts assessment in the College Entrance Exam, which may lower the barriers of applying TBLT. In 2016, Implementation Plan of Deepening Examination and Enrollment System Reform in Beijing changed the criteria for College Entrance Exam and senior high school Entrance Examination. English Oral Exam Score will be included from 2021 and oral test has become a new criterion for College Entrance Exam and senior high school Entrance Examination. Naturally, teachers and students will pay attention to improve students' oral competence. As a result, traditional grammar-teaching method cannot meet their needs. TBLT can provide students opportunities to communicate with each in a real context so that they can improve their oral English. In addition, English has become the common language for worldwide communication, which makes many countries put English into a national curriculum [6]. Teenagers begin to realize that the oral competence is critical to their future job search and promotion. This can also become a catalyst of applying TBLT in public schools in China.

Moreover, educators and researchers need to pay more attention to the large class size in China and try to solve this barrier of applying TBLT as well. Combing with Chinese special national conditions, they could explore a new way to divide students into a smaller size or hire more teachers, which increases the ration between teachers and students.

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