

Exploring Teachers' Perceptions towards Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in Teaching English Reading at a Public University in China

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Abstract. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), as the top-down policy advocated in English education in China, has been acknowledged as an effective method to improve students' reading skills. Teachers' perceptions about TBLT could influence the design and implementation of TBLT in the class and, ultimately, students' learning outcomes. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct research on teachers' perceptions within the classroom context. This research aims to explore EFL teachers' perceptions of TBLT in teaching English reading at a public university in China. A qualitative case study was conducted with 11 university EFL teachers through purposive sampling. The analysis of the focus group interview with 8 teachers and the individual interviews with 3 teachers was conducted in this study. Additionally, data triangulation was employed with document analysis. The findings indicated that college EFL teachers in the university had a comparatively clear understanding of TBLT in teaching English reading. However, some of the teachers misunderstood TBLT, which caused challenges for them when implementing TBLT in the class. The results propose pedagogical ideas for successful TBLT design and implementation in the tertiary setting in China.

1 Introduction

The rise of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in several Asian countries can be attributed, at least in part, to government curriculum changes that explicitly endorse this approach [7]. In China, TBLT has been promoted actively as a top-down approach to English teaching in primary and secondary schools since 2001 [1-3]. In the process of TBLT implementation in the practical classes, teachers play a crucial role as they offer target language input and facilitate language use and form-focus activities for students to practice and enhance their English skills. Hence, it can be hypothesized that the effectiveness of TBLT is limited by the quality of the teachers implementing the tasks [12]. Therefore, teachers' understanding of TBLT directly affects their implementation of TBLT in the classrooms [4, 35, 36].

There exists a substantial discrepancy between policies and actual practices at the classroom level since the implementation of TBLT was largely constrained by the teachers' limited understanding of tasks and knowledge-oriented examination factors in China [32].

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The teachers' role is vital in the implementation of TBLT in practical classrooms. However, many teachers find it difficult to put task-based ideas into practical classroom use [26]. Ellis and Shintani (2013) argued that teachers faced challenges in implementing TBLT in a particular context as they do not understand what a task is or/and how to apply a task-based language teaching approach clearly [26]. According to Harris (2018), some teachers may believe that they are implementing a TBLT approach, but there could be misconceptions about its actual implementation [7]. East (2012) concludes that it is one thing for theorists, researchers, and curriculum developers to promote and investigate TBLT for its potential power as a beneficial language pedagogy; it might be quite another for teachers to make it at the grassroots level of the language classroom [13].

Therefore, it is necessary to explore teachers' understanding of TBLT. It could provide suggestions for teacher educators on training TBLT, as teachers should acquire a comprehensive understanding of the principles of TBLT before incorporating it into classroom instructions. The main objective of this study was to explore the teachers' perception of TBLT in teaching English reading in one public university in China. The major question of this study was: what are the teachers' perceptions of TBLT in teaching reading? It is hoped that the findings of the study could guide and facilitate the designers in designing better materials for the teaching of English reading.

2 Literature Review

This section presents task-based language teaching and its details in the subsections.

2.1 Definition of Task and TBLT

Task is defined as a wide range of activities that individuals participate in on a daily basis, including work, leisure, and everything in between [16, 17]. Tasks can be classified into target tasks and pedagogic tasks [5]. The target tasks are the activities individuals consider when organizing, executing, or recollecting their daily experiences in the real world [17]. The pedagogic tasks refer to classroom activities where students engage in understanding, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language. The main focus is on utilizing their grammatical knowledge to express meaning, with the intention of conveying meaning rather than solely focusing on manipulating form [5].

Tasks are activities involving learners using the target language to achieve a specific outcome for communicative purposes [11]. Hence, TBLT is an effective method of language instruction that actively involves learners in authentic language use within the classroom [6]. Similarly, language in communicative tasks is considered to achieve the desired result by exchanging meanings [5].

Tasks are also categorized into communication tasks and enabling tasks. Communication tasks engage all students in the class in the process of comprehending and producing a foreign language. Students prioritize understanding over structure [31]. The activities mirror the actions performed by students in their daily lives, thereby replicating the characteristics of everyday communication. Enabling tasks supports students in acquiring the linguistic tools necessary for performing communicative tasks [31]. Likewise, the use of grammatical knowledge is emphasized to convey meaning for the close connection between meaning and form. Grammar serves the purpose of facilitating the expression of various communicative meanings.

Overall, the researchers gave different definitions of tasks. Some perceived the task concept in a broad manner that tasks are both linguistic and non-linguistic. Essentially, the tasks are related to real-world activities. Some emphasize the tasks in the classroom that require students to use language to reach a communication goal. The common features and

criteria of tasks focus on the primary meaning. The interpretation of meaning in each of the task definitions should be understood in its pragmatic (communicative) sense [6, 23, 24, 25]. Hence, based on the definitions of tasks above, a task involves the processing of input, generation of output, and interaction with others in order to achieve a specific goal [6, 23, 24, 25]. TBLT is a student-centered and experiential approach [6]. TBLT is a communicative approach that is based on the belief that language is most effectively acquired and developed through communication [15].

TBLT can be illustrated by the following features [6, 23, 24, 25]:

1. A meaningful communicative purpose is clearly stated.
2. There is a resemblance between the tasks and everyday communication.
3. Focus is on the meaning.
4. The relationship between meaning and form is closely connected, and grammar serves the purpose of facilitating the expression of various communicative meanings.
5. An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning.
6. A variety of activities are used for learners to interact and solve problems.

3 Methodology

This section presents the methodology used in this study, which consists of a case study, research instrument, settings, and participants.

3.1 Case Study

In this study, a case study is chosen to explore in-depth the teachers' perception of TBLT in teaching English reading at one public university in China. According to Creswell (2012), a case study is a qualitative research approach [8]. This method involves the exploration of a specific system or multiple systems over some time. The researcher collects detailed and in-depth data from various sources such as observations, interviews, audio-visual material, and documents and reports. The result is a comprehensive description of the case and the identification of themes that emerge from the data. A case study's structure includes the problem, context, issues, and 'lessons learned' [8]. Hence, a case study is problem-centered on a small scale, focusing on the details and complexity.

A case study is a detailed description and analysis of a phenomenon using multiple data collection methods to understand the existing problem in-depth. In this study, the researcher employed group focus interviews, individual interviews, and document analysis to get comprehensive and actual data on the teachers' perception of TBLT in teaching English reading. In addition, a case study enables in-depth exploration to understand what is happening at a place bounded by time and space. In this study, the researcher concentrated on the teachers' perception of TBLT in teaching reading at one university in China, which is bounded in a particular context. This method aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of a situation and a process rather than the outcome of a phenomenon [29, 30]. This study focused on the detailed situation of what teachers understand TBLT in teaching English reading at one university. The findings can be generalized to a group of people with the same characteristics as the sample of this study [9, 30].

3.2 Research Instruments

It is crucial to carefully select appropriate instruments to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings [9]. This study employed three instruments to gather the necessary data: focus

group interviews, individual interviews, and document analysis. A total of eight teachers participated in the focus group interviews, divided into two groups with four teachers in each group. Focus group interviews are commonly employed to gather insights from a limited number of individuals, typically from 4 to 10 participants [29]. These interviews aimed to delve into teachers' understanding, feelings, and ideas of TBLT and the implementation of TBLT in the classroom. Three teachers participated in individual interviews because they could not attend the focus group interviews. In addition, the document analysis was also utilized to collect documented evidence to validate the data obtained from the focus group and individual interviews.

3.3 Research setting and participants

In this study, purposive sampling was selected to choose the participants. Purposive sampling was employed to obtain specific data about teachers' perceptions of TBLT in teaching English reading [10]. Purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to discover and gain insight into the teachers' understanding of TBLT when they applied the approach in English reading class [29]. The individuals selected in purposeful sampling were the teachers required to apply the TBLT approach to teach students reading. They could provide key and rich information about their understanding of TBLT through interviews [10].

The participants selected in this study were eleven teachers who taught English reading to Year 1 and Year 2 students at the university. The researcher used pseudonyms to protect the participants' confidentiality [27]. T was used to refer to the teachers who participated in the focus group and individual interviews. Each participant was given a number (T1-T11). All the teachers who were interviewed have applied TBLT to teach English reading. Additionally, all eleven lecturers have master's degrees in majors of foreign linguistics and applied linguistics, Translation and interpretation, and Instructional design separately. Ten of the eleven lecturers have more than five years of teaching experience.

The researcher asked the prospective participants if they would answer in English. However, they preferred to use their native language, Mandarin, to answer the questions posted to them. Using Mandarin, the participant's first language, could avoid linguistic difficulties they might have encountered if reporting in English. The interviews were recorded. The researcher transcribed and translated their responses into English.

4 Findings and Discussion

Teachers' perception is the key to the implementation of TBLT in the class [36]. The researcher collected data on teachers' perceptions of TBLT through interviews and documents they used in teaching English reading. Based on the teachers' perceptions, they believed that the aim of TBLT is to help students achieve communicative goals in the class. TBLT is a student-centered approach that emphasizes the students' participation in learning, students' active learning, students' collaboration, and students' interest in the teaching process. In addition, they stated that tasks should be derived from students' daily activities. However, they misunderstood that there is no grammar teaching in TBLT. Some of them had the misconception that a task is a language exercise and homework. The findings are categorized into the following subthemes.

4.1 TBLT is to achieve the communicative goal

The findings from the interview responses demonstrated that the teachers had a common understanding that TBLT is the communicative, goal-oriented approach. Teachers'

understanding of setting communicative goals in TBLT is influenced by the popularity of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) introduced in China in the 1970s [37]. TBLT, thereafter following CLT, shared the same aim of developing students' communicative competence through meaningful interaction [33, 34]. Hence, lecturers repeatedly addressed the goal of developing students' communicative competence in TBLT. The following are some statements of the participants, namely T3 and T10 that TBLT is to achieve the communicative goal in teaching reading:

"Actually, the task is a kind of means or way to ultimately achieve the communicative goals in teaching the CE course. ... because the textbook we use is named 'Communication English for Chinese Learners,' which means I should set the goals to cultivate students' communicative competence through the whole teaching procedure." – T3 from FGI.

"In TBLT, for one thing, students need to learn the knowledge of English; for another thing, they need to learn how to communicate with each other in English." – T10 from II.

The teachers' interview responses corroborated with the textbooks students used to learn English reading. The objectives and the content of the textbook used in English reading teaching match the communicative goal. Figure 1 shows the preface of the textbook.

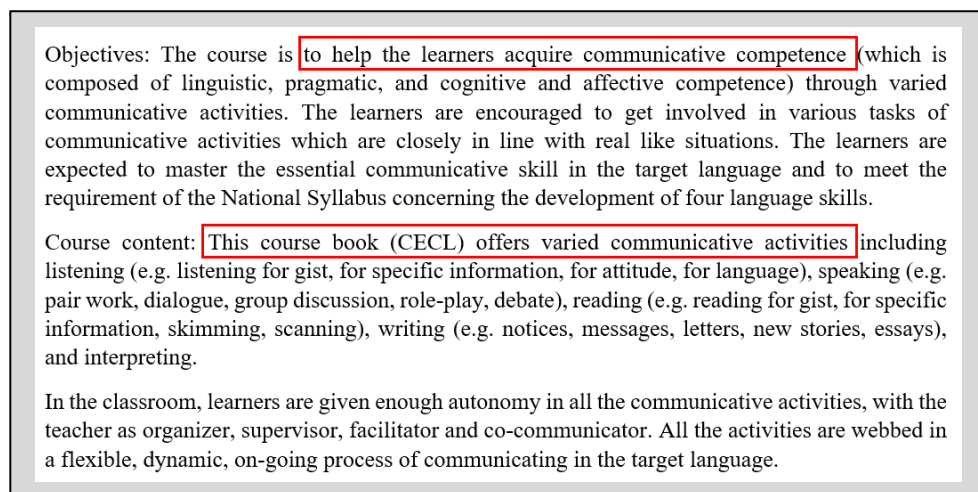


Fig. 1. Textbook preface in English translation

The findings are similar to those results found about teachers' perceptions of TBLT in some other areas in China and other Asian countries, such as Beijing [28], Japan [7], and Vietnam [22]. TBLT is an approach aimed at improving students' communicative skills and competence. In English classes applying the TBLT approach, students are provided with opportunities to carry out communication activities by using the target language in the classroom context.

4.2 TBLT is a student-centered approach

The researcher found that teachers understand TBLT as a student-centered approach. Learner-centeredness focuses on the information about and from learners built into all teaching stages. The goal of TBLT in reading teaching is to develop students' ability to communicate effectively, with a strong emphasis on the students. Hence, they thought TBLT emphasized students' participation in the reading tasks. In addition, they understood that they

should raise students' interest and background knowledge when applying TBLT in reading teaching. Furthermore, students were encouraged to do the tasks collaboratively in reading class. The responses from the interviews on teachers' perceptions of TBLT as a student-centered approach are illustrated in the following:

"TBLT is based on the educational theory of Dewey's Pragmatism. It emphasizes a student-centered approach. Students' output is more meaningful. ...One of the important goals is to guide students to communicate and exchange information through reading." – T2 from FGI

"I first consider students' background knowledge about the reading topics. Another thing I consider is their interest in reading topics." – T3 from FGI.

"In TBLT classroom, students can't follow the teacher as a 'language knowledge Container'; instead, they should take part in the tasks actively. This is what I am thinking. Also, students are given more opportunities to use the language in the class." – T7 from FGI.

"Task is about the teamwork of interaction between students and students, as well as students and teacher. I think jigsaw reading is a good task for students to exchange information with each other." – T10 from II.

According to T2, he thought TBLT was a student-centered approach because he thought students were active learners to produce the output of the language based on the reading texts they learned in the class. T3 treated students' interests and knowledge of reading topics as necessary. Students should be motivated to read the texts actively themselves. In addition, they were supposed to be given more opportunities to use the language in the class. T10 thought students would also be encouraged to work in pairs or groups with their classmates to read the texts, like jigsaw reading.

Compared with the traditional teacher-centered model, teachers in TBLT class would spare more time for students to discuss and share the information as well as their opinions based on the texts they read. Students play a significant role in the language learning process [18]. The teachers need to guide the students to learn the language based on students' readiness, comprehension, and interests. The teachers' perception of TBLT as a student-centered approach reflects the changes in teachers' and students' roles in English teaching in the class.

4.3 TBLT emphasizes that situations are derived from students' daily life

Teachers from the focus group interviews and individual interviews understood that a task is an activity that involves using language in a real situation, just like people do in their daily lives. Hence, they understood that they should set the scenes the same as or similar to the student's lives in the real world to help them use the target language to communicate in class.

The responses from the teachers, the content and tasks in the textbook, and the activities suggested in the teacher's Handbook clearly indicated that students should learn and use the language that is used in daily life to improve their skills. The finding is similar to a study of three teachers in a primary school in Hong Kong to understand that TBLT focused on students' use of target language within an authentic situation [4]. One of the features of designing tasks is authenticity. Authenticity refers to the activities which occur in daily life [24]. Students have the opportunity to communicate with the target language in an actual context in the class the teacher creates for them [5]. Therefore, the teacher's perception of the

authenticity of language resources and their use in TBLT reflects the aim of TBLT, which is to develop students' ability to use the target language in real situations [5].

4.4 The teaching of grammar is not practiced in the TBLT approach.

According to the interviews, some of the teachers had a fundamental misconception of what a "task" is. Teachers reported that they ignored grammar teaching when implementing TBLT in reading class. They misunderstood that students could learn grammar on their own before or after class, as grammar is not the focus in TBLT. What the teachers focused on in the class was the students' performance in completing the tasks. Some of their responses are in the following:

"When students are doing tasks or activities in the class, I don't teach or explain grammar points. I focus on their performances when doing tasks." – T2 from FGI.

"I usually ask students to learn the vocabulary, grammar, and discourse structures by themselves out of the class. I don't focus grammar teaching on the class." – T8 from FGI.

These teachers' understanding of grammar teaching in TBLT is consistent with the finding that many English teachers in China misunderstand that there should be no grammar teaching in TBLT [39]. This also reflects the findings that teachers had difficulties recognizing the function that TBLT had in the learning of grammatical structures in their students' language development [14, 19]. However, in TBLT, grammar plays a crucial place, for grammar is an essential resource in making meaning [13, 18]. The teaching of grammar in TBLT differs from that of grammar as a distinct activity and an aim in itself in that distinct grammar teaching places more emphasis on forms. Instead, grammar teaching, with an emphasis on form, is the teaching procedure to attract students' attention, which could facilitate student's use of the language for communication.

Hence, grammar teaching must be included in the teaching content and procedure in the TBLT class. It is evident that lecturers need to teach students grammar contextually to help them use correct grammar to complete the given tasks.

4.5 The task is homework or a language exercise.

Teachers misunderstood that task as homework or an exercise that students do outside or in the classroom. The excerpt from the teachers is the following:

"Task is the assignment I ask students to do, like homework. I set the tasks based on the teaching materials." – T1 from FGI.

"In teaching reading, I basically assign homework or ask students questions. There are some criteria of tasks: students should finish the tasks within a certain time; the answers students give for tasks should be judged right or wrong." – T6 from FGI.

"I think a task is the activity or language practice for students to do." – T11 from II.

Through the teachers' 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). Some of them have misconceptions of tasks that are similar to the definition of tasks in some commercial course books, which are the conventional linguistically focused exercises and activities [18, 20]. They misunderstand the tasks as activities that are communicative at some level but overt or covert in purpose and involve practicing specific linguistic items [18].

However, there are distinctive differences between exercises and tasks. Exercises place a greater focus on the accuracy of linguistic forms like the teacher (L6) mentioned whether the

student's answer is right or wrong in reading. At the same time, the tasks demand appropriate language use for the actual communication setting [5]. In addition, lecturers' responses are in line with the misunderstanding that language teachers are confused about the differences between tasks, activities, and exercises [38].

5 Conclusion

The findings in this study exhibit that teachers have a comparatively clear understanding of task-based language teaching in general. They mentioned the features of TBLT and the tasks in teaching reading and oral communication: the aim of TBLT is to develop students' communication skills; it is student-centered; it requires the use of authentic context for students to use English. However, the lecturers' understanding of tasks in the current study was insufficient because they were not able to give detailed explanations in the interviews on the methods for classifying, choosing, sequencing, and implementing tasks. This was the case because the teachers were not able to give detailed explanations on these topics. These problems were due to the lecturers not having an in-depth theoretical understanding of the TBLT approach, which is one of the challenges they faced when they implemented TBLT to teach reading.

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