

## **TBLT IN CHINA (2001-2011): THE CURRENT SITUATION, PREDICAMENT AND FUTURE**

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**Abstract:** With the reform of English education in China since 2001, a communicative and task-based language teaching has emerged into Chinese English classroom. To understand task-based language teaching (TBLT) practice in China, a synthesis study was conducted to analyze the current situation and predicament of TBLT in China over the last ten years based on the published TBLT articles (2001-2011) in Chinese journals and educational newspapers. The study shows that there is questioning and criticism on the effectiveness of TBLT in the foreign language teaching classes despite the amazing growth of research in TBLT in China. It is also found that the predicament of TBLT may be attributable to a variety of factors such as no professional and systematic training TBLT for teachers, little knowledge of the latest development of TBLT, differences in student English proficiency, gap between local educational levels, no enough educational funds as well as misunderstanding and mispractice of TBLT. Thus, how to appropriately adapt and localize TBLT in China has become the major concern of researchers and educators as well as teachers. To solve the problem, this paper puts forward some suggestions to localize TBLT in the Chinese context, which is concerned with (1) task design; (2) integrating target tasks and pedagogical tasks; (3) balance between meaning and form; (4) tasks for big classes; (5) developing school based textbooks and (6) combining tasks and other teaching principles. Such a context-based approach to TBLT could provide a reference for other contexts similar to China.

**Key words:** TBLT in China; the predicament; the Chinese context

**Abstrak:** Bersamaan dengan reformasi pendidikan bahasa Inggris di Cina sejak tahun 2001, pengajaran bahasa komunikatif dan berbasis tugas telah muncul di kelas-kelas bahasa Inggris Cina. Untuk memahami praktek pengajaran bahasa berbasis tugas (TBLT) di Cina, sebuah kajian sintesa dilakukan untuk menganalisis situasi dan rintangan terkini TBLT di Cina selama sepuluh tahun terakhir ini berdasarkan artikel-artikel mengenai TBLT (2001-2011) yang diterbitkan di jurnal dan surat kabar pendidikan Cina. Kajian ini menunjukkan bahwa ada pertanyaan dan kritik terhadap efektivitas TBLT di kelas-kelas pengajaran bahasa asing, meskipun jumlah penelitian dalam TBLT di Cina mengalami pertumbuhan yang luar biasa. Ditemukan juga bahwa rintangan yang dihadapi TBLT bisa dikarenakan beragam faktor, seperti tidak adanya pelatihan yang profesional dan sistematis, sedikitnya pengetahuan tentang perkembangan terbaru dalam TBLT, perbedaan pada kecakapan bahasa Inggris siswa, jarak antara tingkatan pendidikan lokal, tidak cukupnya dana pendidikan juga kesalahpahaman dan kesalahan praktek TBLT. Karena itu, cara untuk mengadaptasi dan melokalkan TBLT di Cina telah menjadi perhatian utama para peneliti dan

pendidik juga guru. Untuk mengatasi masalah tersebut, makalah ini memberikan beberapa saran untuk melokalkan TBLT dalam konteks Cina, yang menaruh perhatian pada (1) rancangan tugas; (2) perpaduan tugas target dan tugas pedagogik; (3) keseimbangan antara makna dan bentuk; (4) tugas untuk kelas-kelas besar; (5) pengembangan buku teks berbasis sekolah; dan (6) penggabungan tugas dan prinsip-prinsip mengajar lainnya. Pendekatan kontekstual terhadap TBLT seperti itu bisa memberikan acuan untuk kontek-konteks lain yang sama dengan konteks di Cina.

**Kata kunci:** TBLT in China; the predicament; the Chinese context

With the development of TBLT in EFL/ESL since 1980s (Candlin, 1987; Ellis, 2003; Foster & Skehan, 1996; Nunan, 2006; Prabhu, 1987; Robinson, 2005; Samuda & Bygate, 2008; Skehan, 1996, 1998, 2001, 2009), the research concerning TBLT in Pacific-Asian area is increasing simultaneously (Butler, 2011; Carless, 2007; Littlewood, 2007; Cheng & Luo, 2009; Cheng, Lu, Zhong, 2007; Luo, 2006, 2008, 2011; Wen, 2004). In 2011, the Ministry of Education (MoE) of China introduced the new National English Curriculum Standards (NECS), which advocated the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach. In order to cultivate students' ability to do things with English, NECS has suggested that English teachers create real life situations and contexts as well as a variety of language teaching approaches and methods that emphasize both processes and products, such as task-based language teaching (MoE, 2011). Since then, the researchers and English teachers have started research on TBLT theories and practices from different perspectives with striking achievements. However, due to the constraints of traditional approaches to English education, the development of TBLT still faces many challenges and problems (Cheng & Luo, 2009). Hence, some researchers and teachers are questioning whether or not TBLT is appropriate for foreign language teaching in China. Based on the analysis of relevant articles in the both academic

journals and educational newspapers from 2001 to 2011, the current study attempts to investigate the current situation and predicament of TBLT in China with a suggestion of the reform and direction of TBLT in the future.

#### **METHOD**

In order to have an overview of the TBLT research and practice in China, we searched the Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) and obtained 2665 articles related to TBLT under the following searching conditions: Theme: TBLT; Model: accurate match; Areas: all the academic journals and newspapers in linguistics; Databases: Chinese academic journal electronic publishing house and Chinese key newspaper full-text database; Range of time: 2001-2011. The 2665 articles were published between 2001 to 2011 in relevant academic journals and educational newspapers, among which there are 2650 in academic journals and 15 in educational newspapers.

A mix method of quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis was used in this synthesis study. Based on the statistic data of TBLT articles (2001-2011) searched in CNKI, the quantitative method aims to analyze the macro-situation of TBLT in China, and the qualitative method tends to analyze the current problems of TBLT from a micro perspective. With reference to the findings in the two analyses, a direction of reform in TBLT in the Chinese

context is suggested.

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In order to attain the current research situation in TBLT, based on the statistic data of TBLT articles published in the

journals and educational newspapers between 2001 and 2011, further analysis is made regarding the number of articles published in each year (Table 1) and the types of journals in which the articles are published (Table 2).

Table 1. The time when articles about TBLT are published and the number

Time	2001	200	200	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
		2	3								
In Journals	7	15	57	113	137	189	290	364	465	511	502
In Newspapers	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	3	9	0	0

Table 2. Types of journal articles

	Key journals	Ordinary journals	Supported by funds	High citation	High download
Number	221/8%	2429/92%	315/12%	34/1.2%	14/0.53%

As it is shown in Table 1, the number of TBLT articles published in the journal is increasing annually. In 2001, there are only 7 TBLT articles in the journals, but the number increases to 511 in 2010, despite a slight decrease to 502 articles in 2011. However, as shown in Table 2, 92% of the TBLT articles are published in ordinary journals, instead of key journals. Only 8 % of the articles are in the key journals, such as Journal of Foreign Languages, Journal of Curriculum, Material and Method, and Foreign languages in China. It should be pointed out that only 12% of the articles are supported by funds. Generally speaking, the researchers and English

teachers have an increasing interest in TBLT. In addition, the research areas extend from the introduction of TBLT theories to all the aspects of TBLT, including task-based reading, task-based writing, task-based testing, the effect of task features on task performance of learners, and the like. It is also clear that the researches in TBLT have not yet gained enough support from the governments.

In order to analyze the TBLT research situation in China from a qualitative perspective, the articles collected from CNKI are classified according to the research themes in TBLT (Table 3).

Table 3. The research themes of TBLT articles in China from 2001 to 2011

The themes	Representative articles (authors and issued time)
Introducing TBLT theories and Interpreting TBLT	Liao (2001), (2002); Lu, (2002); Gong & Luo (2003), etc.
The methods and approaches of task design in the elementary, high school and college.	Z. Lu (2002); Feng & Tang (2004); X. Lu (2004); Xue (2004); Pan (2007); Song, (2007); Luo, (2008), Wang (2010); Shen & Liu (2011), etc.

Task-based reading, reading task design, application of reading tasks in the classroom setting	Yangng (2007); Yi (2006); Wang (2010); Chen (2008), etc.
Task-based writing and the features of task-based wrting; How is task-based writing carried out in the classroom?	Zeng & Wu (2010); Tang (2004); Xiao (2002).
Task-based assessment and Testing	Huang (2009); Luo (2006), (2009); Han (2003); Ye (2009).
TBLT and teacher education; Teacher development in TBLT;	Luo (2006); Liu & Luo (2011); Peng (2007).
The features of teacher professional development.	
The effect of task features: task conditions, task difficulty and task complexity on the language production of Chinese English learners.	Chen & Wu (1998); He & Wang (2003); Huang, (2009), etc.
The problems and difficulties of TBLT in China;	Chen (2009); Chengg & Luo (2009); Lei (2008); Peng, (2006); Song (2007); Wen (2004); Zhou (2007),etc.
The effectiveness of TBLT in China is questioned.	

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In the Chinese mainland, since the NECS was launched by the MoE in 2001, the researchers have started to introduce TBLT theories. Liao (2001), Lu, Z. (2002) and Gong & Luo (2002) are believed to be the pioneering advocators of TBLT in China. Liao (2001, 2002) introduced the sources of TBLT and how TBLT was practiced in the classroom setting. She held that TBLT was developed based on Prabhu's Bangalore project. The experience from Bangalore project might help understand the source and theoretical background of TBLT. She claimed that since TBTL facilitated language acquisition, it was worthwhile to advocate TBLT in language teaching and learning. Gong & Luo (2003) suggested that we should understand TBLT theories from the perspectives of curriculum and constructivism, so that the teachers could better reflect their own teaching methods. Gong & Luo (2006) and Cheng (2004) systematically introduced the theoretical backgrounds of TBLT, such as language acquisition, psycholinguistics, social constructivism, course theories, social-cultural theory

and the interaction hypothesis in their own monographs respectively, which pave a firm foundation for introducing TBLT theory and practice systematically and comprehensively.

Authenticity plays an important role in task design. The representative studies include Lu, X. (2004), Lu, Z. (2002), Song (2007), and Xue (2004). Lu, Z. (2002) claimed that in task-based language teaching, the first task was to design real life related activities and then present them to students who were, therefore, able to acquire knowledge and obtain learning ability by doing the tasks. Lu, X. (2004) also held that authenticity was the basis and the starting point of task design. He considered it necessary to integrate authenticity and task design. Apart from authenticity, the sequence of tasks has drawn great attention of researchers. Feng & Tang (2004) thought that TBLT focused on meaning with an aim to complete a communicative task; thus, tasks should be designed and sequenced according to the variation of complexity or difficulty. In addition, task design in the classroom includes an

integration of listening, speaking, reading and writing (Chen, 2008; Luo, 2008; Yi, 2006; Wang, 2010). Luo (2011) designed the PWP (pre-task phase, while-task phase and post-task phase) teaching process of listening, speaking, reading and writing respectively on the basis of TBLT models provided by Willis (1996), Skehan (1998) and Ellis (2003). She also designed some sample tasks, which could play an instructive role in task design of English teaching in the primary or middle schools.

In task-based language assessment (TBLA) and language testing, distinctive studies include Luo (2009), Han (2003), Ye (2009), etc. Han (2003) pointed out that TBLA became popular because people began to complain about the traditional language assessments. Different from traditional language testing, which attaches great importance to language forms and skills, TBLA focuses on tasks and task performance of the testees. Han's work also involves how to design tasks and how to assess task performance of the testees. Luo (2009) conducted a research on task difficulty (A focus on TBLA) and constructed a new framework of task difficulty. She held that task difficulty could be sequenced to predict learners' language ability. According to her research results, there is a correlation between task difficulty and student competence. It is of great significance for task-based syllabus design in the Chinese context.

In relation to TBLA is the study of task features, such as task condition, task complexity and task difficulty, and how they affect language production of language learners (Chen & Wu, 1998; He & Wang, 2003; Huang, 2009). Chen & Wu (1998) and Huang (2009) examined the effect of task difficulty, task type and task condition on the spoken and written language production of language learners in terms of fluency,

accuracy and complexity with the assistance of Levelt's spoken language production model. He & Wang (2003) focused on the impact of task complexity, task difficulty and English proficiency on language production of language learners. However, these studies fail to discuss trade-off effect (Skehan, 2009).

TBLA has theoretically and practically impacted teacher development. It also exerts great influence on the roles of teachers in the classroom as well as the knowledge of teaching theories. Unfortunately, there is little attention to the area of the effect of TBLT on teacher development in the Chinese mainland (Shaoqian, 2006; Liu & Luo, 2011; Peng, 2007). Peng (2007) analyzed how TBLT might bring a new challenge to foreign language teachers. Liu & Luo (2011) further discussed the possibility of teacher education based on tasks, which were found to help teachers to take an active part in their professional development.

In spite of much research and practice of TBLT in Chinese EFL field, many researchers have been questioning the development of TBLT (Chen, 2009; Cheng & Luo, 2009; Lei, 2008; Peng, 2006; Wen, 2004). The first issue is that the development of TBLT textbooks really lags behind the increasing demand of language teaching on TBLT. It is rare to see a textbook that is truly based on the principles of task-based language learning and teaching. One of the few textbooks is "Go for it," of which Luo & Lu, X. (2011) conducted a survey. They found that the *Go For It* series, to some degree, was not appropriate for some areas, especially rural areas in China. The level of the series is largely beyond the students' current English proficiency in these areas, where they are short of facilities and qualified teachers. Just as Lei (2008) held that TBLT in remote

areas was in a marginal position due to the unbalanced development in the countryside, Wen (2004) claimed that TBLT had striking weaknesses in China, in that the current teaching method was a presentation-based approach, i.e., the PPP approach, which focused on language forms, whereas TBLT was the other way round and started with production. Peng (2006), therefore, suggested that TBLT should be placed at the stage of production of PPP. In addition, with the development of teaching reformation as well as National English Curriculum Standards, the English teachers' awareness of changing traditional teaching method becomes more and more vehement, but they lack the knowledge of TBLT (Chen, 2009). TBLT is criticized for just imitating and playing, ignoring information exchange, attaching too much importance to products instead of process, focusing on meaning instead of forms, and task design without purposes (Zhou, 2007).

To summarize, it is clear that in the basic education of China, teachers' passion and motivation towards TBLT are still strong. Favoured by teachers and students, TBLT plays a positive role in teacher development and students' language use ability. By contrast, TBLT has some problems in China: Teachers do not obtain professional and systematical training on TBLT, nor do they know the essence of TBLT practice and theory. Teachers in China can not follow the new development of TBLT promptly. There are also a variety of constraints such as domestic educational systems and policies; unbalance of English Proficiency among students and unbalance of education in local areas; contradiction between TBLT and Chinese traditional testing culture; TBLT textbooks developing slowly; weak support from national educational funds, etc. All the aforementioned problems restrict the further development of TBLT

in China. Therefore, many teachers and researchers begin to question and even resist TBLT in China.

#### **The future direction of TBLT in China—to put TBLT in the Chinese context**

As a further development of communicative language teaching, TBLT involves advanced teaching theories and principles. Since 2001, when the NECS (experimental version) was launched, TBLT has been accepted by teachers and students and has facilitated teacher development and language competence.

Therefore, despite the problems, TBLT is still necessary for EFL in the Chinese context and this approach has been put forward again in the revised NECS in 2011. Some researchers set out to make a study about how to localize and develop TBLT in China (e.g., Wen, 2004; Cheng & Luo, 2009). Wen (2004) held that since TBLT entailed advanced teaching theories, it could not be refused but reformed to be in accordance with the reality of the foreign language education in China. Cheng & Luo (2009) further pointed out that with an aim to solve the current problems of TBLT, TBLT was supposed to be modified to accord with the foreign language teaching environment in China.

#### **Significance of TBLT in the Chinese context**

TBLT in the Chinese context is of great significance in both theory and practice. Theoretically, TBLT in the Chinese context shows that the practice of strong version task-based language teaching in China is of no possibility, while it proves the scientific aspect of the weak version task based language teaching, which focuses on meaning as well as form. Practically, TBLT in the Chinese context is able to take into full consideration the reality of the foreign language education in China as well as great influence that

TBLT has exerted. It is believed to promote a further reformation of the foreign language teaching in China.

### **The approaches of TBLT in the Chinese context**

In view of the advantages of TBLT in language teaching and the current reality of TBLT in China, some approaches are suggested in order to implement TBLT in the Chinese context. First, owing to the reality of EFL in China, the definition of task in China needs to be redefined. The weak-version of TBLT might be a more appropriate approach in China. Secondly, it is important to integrate target tasks and pedagogical tasks in designing and selecting tasks to meet various demands of the students. A third approach worth mentioning is the balance of meaning and form. It is noted that tasks are centered on meaning, which is fundamental in the communicative tasks. However, it should be pointed out that it is of great necessity to focus on some grammar points, words, phonetics and spellings and so on during three phases (pre-task phase, while-task phase and post-task phase), which may guarantee the successful completion of tasks by providing necessary language aids.

The fourth one is concerned about how to design tasks for a big class. A small class may not be practical in China with such a large population but limited teaching facilities, which will not be improved recently. Therefore, it is suggested that textbook writers and teachers should design and create pedagogical tasks in accordance with big classes. The fifth suggestion is related to the examination-oriented education system. It calls for the attention of educational administrators and school authorities to focus on the assessment of students' ability for language use. The development of school-based textbooks to accord with English proficiency and teaching environment in local areas also

plays an important role in TBLT. Currently, there lack TBLT textbooks and materials. Researchers and teachers need to adapt or write textbooks to meet the local needs. The seventh suggestion falls on teacher training regarding TBLT theory, which enables teachers to follow the new development of TBLT. Through systematic training, teachers are able to know what TBLT is and how to do it. Such a training program needs to be professional and systematic from a long term perspective.

Last but not least is the necessity to integrate different methods with TBLT. At the age of globalization and multiculturalism, it is advocated that teaching should abide by principles rather than by one method. In accordance with certain teaching and learning principles, whatever teaching methods could be adopted in the language teaching. It is admitted that each teaching method has its own merits and demerits. No teaching methods are perfect without exception of TBLT. Thus, TBLT must be integrated with other teaching methods to promote students' ability for language use and cultivate integrative competence of the students.

### **CONCLUSION**

To sum up, the current synthesis analyzes the reality of TBLT in China. It is found that TBLT is favored by teachers and students in China. In practice, TBLT has an active role to play in teacher professional development and the development of students' ability for language use. On the contrary, TBLT in China has some problems such as no professional and systematic training for teachers on TBLT, no knowledge of the latest development of TBLT in the world, unbalance of student English level, unbalance in local education, no enough educational funds. In order to solve these problems, TBLT in the Chinese context is suggested with several approaches

such as redefining tasks in the Chinese context, integrating target tasks and pedagogical tasks, balancing between meaning and form, designing tasks in accordance with big classes, cultivating school-based textbooks and emphasizing the integration of a variety of teaching methods. It is believed that TBLT in the Chinese context could provide a reference for the future development of TBLT in China.

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