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A Review of the Impact of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) on Oral Proficiency

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Abstract: With economic globalization, oral English proficiency has become a key factor in international communication. However, the oral English proficiency of Chinese students is generally low. The traditional teaching mode pays too much attention to written English and neglects oral practice. As an emerging teaching mode, task-based language teaching (TBLT) promotes language learning through authentic and meaningful tasks and emphasizes learning by "doing". Research has shown that TBLT can significantly improve students' oral fluency, accuracy, and communicative competence. However, it faces many challenges in the implementation process, such as the role change of students and teachers, the complexity of task design, and the limitation of large-class teaching. This paper discusses the effectiveness of TBLT in English teaching in mainland Chinese universities, analyzes its advantages and challenges, and puts forward corresponding suggestions for improvement, intending to provide references for oral English teaching. Improving students' spoken English and communication abilities and supporting the development of talents with international competitiveness can improve the promotion and implementation of TBLT.

Keywords: Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), Oral Proficiency, Mainland Chinese Universities

1. Introduction

Economic globalization has brought people around the world into closer contact with each other, and English has become particularly important as a key tool for international communication. In the context of globalization, the demand for oral English proficiency has changed significantly, both in the field of education and in the workplace environment [1]. In education, more and more international academic exchanges, transnational education programs, and online learning platforms require students to be fluent in spoken English to better participate in international academic discussions and collaborative research. For example, many international conferences and academic seminars require participants to be able to give oral presentations and interact in English. With the increase in multinational corporations and international business, employees need to communicate effectively with colleagues and clients from different countries, and oral English proficiency has become a necessary skill. According to a survey of multinational corporations, more than 80% of employers believe that their employees' English-speaking ability directly affects their performance and career development in international projects [2].

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Inconsistent with this trend, Chinese students' oral English proficiency is still generally low, making it difficult to meet actual communicative needs [2]. According to FY2023 to FY2024, the average speaking score of mainland Chinese test takers is 5.5, which is among the lowest scores compared to other individual items [3]. IELTS scores range from 1 to 9, with a score of 6 usually considered a benchmark for a “pass” level, while a score of 5.5 indicates a significant lack of oral expression, especially in fluency, vocabulary use, and grammatical accuracy. In contrast, the average speaking scores of candidates from other major non-native English-speaking countries around the world are usually above 6, which further emphasizes the relative weakness of mainland Chinese candidates regarding speaking ability. This discrepancy not only affects the overall performance of the candidates but also reflects the differences in English education and language practice environments in different countries. Second. Chinese students have been exposed to English learning since elementary school; however, the long-standing test-oriented teaching system has led them to gradually develop the notion that test paper scores are the only measure of learning outcomes. This conception leads students to pay excessive attention to learning written English and neglect the cultivation of speaking skills [4]. Furthermore, Chinese students do not accurately understand their oral English ability. They have a high self-evaluation but poor proficiency. Some students are even unable to communicate in English before taking oral English classes [5]. Generally, students lack confidence in their own oral English ability and have a significant fear of making mistakes.

Therefore, oral English teaching urgently needs to transform from the traditional single repetitive training and stimulate students' intrinsic motivation through flexible and interactive instructional design [5]. TBLT stands out among numerous learning methods. Moreover, the National English Curriculum Standards for the Chinese mainland issued by the Ministry of Education of China (MOE) particularly advocate using TBLT.

2. Conceptual definition of Task-Based Language Teaching Method (TBLT)

Task-based Language Instruction (TBLT) is a task-centered language teaching method that emphasizes promoting language learning by completing specific and meaningful tasks [6]. It is implemented in three phases: pre-task which involves activating background knowledge and lowering cognitive barriers (e.g., brainstorming, example provision) during-task where students need to collaborate to complete the task and the teacher acts as a facilitator to provide immediate support [7] and post-task where learning is consolidated through feedback and repetition of the task [8]. The teacher as facilitator provides immediate support [7] and the post-task consolidates learning through feedback and repetition. These stages provide a clear pedagogical framework for teachers [8]. The theoretical framework and pedagogical practices of TBLT emphasize the advantages of task-based language teaching in improving learners' language proficiency [9].

It is a teaching method that cultivates communication skills by exposing learners to oral English practice [10]. TBLT emphasizes the language application teaching method of "learning by doing" and "doing while learning" teaching practices [11], which emerged in the 1980s and is task-centered [12]. Its theoretical basis mainly stems from Communicative Language Teaching Method (CLT), social constructivism, and the Input and Output Hypothesis [6].

3. The positive impact of TBLT on oral language ability

Current research generally holds that the Task-based Language Teaching Method (TBLT) can promote the improvement of learners' oral language ability in multiple dimensions, mainly reflected in three aspects: improving oral fluency, strengthening language accuracy, and cultivating communicative ability.

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3.1. Improve oral fluency

While completing the tasks, students gradually overcame the obstacles of language expression and enhanced their oral fluency through interaction and cooperation with their peers [13]. During the process of task completion, students need to use the target language to express their viewpoints, discuss problems, and complete tasks. This scenario prompts them to constantly output language [14]. For example, in group discussions or role-playing, students must frequently use language to communicate, thereby obtaining a large number of language practice opportunities [15]. Such activities enhance students' language participation and promote the practical application of language ability through the scenario simulation of "real communication", which conforms to the basic principle of communicative language teaching, namely "learning language through use".

Zuniga, E. C., Mayorga, E., & Ruiz, N. designed a teaching experiment on oral fluency lasting for 24 weeks, with 10 hours per week, totaling 240 hours in 2023. The implementation process can be divided into five steps, namely the "Five Ds" (Disclosing, Deducing, Displaying, Developing, Discovering): Phase One, Disclosing, in which the teacher introduces the task to the student, including the areas that need practice, the objectives, and the expected results. Phase 2, Deducing, The teacher enables students to infer and learn the fluency of native speakers and advanced language learners by sharing film clips, videos, podcasts, and audio materials. In the third stage, "Display", the teacher plays the materials again and allows students to practice conversations, discussions, and debates to improve their communication skills. In the fourth stage, Developing, students complete ten oral fluency tasks based on daily topics. The final stage of Discovering involves evaluating learning outcomes, including self-assessment and teacher assessment, as well as subsequent follow-up activities.

The above steps are in line with the complete process of implementing TBLT. The experimental results show that TBLT is helpful for improving oral fluency. This is because the task design enables learners to focus more on the content of the conveyed information rather than the language form, thereby reducing pauses when looking for appropriate words or structures. During the practice process, the task encourages learners to communicate at a more natural speaking speed. Simulating real-world communication scenarios and having conversations at a speed closer to that of native speakers helps them improve their speaking speed. Task-based activities require learners to use language to complete specific tasks, which prompts them to pay more attention to how to express their ideas clearly and accurately, thereby improving their expression ability. During the teaching process, students are required to participate in activities such as group discussions and role-playing, and they need to collaborate and communicate with each other. This interactive learning helps improve learners' oral fluency.

The application of TBLT in English language teaching in mainland Chinese universities has also achieved remarkable results. For example, Yu's study found that students' oral fluency was significantly improved by TBLT, especially in tasks that simulated real-life scenarios.

3.2. Improve the accuracy of spoken language

Task-based Language Instruction (TBLT) has significantly improved the oral English accuracy of ESP students (Learners of English for Specific Purposes). The research found that through 14 weeks of TBLT training, students' grammatical and lexical errors in oral expression decreased, and the influence of their native language on pronunciation was reduced [16]. TBLT enables students to master language rules naturally through the design of real tasks in practice. During this process, the immediate feedback teachers provide plays an important role in helping learners identify and correct mistakes in language usage.

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In addition, TBLT stimulates students' interest in learning, enhances their language awareness, and provides rich language input, thereby effectively improving the accuracy of oral English.

3.3. Cultivate communication skills

TBLT provides students with a flexible learning environment, encouraging them to adapt to different learning styles, preferences, and abilities by participating in oral practice activities such as interviews, discussions, and daily life situations. These opportunities for real communication help students overcome the barriers of language expression, enhance their self-confidence, and, through task practice, learn how to initiate, maintain, and end conversations, break through the barriers of target language communication ability, and improve their communication skills. The diverse oral practice has enabled students to have a positive view of TBLT, considering it an effective teaching method that can help them master communication skills through lively and rich oral experiences. During the implementation process, students actively participated in classroom activities, asked questions proactively, answered them, and sought clarification, demonstrating excellent learning outcomes [10]. These opportunities for real communication help students overcome the barriers of language expression, enhance their self-confidence, and through task practice, learn how to initiate, maintain, and end conversations, break through the barriers of target language communication ability, and thereby improve their communication skills.

4. Challenges during the implementation process

Although existing studies have shown that TBLT has significant advantages in improving students' oral English ability, it still faces many practical challenges in actual teaching scenarios, mainly including the difficulty in reconstructing the roles of teachers and students, the complexity of task design, and the implementation limitations in large-class teaching environments.

4.1. The role transformation of students and teachers

The research finds that there are several mismatches between the traditional teaching and learning methods in China and the principles of Task-based Language Instruction (TBLT). First, students fail to master tacit knowledge, while TBLT aims to enable students to understand the content that is not clearly expressed. Second, students rely on teachers' explanations, while TBLT requires students to learn independently. Thirdly, students are reluctant to cooperate in groups, while TBLT emphasizes student-centered group learning [17]. It can be seen from this that the differences in teaching cultures between China and the West pose challenges to the localization of TBLT.

The classroom has shifted from the traditional teaching model centered on teachers and based on knowledge imparting to one centered on students and led by teachers. Against the background of curriculum reform, the teaching objective has shifted from cultivating learners' language accuracy to developing their communicative ability [18]. The successful implementation of TBLT requires teachers to comprehensively understand teaching methods, including the design, implementation, and evaluation of tasks. If teachers do not have a deep enough understanding of TBLT, it may lead to poor teaching effects. The successful implementation of TBLT requires teachers to comprehensively understand teaching methods, including the design, implementation, and evaluation of tasks. If teachers do not have a deep enough understanding of TBLT, it may lead to poor teaching effects. Some teachers lack systematic reflection and are unable to accurately identify problems in task design (such as inappropriate difficulty and ambiguous communication goals), which leads to the recurrence of students' mistakes, intensifies teachers' sense of frustration in teaching, and causes students to distrust the "TBLT" teaching method. In addition, although the teaching objectives have changed, the assessment criteria within the school are still based on the results of the written test. Therefore,

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teachers returned to the traditional teaching method, and TBLT became an occasional "performance class" [7].

4.2. The design of classroom tasks is rather difficult

There are multiple difficulties in the task design of Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT): language complexity, the tones and systems of foreign languages increase the difficulty of task design. Cognitive requirements require balancing the difficulty level of tasks to adapt to learners' cognitive load. Communication pressure. Learners face greater anxiety in oral tasks, which need to be taken into consideration in the design. There are individual differences among learners. Different learners have different preferences and demands for tasks, making it challenging to satisfy everyone. Time management requires a reasonable time allocation to ensure task completion and reflection. Task diversity and monotonous task forms can easily make learners bored. The role of teachers requires balancing the needs of teachers' guidance and students' independent task completion [19].

4.3. Limitations of large-class teaching

Research shows that the implementation effect of TBLT in the large-class teaching situation is restricted by the following key factors: The phenomenon of learners' language avoidance is the primary obstacle. Studies show that many students tend to rely on their native language rather than the target language to complete tasks and reduce cognitive load [20]. This phenomenon is particularly prominent in larger classroom sizes with limited instructional time [21] and directly affects the quality of task engagement. Classroom management issues ensue. In large-class teaching, it is difficult for teachers to comprehensively monitor students' task execution, resulting in some activities deviating from the established goals [22]. Meanwhile, the differences in students' language proficiency make personalized support difficult. Low-level learners often make limited progress due to the lack of targeted feedback [23]. The mission design itself faces a double paradox. On the one hand, teachers need to take into account the abilities of different learners and design inclusive tasks [24]; On the other hand, the class time is limited, and the task execution and feedback sessions are often compressed. As a result, some students lose the opportunity to fully participate [25]. Furthermore, the uneven participation of students further weakens the effect of TBLT. Students who are introverted or have a weak language foundation may choose to watch passively [26], while teachers have a significantly increased burden as they need to invest extra energy in coordinating tasks and classroom management [27]. Finally, the limitations of feedback make it difficult for students to obtain precise guidance, and the learning effect is greatly reduced [28].

5. The limitations of TBLT

Although TBLT has demonstrated many advantages in teaching practice, a series of structural limitations have been exposed during its implementation process, reflecting the limitations of this teaching method in practical application. TBLT has limited improvement in pronunciation skills. It emphasizes promoting language learning through practical tasks, but may lack systematic and targeted guidance in pronunciation training. Moreover, the grammatical accuracy is insufficient. This is because TBLT focuses on the practical application and fluency of the language and lacks the training of grammatical accuracy, which sacrifices grammatical accuracy to a certain extent [29].

In addition, TBLT failed to take individual differences into account fully, which led to an imbalance in students' participation. Since TBLT emphasizes group cooperation and collective participation, some students may have a lower level of participation due to personality reasons or insufficient learning motivation, and thus may benefit less from group activities [29]. Students need

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to have a certain language foundation and learning strategies in TBLT; otherwise, they may have difficulty effectively participating in the tasks [15].

For example, visual learners may be more inclined to learn through reading and writing, while hands-on learners prefer to master knowledge through practice. If the task design of TBLT does not adequately take into account these differences in learning styles, it may result in some students feeling uncomfortable, thus reducing their engagement [23]. In TBLT, students with stronger language skills may be more likely to participate in tasks and take the lead in interactions, while those with weaker language skills may reduce their participation for fear of making mistakes. This difference may lead to an imbalance in classroom interaction and affect the learning effect [30]. Some students may be highly motivated to learn English and actively participate in classroom activities. Some other students may reduce their participation due to a lack of interest or insufficient self-confidence. TBLT emphasizes stimulating students' interest in learning through real tasks. However, if the task design does not fully consider the differences in students' motivations, it may make some students feel bored or anxious [5].

The effective implementation of TBLT requires abundant teaching resources and a good learning environment, but in actual teaching, it may be limited by resources and the environment [31]. And it requires a lot of time and resources to design and implement tasks, but it may be subject to time constraints in actual teaching [32].

6. Conclusion

Through the design of real tasks, TBLT provides students with abundant opportunities for language practice, effectively enhancing their oral fluency, accuracy, and communication skills. At the same time, it also stimulates students' interest in learning and their autonomous learning ability. However, during the implementation process, TBLT is confronted with problems such as the difficulty of role transformation between students and teachers, the complexity of task design, and the limitations brought by large-class teaching. Furthermore, TBLT has limitations in improving pronunciation and grammatical accuracy, and fails to fully consider individual differences, which requires abundant teaching resources and time investment.

In order to better promote and implement TBLT and to enhance students' oral and communicative English proficiency, it is recommended that teachers be provided with systematic training and support to help them master the theoretical basis and implementation strategies of TBLT and to enhance teachers' teaching ability and professionalism. It also establishes a mechanism for teachers' professional development, organizes seminars and workshops on a regular basis to share best practices and teaching cases, and promotes exchanges and cooperation among teachers.

After the training, teachers can design and optimize tasks based on the actual situation, fully considering students' language proficiency, cognitive needs, and learning styles, ensuring the diversity and authenticity of the tasks, and meeting the needs of different students. It is necessary to balance the difficulty of the tasks, reasonably design the difficulty level of the tasks, avoid the tasks being too simple or too complex, and ensure that students can obtain appropriate challenges and a sense of achievement in the tasks. Teachers can design diverse task forms, such as group discussions, role-playing, project design, etc., to increase students' participation and interest.

To address the constraints of large class teaching, group teaching can be adopted by dividing students into small groups for task activities to ensure that each student can fully participate in the task. Teachers can design rotational tasks in which students take turns to play the roles of organizer, participant, and evaluator in different tasks, thus increasing students' opportunities for participation, enriching their learning experience, and developing their cooperation and critical thinking skills. Learners can make use of peer evaluation and self-evaluation mechanisms to reduce the feedback burden on teachers and cultivate autonomous learning ability and critical thinking at the same time.

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Future research directions related to TBLT can include: evaluating the impact of TBLT on students' long-term language ability development; exploring the application effects of TBLT in different disciplinary fields; studying how to utilize modern educational technology to optimize the implementation of TBLT; and analyzing the adaptability and adjustment strategies of TBLT in different cultural backgrounds. Through these measures, TBLT can be better promoted and implemented, enhancing students' oral English and communication skills, and providing support for cultivating talents with international competitiveness.

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