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The Application of Task-Based Language Teaching in Junior High School English Reading-Taking Unit 1 of the Shanghai Education Edition Grade 7 as an Example-Friendship

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Abstract. For decades, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has been applied in English reading for junior high school students. TBLT is distinctive from traditional teaching method, brings numerous design challenges for teachers. Research has shown that TBLT significantly improves students' motivation and agency in English reading learning. However, TBLT has been insufficiently studied in the field of English reading for junior high school students. The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore the effects of TBLT on students' attitudes toward English reading, such as their reading motivation and reading confidence. The duration of the research lasts for approximately four months. The two-round semi-structured interviews are conducted with five English teachers and 30 students of different English proficiency in Grade 7 from the same school, each every two months. The data are recorded and analyzed carefully by the researcher. The results indicate that participants' attitudes towards English reading have been improved considerably after the implementation of TBLT compared with their conventional pedagogy.

Keywords: TBLT, English Reading, Qualitative Case Study, Junior High School Students

1. Introduction

English has become increasingly important in today's dynamic world. In order to keep up with the trend, the Minister of Education issued the English Curriculum for Compulsory Education, indicating the shift of the core teaching method from the traditional grammar-translation method towards Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). Besides, reading plays a vital role in the whole process of English learning, and the introduction of TBLT enables students to actively explore knowledge instead of passively being assigned by teachers, which is a student-centered teaching approach. By taking part in various class activities based on tasks, their learning motivation and interests can be aroused and their interaction with classmates and teachers can be maximized. The purpose of this research is to explore the effects of TBLT on students'attitudents towards English reading by means of semi-structured interviews after a four-month teaching experiment. This research takes junior high school students as the research participants and discusses how to combine task-based teaching with junior high school English reading teaching effectively, which provides guidance for future reading teaching.

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2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Definition of TBLT

S. Prabhu defined TBLT as a pedagogical approach in which language is acquired through performing tasks that require a main focus on communication and meaning negotiation, rather than through explicit instruction of linguistic forms [1]; David Nunan defined a task as a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is primarily concentrated on meaning instead of form [2]. Willis defined a task as an activity in which the target language is used by learners for a communicative purpose in order to achieve an outcome. She emphasized that tasks must have a clear goal, consist of meaningful interaction, and produce a tangible result, thereby distinguishing tasks from mere form-focused exercises [3]; Ellis defines a task as a workplan that requires learners to process language pragmatically, with a primary focus on meaning, involving a gap, using their own linguistic resources, and aiming for an evaluable outcome. Also, he advocates a balanced integration of meaning and form within the task cycle [4]; Rod Ellis put forward an eight-principle framework for Task-based Language Teaching, including task dependency principle, scaffolding principle, recycling principle, active learning principle, integration principle, reproduction to creation principle, reflection principle and form-focused principle [4]; Jane Willis proposed a three-stage task-based framework of pre-task, task cycle and language focus [3]. This research is carried out based on Jane Willis's three-stage framework.

2.2. Previous studies on TBLT at home and abroad

N.S. Prabhu proposed TBLT as a core teaching unit while conducting a 'communicative teaching experiment' in India [1]; David Nunan published his book named *Tasked-Based Language Teaching*, systemically defining tasks and design frame [2]; Jane Willis released *A Framework for Task-Based Learning*, introducing the Three-Stage Framework [3]; Peter Skehan analyzed task complexity from the perspective of cognitive psychology [5]; Rod Ellis systemically integrated empirical research with curriculum standard design in Task-based Language Learning and Teaching [4].

In China, Cheng Xiaotang chiefly edited *Task-Based Language Teaching*, systematically elaborating on task design and assessment methods in secondary schools [6]; Gong Yafu emphasized applying TBLT to achieve all-round education in secondary English teaching and focusing on Task-oriented teaching strategies in the context of large classrooms [7]; Lu Ziwen proposed that task content should align with the reform of the entrance examination for secondary schools [8]. This research maily analyzes the effects of TBLT on secondary school students' English reading and adopts a quantitative analysis approach.

3. Methodology

3.1. Curriculum design

This part takes unit 1 of the Shanghai Education Edition Grade 7 as an example - *Friendship*, fully exploring the application of TBLT in reading.

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3.1.1. Pre-task

Before reading the text, the teacher tried to introduce the topic and activate relevant language. Firstly, the teacher demonstrated some pictures, such as new schools and new friend, and asked 'How do you like your new school? Do you make new friends? What's he/she like?' to guide students to answer in simple sentences, for example, she is helpful or he is smart. Then, the teacher helped students to review important vocabulary, such as confident, patient, improve and helpful, and asked students to translate them into Chinese and make sentences with them. After that, the teacher clarified the mission:" Today, we will read a story about Chen Ming and his new friend Li Hua. After reading, you need to write a short paragraph to introduce your own best friend (include his/her qualities and how he/she helps you)."

3.1.2. While-task

Firstly, the teacher asked students to read the text silently and filled in the information form prepared by the teacher beforehand, including four questions such as Chen Ming's friend, his or her qualities, how Li Hua helped Chen Ming and Changes in Chen Ming. Secondly, students worked in groups of four and checked the answers to the form, and discussed the question "Which quality of Li Hua do you like most? Why?" Then, the teacher guided students to find out the key sentence patterns: "Li Hua is helpful and patient." "When I meet difficult maths problems, I turn to him for help." "I think this is all thanks to Li Hua." After that, students made sentences by imitating, for example, "My friend is kind. When I'm sad, she listens to me." Finally, students wrote independently while the teacher was walking around to provide assistance and fix grammatical mistakes.

3.1.3. Post-task

The teacher invited three or four students to read their articles aloud in front of the class, and other students made comments: "I like your sentence". Then, the teacher made a summary: "Today we have learned how to describe a friend's qualities and talked about their help. Remember, friends are not just for fun—they give us support and make us better!" Finally, the teacher assigned the homework: "Draw a picture of your best friend and write seven sentences about him or her."

3.2. Research questions

The essay mainly focuses on two research questions: 1) what are students' attitudes towards TBLT compared with the traditional teaching method; 2) what are students' attitudes towards English reading after the implementation of TBLT. The author employs semi-structured interviews to investigate these two questions.

3.2.1. Participants

This essay is a design-based study in one junior secondary school in Shanghai, with Year 7 teachers and their classes as the research subjects, who have a good mastery of English according to the standard curriculum. The teachers carry out the teaching tasks still using the conventional grammar-translation method, but all reading courses will be taught by means of TBLT this semester, lasting for four months. It would begin by analyzing the Year 7 English textbook currently in use, coding its activities against established task criteria to establish which constitute tasks in the TBLT sense and

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where the others might be adapted. This small group of five teachers conduct teaching activities through co-design, classroom tests, and revisions.

3.2.2. Research instrument

The research instrument is primarily semi-structured interviews. There are two-round interviews over four months, with one interview every two months. In order to ensure the accuracy of interview results, each interview is carried out with three English teachers and six students of different levels of proficiency selected randomly from each class. Through this, the researcher knows about teachers' and students' suggestions and true attitudes towards English reading after the implementation of TBLT compared with traditional teaching pedagogy. Also, the interview content is collected and organized immediately to form valid data. The whole interview process is recorded and transcribed.

3.2.3. Data collection and analysis

The semi-structured interviews with participating teachers and students are arranged during the time for individual study and in meeting rooms booked in advance. Before the interview, students are told there is absolutely true or false answers, encouraging them to express their true point of view. In the meantime, the researcher records students' answers, and after the interview, the researcher listens to the record repeatedly, transcribe and analyzes it. Through the interview, the researcher learns about students' and teachers' attitudes toward TBLT and English reading, as well as challenges faced in the teaching process.

4. Discussion of the effects of TBLT on students' reading

Through two-two-round semi-structured interviews with five English teachers and 30 students of different English proficiency in Grade 7 from the same school, the author draws the following conclusions: as for students' attitudes toward TBLT compared with the traditional teaching method, students think that TBLT is a student-centered teaching method, enabling them to get more involved in the learning process and learn English by doing to improve their communication skills in real scenarios, whereas the traditional teaching method gives students few chances to interact with the teacher and classmates. In regard to students' attitudes toward English reading, students agree that TBLT significantly enhances their confidence and interest in English reading, as they can actively participate in pair tasks and group tasks instead of just passively following teachers' instructions. Teachers think that TBLT has a positive impact on students' reading, which has greatly aroused their interests and facilitated their engagement in English reading classes.

5. Conclusion

The essay mainly explores the effects of TBLT on students' attitudes toward English reading, and the results demonstrate that TBLT has a positive impact on students' reading, making great progress in their reading interests and reading confidence. TBLT arouses students' reading interests by designing reading tasks that are close to real-life situations, turning passive learning into active exploration and stimulating their internal motivation. Although much effort has been made in research on design and practice, there are still some shortcomings in this research: firstly, there are deficiencies in teacher lesson preparation, because teachers have little experience with TBLT pedagogy, and it is challenging for them to fully integrate TBLT into class teaching. Secondly, classroom efficiency is

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sometimes low, and it is difficult to fulfill all student engagement in the teaching process. TBLT may be carried out in other types of courses, such as listening, speaking, writing and reading in primary and higher schools, as well as in junior high schools in the future.

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