

THE TASK-BASED APPROACH IN ORAL TEACHING FOR HIGHER VOCATIONAL
COLLEGE IN CHINA

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Gao Fei

Under the Supervision of Professor Raymond Spoto, Ph.D.

The task-based approach is a significant teaching method which became popular in the 20th century. In China, we usually use it in the field of second language teaching. Teachers like to design different tasks for English majors who are interested in studying English. But, because of the development of the Chinese economy, an increasing number of students who graduate from the high vocational college and control the technical skills have more opportunities to get the job from an international company. That means that English, especially oral English teaching, has already become an important teaching task for the teachers who work in higher vocational colleges. Therefore, this paper will inform people of the development of the task-based approach. Then, the statues of oral English teaching will be analyzed. After that, the author compares the differences between the traditional teaching methods and the task-based approach. There are some tasks that can prove that the task-based approach can stimulate the higher vocational college students' interest in the oral English learning. Students can discover the meaning of tasks designed in the comprehensive English course. The last part of the paper will discusses both advantages and disadvantages of applying the task-based approach. This will emphasize the whole research condition of the task-based approach.

There are some questionnaires that can support the author's viewpoint about using different tasks that can allow the higher vocational college students to pay more attention to the study of oral English.

In summary, this useful teaching method should be implemented quickly, and it should allow students to benefit from it. In the future, the task-based approach will help students acquire more useful knowledge in the second language learning field.

[Keywords] the task-based approach, the grammar-translation approach, higher vocational college

	PAGE
APPROVAL PAGE	i
TITLE PAGE	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENT.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv,v
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
Introduction	
Statement of the Problem	
Definitions of Terms	
Method of Approach	
II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	3
The development of TBA in oversea	
The development of TBA in China	
The status of oral teaching in higher vocational college in China	
Differences of TBA and other traditional methods of oral teaching in higher vocational college in China	
The task design in oral teaching in a comprehensive English course for the higher vocational college	
Summary: Both advantages and disadvantages of TBA in higher vocational college for oral teaching in China	
III. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	17
IV. REFERENCES	19

Chapter 1 Introduction

The task-based approach (TBA) is a practical teaching method which became popular in the Western world in the 1980s. It has had a significant impact on language teaching, and it is also essential to foreign or second language teaching. Prabhu is considered to be the founder of this method. However, in China, this method is still new in second language teaching. It encourages students to perform a task when they are studying (Ellis, 2005).

Compared with traditional teaching methods such as grammar-translation approaches and audio-lingual approaches, the task-based approach advocates a focus on a learner's activities and creativity (Van den Branden, 2006). It is different from traditional teaching methods. In China, although this method is popular in the primary school and the secondary school, university teaching pays less attention to it, especially for oral teaching in higher vocational colleges. Usually, students in higher vocational colleges are non-English majors and they care more about their lessons in technical study. It is hard for them to have enthusiasm in an English class, especially for oral English. Therefore, learning to use this new method in oral teaching is worthy of research. It is useful for teachers to know the difference between higher vocational education and common university education when using this method in oral teaching.

Whether this new method can make students interested in oral English is worthy of discussion. This paper will provide a background and the development of the history for the task-based approach. Then, it will analyze the status of oral teaching in higher vocational colleges. There will be some tasks designed to point out how to apply this method in higher vocational colleges. After that, the essay will discuss whether it is necessary for teachers to use this method, and it will tell teachers how to learn advanced teaching theories. In conclusion, I will analyse both the benefits and weaknesses of the application of this method and infer the

influence of task-based approaches in the future.

Statement of the Problem

The problem to be addressed is how to use the task-based approach to change the status of oral English teaching for higher vocational colleges in China.

Definition of Terms

The task-based approach: This method asks students to do meaningful tasks when they use the target language. Assessment is primarily based on task outcome (in other words, the appropriate completion of tasks) rather than on accuracy of language forms (Nunan, 2004).

Method of Approach

The research was conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville over a period of ninety (90) days. Primary searches were conducted via the Internet services of the library through EBSCO host with ERIC, Baidu, Google/Google Scholar as the primary search engines. The primary search terms or keywords were Task-based teaching, oral teaching, higher vocational education and TESOL.

Chapter 2 Review of Related Literature

The development of TBA in oversea

Prabhu was the founder of task-based language teaching activities. TBA as practical teaching method became popular in the Western world in 1980s of the 20th century. After this, TBA became one of the useful teaching methods in TESOL. Task-based Language Teaching is a further development of Communicative Language Teaching. The goal of this method is that language should be learned as closely as possible to real life situations and settings. The theory of TBA should be based on the "input and inter-actionist hypothesis" (Long, 2005). Students should take care of all kinds of opportunities about information input and information output (Jarvis and Pavlenko, 2008). Therefore, foreign language teaching should include "modified interaction" activities (i.e., tasks) to enable students to complete their tasks in the process of understanding the use of the target language communication. Then students naturally contribute meaningfully to the target language of acquisition. Thus, according to the above-mentioned theory, it shows that teachers should provide opportunities for students to participate in activities and help them express true and natural feelings. Students should search for knowledge and ask questions, then construct their own models, concepts and strategies. The more they practice, the more they can know about the true essence of communication. This is called "learning by doing" (Harmer, 2006).

The "Task" is significant in TBA. It requires the participants to function primarily as "language users" in the sense that they are involved in real activities (Ellis, 2003, p.3.). It is not difficult to imagine that the determined actions and perspectives of learners may turn a task into an exercise. Different tasks can make language learners know how to choose the best learning method (Garcia-Mayo, 2007).

The development of TBA in China

In China, TBA has three steps (PTP): Pre - task, Task - cycle and Post-task (Tin, 2003). These models or forms for teachers teaching in the classroom provide the operational level guidance (Clark and Elen, 2007).

The adoption of reasonable teaching tasks is designed to allow students to get a reasonable allocation of attention. TBA has become critical in recent years. In 2001, the Ministry of Education issued a *Full-time average high school English curriculum standards* for the first time that clearly stated that the Ministry was advocating a task-based teaching model. It is assumed that teachers in the teaching field would allow students to study with the mission objectives and help students better grasp the classroom knowledge. With the help of the world-renowned educator Nunan, China has been prepared to act in accordance with TBA ideas for primary school English teaching materials. With *The new standard English*, as it is known, Nunan (2004, 2009) involves students in classroom tasks that involve learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language.

Professor Luziwen at Huazhong Normal University contributed one notable part of this work. The work is titled the *Task-based approach brief* (2002). In essence, it is the beginning of the research of China's education focus on the TBA. It can be said that in China, the TBA adheres to the applicant development process model from primary school to high school to vocational college levels.

This approach means that Chinese classroom instruction needs to become more flexible. On one hand, the real materials are collected with a study environment that makes students participate in the process of study reading. On the other hand, the task-based approach means the language-teaching goal is to improve the ability of communication. Thus, this approach easily

broadens student's horizons and improves their external communication skills.

The status of oral teaching in higher vocational colleges in China

Speaking is the skill that the students will be judged upon in real-life situations. Wang (2006) concluded the principles of oral teaching in China should include the following ideas:

1. Balancing accuracy-based practices with fluency-based practices
2. Contextualizing practice
3. Personalizing practice
4. Building up confidence
5. Maximizing meaningful interactions
6. Helping students develop speaking strategies
7. Making the best use of the classroom learning environment to provide sufficient language input and practice for the students

One researcher (George, 2006) has said that the assessment of oral skills is a competence-based learning. Oral skills involve a series of "open-ended interactions characteristic of the professional-client relationship" (Brayne, 2002, p.153).

China has a special education system for higher vocational college education. Unlike developed countries, students in China who chose to enter the higher vocational college system usually do so for two reasons: 1) some of them come from the poor families where their parents don't have enough money to support them at a four year university, which means they will want to take a job early to improve the condition of the family. In this condition, when a poor student attends a technical college, if they study hard, the government will offer some subsidies to help them to finish school. 2) Chinese students just have one chance to take the university entrance exam. If the students do not do well, their scores will be lower than the undergraduate course line

average. If they do receive a lower score, the only choice is to enter the higher vocational college system.

These special situations cause a variety of troubles for teachers who are teaching. First, most of the students from rural areas or those who do not have a strong academic record will have weak learning skills. On one hand, it is hard for teachers to control these students. On the other hand, these students usually do not have interest in oral learning. They just want to acquire skills to make a living. Second, they lack of the motivation to study minor courses. Thirdly, from the teachers viewpoint, if their students are disrespectful or do not work hard, the teacher may feel that their job is not making a difference. If conditions like these last for a long time, the vicious circle would continue to repeat itself.

For this special teaching environment, the higher vocational college teachers not only need to have extreme dedication and patience, but also powerful class organizational skills. For a deeper meaning to this concept, the higher vocational college requires teachers perform as an effective teachers. Teachers must know all of the teaching methods and choose the best one to utilize in the class. There are a series of problems waiting for teachers to solve. They must be in complete control of the students.

In recent years, the higher vocational teachers should try to research teaching methods that can make students study useful knowledge, and stimulate students' learning potential. TBA as an emerging method has been used gradually (Ishikawa, 2008).

In China, at the college level, Audio-lingual courses and Reading courses use TBA as a practical approach. However, the higher vocational colleges focus on teaching students practical technologies. Compared with the comprehensive university, the higher vocational university pays less attention to second language learning. As a result, the student has weak basic English

skills. As a practical matter, the teacher cares more and more about how to get the student to pass the practical skills examination. Thus, less attention is given to making the students practice their oral English.

At present, the TBA in the higher vocational college is normally applied in the non-professional English Audio-lingual courses and Reading courses. A few task designs have been used in the oral English teaching area. Fewer tasks have been set by teachers teaching in the form of communication and interaction with students. In fact, in the TESOL related fields, lots of teaching research in other countries indicates that teachers, who teach English as the second language, use the TBA pedagogy as a means to make students quickly absorb the useful content. Therefore, teachers who want to change the status quo and promote teaching levels should incorporate TBA, and they should also use reasonable oral English skills without hesitation (Wang, 2006).

Differences of TBA and other traditional methods of oral teaching in higher vocational college in China

Bond and Ockey (2003) refer to the main purpose of oral English teaching is to help students apply language knowledge in a real life situation and to know how to communicate with others. It is necessary to enhance the capacity of the integrated use of language for students, and to lay a solid foundation to improve their oral English skills. If the students have a clear speaking target, they will spontaneously want to speak. As a higher vocational colleges teacher, it is useful to let students know more about how to speak English. If students can have both technical abilities and foreign language skills, they will have more opportunities when they want to find a good job (Velde, 2009).

Vocabulary is the foundation of oral English speaking. Another researcher (Gao, 2010) has

done the analysis for the vocabulary learning patterns of non-English majors in higher vocational colleges. He found that the best way for students to remember lots of vocabulary words is not to read the word for several times, but to apply these vocabulary words in the actual English speaking environment. The other author, Moriatsu (2003) came to the conclusion that when students practice oral English in a group, for example when teachers design a game and ask students to use English to solve the problem, the students have more interest in speaking and tend to enjoy their classes.

Compared to the TBA, some of the traditional teaching methods have been widely used in higher vocational teaching and have been studied thoroughly by teaching researchers. Traditional teaching methods can be divided into two types: One is an emphasis on basic grammatical exercises, such as the Grammar-Translation Approach (GTA). The other is an emphasis on the oral and listening teaching, such as the Situational Language Teaching and the Audio-Lingual Approach (ALA).

Richards and Rodgers (2000) stated that the GTA uses the mother tongue in foreign language teaching. When teachers use the GTA for oral teaching, they just let students read the text several times. Then teachers analyse the grammatical structure of some significant clauses. Finally, they ask students to repeat the content or conduct some form of quizzes to consolidate the knowledge acquired. This teaching method is less effective with students who have poor oral analysis ability and who may hardly understand what the teacher has said. Students just read the passage repeatedly as they practice oral English. For students, it is easy to forget what they have learned when they are in the real social communicative environment. They cannot say anything. Thus, we can say that the GTA has two prominent shortcomings. One shortcoming is that the GTA causes language learning to become abstract. Book knowledge is divorced from real-life

situations. It is difficult to incorporate what the students have learned into a real scenario since they can hardly apply their knowledge. The second shortcoming is that the GTA is a teacher-centered teaching method. Teachers are the authorities who impart knowledge so that students may learn with a passive attitude. These two points are extremely unfavorable for students in acquiring English knowledge. However, these shortcomings are the advantages of the TBA. The TBA requires teachers to set the situation for students to complete the task in the form of learning according to the corresponding situation. The TBA is closer to everyday life. Students become interested in participating in several "task" activities.

The ALA is aimed at developing students' communicative competence with the target language. This method shows that oral language is the most important part for the English learners. In this approach, listening and speaking come first. Students can control some oral English patterns through practice. Although students can apply these oral English patterns, it does not mean that they can write very well about what they want to say. The teaching method which controls several oral patterns will make students lose their imaginary space. This method limits students' creativity. Therefore, the ALA can only be practiced in some special classes. Compared to the ALA, the TBA can assist students to finish their task fluently and can balance and promote their listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating skills. The ALA requires less effort than the TBA.

The TBA is a good method which controls the whole cognitive process of students learning (Skehan, 2001). It brings together the advantages of both the GTA and the ALA. On one hand, teachers can design a variety of tasks to increase students' interest in basic grammar learning. On the other hand, all the tasks can combine listening, speaking, reading, and writing together. This can let students know how to balance their study situation (Robinson, 2011).

The task design in oral teaching in a comprehensive English course for the higher vocational college

In this chapter, unit 4 of *A new English course* will be discussed as a tool for using TBA in the classroom. The key point of this unit is to understand the concept of "pollution control."

If teachers use the GTA or ALA for oral English teaching with this unit, they simply allow students to read the text several times, then detect some new words about pollution. After that, the teacher may introduce some modal verbs statement to clarify the grammatical structure and ask some questions to guide students to understand the text. Finally, the teacher requires students to repeat the content or use quizzes to consolidate the knowledge acquired. Teachers usually speak for a whole class period. However, both teachers and students become tired and lose their interest.

TBA is a completely different teaching method. Teachers can give students the task to find related English-language news and topics, and encourage students to become the master of the class.

"Pollution control" is a topic which connects with our daily life. Relevant information can be found through newspapers, magazines, web pages, and other aids, such as political news. One example of political news includes the "Climate conference in Denmark's Copenhagen," which like the film "Avatar" includes the environmental pollution topic. All of these media sources can make students interested in seeking the information about pollution control and encourage students to share their materials with classmates.

For students with weak oral skills, intensive reading lessons are useful. When they do not understand the article, the former information can give them more knowledge about "Pollution Control." In the classroom setting, a teacher can ask some students to introduce the news they

have researched. Then, the teacher gives students tasks for using different sentence patterns to describe the problems of pollution. Next, the teacher discusses with students the highlights and shortcomings of these sentences and encourages students to become active in the class and allows students to get together to correct mistakes. After that, students can divide into two groups to discuss the topic of how to improve our environment and to debate which method is the best one. Finally, teachers give students five minutes to prepare a short talk about their own feelings on this issue. For this task practice, students can easily control the key point of both the article's content and the knowledge structure and thus students do not feel bored when they practice.

The teacher surveys 4 classes and conducts research about the feeling of students when they experience the lesson which has designed tasks. The questionnaire is finished by the sophomore students whose major is becoming a dental assistants through the nursing school of Wuhan University.

Form 1: Included here is the number of student questionnaires that the author got from the nursing school of Wuhan University.

	Class 1	Class 2	Class 3	Class 4
Amount	45	42	40	41

The questionnaire has 5 questions, each question has 5 levels that range from highly appealing to not appealing; Students can choose their answers freely.

Form 2: Questionnaire

This questionnaire asks students to choose their class and to use a number to indicate their selection and option.

Highly appealing	Appealing	A little appealing	Natural	Not appealing
1	2	3	4	5

Class 1 2 3 4		
(1)	Do you like to collect information about "Pollution control" on the Internet?	1 2 3 4 5
(2)	Do you like the group discussion?	1 2 3 4 5
(3)	Do you like to show your research to your classmates?	1 2 3 4 5
(4)	Do you like the debate topic?	1 2 3 4 5
(5)	Do you like the short speech?	1 2 3 4 5

From this questionnaire, teachers can evaluate how the students feel about task design after students finish this survey.

Teachers collect all the data and information about this survey, and they come to a conclusion in the following forms. The line is the condition for students to choose 1 (highly appealing), 2 (appealing) and 3 (a little appealing), the row blank from(1) to (5) express the 5 questions. The average percent is to identify the average number of people who choose 1, 2 and 3, and to compare it with the total numbers of students in one class. The total shows what percent of the people like task design.

Class 1

	Choose 1	Choose 2	Choose 3
(1)	30	10	2

(2)	32	6	2
(3)	25	12	3
(4)	40	1	1
(5)	28	4	2
Average percent	68.89%	14,67%	4.44%
Total	88%		

Class 2

	Choose 1	Choose 2	Choose 3
(1)	28	10	1
(2)	25	11	1
(3)	19	12	3
(4)	32	4	0
(5)	27	6	1
Average percent	62.38%	20.48%	14.29%
Total	97.15%		

Class 3

	Choose 1	Choose 2	Choose 3
(1)	16	18	2
(2)	23	3	4
(3)	18	10	4
(4)	22	3	8
(5)	25	7	1
Average percent	52.00%	20.50%	9.50%
Total	80%		

Class 4

	Choose 1	Choose 2	Choose 3
(1)	30	10	0
(2)	24	5	3
(3)	28	1	1
(4)	14	19	2
(5)	26	8	4
Average percent	59.51%	20.98%	4.88%

Total	85.37%
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From these four forms, it reveals that at least 80% of the students like these tasks design in each class. That is means that task design is effective in the higher vocational colleges.

Summary: Both advantages and disadvantages of TBA in higher vocational college for oral teaching in China

First, the TBA makes students have initiative and control over their academic studies. From the beginning of the rehearsal phase of the review to the final stages, teachers have worked out tasks while the students use their own ideas to finish. Students can choose their favorite way to approach the tasks, to select the speaking materials they prefer, and to gather information for resolving the problem positively. Furthermore, a variety of media outlets enhance students' interest in using oral English in the modern society. Chen (2005) shows that TBA is a pleasant teaching method for the student in a higher vocational college.

Second, the TBA strengthens teacher-student interaction. In the TBA, the best way to check teaching success and the completion of its goals is to let students participate in group discussions or lectures. When students introduce new information to support their views, teachers provide opportunities for them to obtain the necessary language skills. Teachers and students become closer. Students enhance their language proficiency and can be more daring in their communication with people in the real society.

The disadvantage of the TBA is that this method is difficult to control the students' oral English level. When teachers choose TBA to educate students, they must prepare their lessons carefully. Teachers need to expand their knowledge. Tasks and supplementary oral materials should be well prepared. Teachers have to design the task both for teaching content and

suitability for students' learning knowledge. Only in this way, students can keep pace with their teachers.

Chapter 3 Conclusions and Recommendations

For higher vocational college students, who pay less attention to the oral English, maybe TBA can allow them to realize that oral English is more interesting than what they thought, and to recognize the significance of learning English. Through this real operating platform, teachers can achieve the purpose of interacting with students. If teachers in higher vocational colleges want their students to have perfect oral English skills, it is not enough to ask students to read the assigned paragraph repeatedly. Teachers should prepare more tasks to guide and teach student through the active learning style. TBA is a method that can make students speak English without enforcement.

Only when the students have a clear target can they fully achieve find their own speaking abilities. Therefore, in the higher vocational colleges, there is no doubt that teachers should design more tasks to make students care about their oral English communicating skills.

The best way to improve students' oral English skills is to connect the advantages of both the traditional methods and the TBA. The grammatical exercises should provide tasks that let English learners enjoy studying their oral English skills.

Oral English teaching needs teachers to work hard and to research more methods that prompt students' interest. English Speaking is an applied science. If teachers do not have good methods to guide students, it is probable that students may forget how to apply oral English. Therefore, when teachers are familiar with a new method such as the TBA, it is necessary to catch the key point of this method and to use it in the class. In the meantime, teachers should introduce this method to other tutors or professors. Gathering different teaching experiences can enhance teaching efficiency. In the future, Chinese higher vocational teachers should research more useful tasks through the Internet, and they should know how to teach students to apply it.

The TBA will become popular in the future research of second language teaching. It is no doubt that the TBA can absorb the key points of this resource and allow second language teaching in China to become easy.

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