

IMPLEMENTING A TASK-BASED APPROACH IN CHINESE HIGH SCHOOL ORAL
ENGLISH TEACHING

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Abstract

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Zhiwei Dong

Under the Supervision of Dr. Yuanyuan Hu

It is common that high school students in China struggle with oral English. This paper explored what makes a good speaking task and how to design good speaking tasks for Chinese high school students taking into consideration the reality of China. Suggestions were provided for dealing with the challenges of implementing the task-based approach in Chinese high school oral English teaching. This paper will help Chinese high school English teachers gain a deeper understanding of the task-based approach and features of a good speaking task.

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Chapter I Introduction

The goal of learning a foreign or second language should be that we can communicate with other people in the target language. However, it is common that Chinese high school students' oral English is poor. Many Chinese high school students who successfully finished listening, reading and writing parts in an English examination failed to communicate with English-speaking people. On one hand, the exam-oriented education, which has been prevailing in China for many years, may shoulder the responsibility for this situation. On the other hand, traditional teaching methods, for example, the traditional 3P (presentation, practice and production) teaching model that Chinese high school teachers commonly use, cannot meet the need of developing students' oral English.

The Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China issued *The English Curriculum Standards for High Schools* in 2003, which recommended that the task-based approach should be adopted in English teaching. According to *The English Curriculum Standards for High Schools* (2003), more attention should be given to students' English comprehensive ability, problem-solving skills, critical thinking ability, and autonomous learning.

The task-based teaching approach is a kind of learner-centered instruction. Brown and Lee (2015) stated that "Learner-centered instruction turned teacher-centered models 'upside down' by playing down the all-knowing, authoritative role of the teachers, and giving opportunities to students to participate in a classroom without fear of being scolded or belittled by a teacher" (p. 45). Scholars have carried out a large number of studies, which contributed to the development of concepts, principles and models related to the task-based approach.

According to Wang (2012), the task-based approach has been increasingly adopted in English teaching in Chinese high schools over the last decade, with results showing that the

task-based approach is better than traditional teaching methods in improving Chinese high school students' English, especially their oral English.

However, what we cannot ignore in the implementation of the task-based approach is the reality of Chinese high schools. As Cui (2009) pointed out, “many factors restrict the implementation of TBLT, such as the conflict between traditional culture and TBLT based on constructivism, the difference of teachers, the diversity of students, and so on (p. 31).” In other words, it is necessary for Chinese high school English teachers to find a better way to achieve the “localization” of the task-based approach.

Statement of the Problem

In view of the present oral English teaching in Chinese high schools, this paper aimed to explore the following questions:

1. How has the task-based approach been implemented in Chinese high school oral English teaching?
2. What are some challenges for high school English teachers in China in implementing the task-based approach to oral English teaching?
3. How can high school English teachers use the task-based approach in teaching oral English despite potential challenges?

Definition of Terms

Task-based approach: The task-based approach is an approach to second/foreign language teaching, with which classroom tasks constitute the main focus of instruction (Richards, Schmidt, Platt, & Schmidt, 2003). Teachers design specific and operational tasks in line with teaching goals; students complete tasks through communication, cooperation, and other sorts of language

activities to achieve the goal of learning. It is also a variation of communicative language teaching.

Purpose of the Study

This paper explored what makes a good speaking task and how to design good speaking tasks for Chinese high school students taking into consideration the reality of China. Suggestions were provided for dealing with the challenges of implementing the task-based approach in Chinese high school oral English teaching. This paper will help Chinese high school English teachers gain a deeper understanding of the task-based approach and features of a good speaking task.

Methodology

A brief review of the literature on the task-based approach and its theoretical basis was conducted. Components of a good speaking task were examined. The implementation of the task-based approach in Chinese high school English teaching was also reviewed. Suggestions on how to use the task-based approach in oral English teaching in Chinese high schools were provided.

Chapter II Review of Literature

This chapter reviews the literature on the task-based approach, components of a good speaking task, and the implementation of the task-based approach in Chinese high school English teaching.

An Overview of the Task-based Approach

The task-based approach was derived from communicative language teaching. As explained by Widdowson (1978), “drawing on pragmatic and sociolinguistic approaches to the study of linguistics, communicative language teaching was introduced in the 1970s, raising awareness among language teachers of the need to base language learning in communication” (as cited in Branden, 2006, p. 239). Richards (2010) stated that “the communicative approach in language teaching starts from a theory of language as communication. The goal of language teaching is to develop what Hymes (1972) referred to as ‘communicative competence’” (p. 69). Communicative language teaching is a teaching approach based on the idea of cultivating students’ communicative competence, emphasizing that the ultimate goal of foreign language teaching is to develop students’ ability to communicate in a foreign language (Yao, 2010).

The task-based approach appeared during the boom time of communicative language teaching in the 1970s as one of its interpretations (Li, 2015). Branden (2006) stated that Prabhu was the first one who designed a task-based approach curriculum, which shows that if people use a target language, they can learn it more effectively. Prabhu (1987), in Bangalore Project, took the lead in using “task” as the main form of English teaching. As Branden (2006) put, “the significance of Bangalore Project lies in the fact that Prahbu systematically used the ‘task’ as an important component of classroom teaching and applied it in second language teaching practice, which is the rudiment of task-based approach” (p. 239).

What Is a Task?

Various definitions of “task” have been proposed by different scholars over the past three decades. Long (1985) defined “task” as “things people do in everyday life” (p. 89). Long’s definition indicates that tasks should be closely related to real-life situations. According to Prabhu (1987), “an activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process, was regarded as a task” (p. 89). Prabhu’s definition highlights the importance of engaging learners in thinking to reach an outcome. Nunan’s book titled *Designing Tasks for the Communicative Classroom* and published in 1989, is a landmark of the task-based approach. According to Nunan (1989), a task is “a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language; while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form” (p. 69). Willis (1996) defined tasks as “activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome” (p. 54). Skehan (1996) argued that language learning tasks should focus primarily on meaning. What the aforementioned definitions share in common is that a task is goal-oriented, which motivates learners to use a target language to achieve an outcome.

What Makes a Good Speaking Task?

The researchers’ definitions suggest essential components for a good speaking task.

General principles. A series of interrelated steps is essential to a task. Willis (2007) put forward that a task should consist of three parts: pre-task, task-cycle, and post-task. In the pre-task part, teachers set up the task, contextualize the topic of a lesson, raise students’ interest, and prepare them for the task; in the task-cycle part, students are supposed to complete the task

in small groups or pairs using a target language to express themselves; the post-task part can be a supplement to classroom teaching rather than a repetition of classroom teaching (Willis, 2007).

A task should be challenging as well as manageable to students. Skehan (1998) pointed out that when teachers choose or design a task, they should consider the difficulty level of the task. On one hand, a task should not be too difficult for learners. They may lose confidence and motivation in completing the task if it is beyond their ability. On the other hand, a task should not be too easy. Learners may feel bored or disengaged when a task is too easy or not challenging for them to complete. As Skehan (1996) stated, teachers should give students tasks that are appropriate to their level of proficiency.

Features of a good speaking task. When it comes to speaking tasks, teachers need to take into consideration features of spoken language in addition to the general principles. Brown and Lee (2015) stated that a speaking class should “encourage the use of authentic language in meaningful contexts” and “focus on both fluency and accuracy” (p. 356). In other words, authenticity, fluency, and accuracy are important features that teachers should take into consideration regarding a speaking task.

A good speaking task should encourage students to use a target language for authentic communication. Students should be provided with opportunities to use language forms they have learned in authentic communicative contexts (Li, 2015). Branden (2006) stated that “the teacher should design appropriate speaking tasks in which students are involved to trigger their linguistic competence into communicative performance in real-life situation” (p. 239).

In addition to authenticity, teachers also should take accuracy and fluency into consideration when choosing or designing a speaking task. Nation (2003) suggested the following for effective fluency activities: language materials involved being familiar to students,

the focus being on communication (not form), and support being available to students. For accuracy, a good speaking task should help students express their ideas accurately with grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation activities. Branden (2006) pointed out that students may feel more confident to express themselves in a speaking task that starts with accuracy activities followed by fluency ones.

A sample speaking task. Below is a sample speaking task adapted from *The National English Curriculum* (2011), which illustrates the three features of a good speaking task, authenticity, accuracy, and fluency.

Class Preparation

1. Draw a map according to a school layout, leaving out the name of each building or room.
Make several copies of the school map.
2. Make flash cards for words (school, playground, office, computer room, library, restroom, etc.).

Procedures

Step 1. Teach students words (school, playground, office, computer room, library, restroom, etc.) using flash cards. Students are required to learn the pronunciation and meaning of each word.

Step 2. Ask students to use sentence patterns in their textbook to introduce school buildings.

Step 3. Divide students into several groups with 4 or 5 students in one group. Give each group a copy of the school map and a set of flash cards. Students are required to stick the cards to the school map.

Step 4. Ask group members to describe the school map, using sentence patterns such as “This is the playground” and “The music room is here.” Students are encouraged to use vocabulary and sentence patterns they have learned.

Step 5. Ask students to design an ideal school with the flash cards and give an oral presentation about their design. Give students help if needed.

As the example above illustrates, the topic of the task is related to students' daily life, which can be authentic and engaging to students. Steps 1 through 4 are accuracy activities that focus on pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar practices whereas step 5 focuses on fluency, providing students with an authentic communication opportunity.

In sum, a good speaking task should be a good learning opportunity for students. Moreover, it is worthwhile to note that each element in a task is not in isolation but affects one another in a dynamic and interactive way.

The Task-based Approach in Chinese High School English Teaching

Since the last decade of the 20th century, the task-based approach has been increasingly used in Chinese high schools. Overall, scholars believe that the task-based approach can be motivating to students, engaging them in independent, interactive, and cooperative learning.

Studies on the implementation of the task-based approach. Many scholars in China have conducted empirical studies towards the implementation of the task-based approach over the years. Jiao (2012) conducted her three-month study about using the task-based approach to teach English reading. Students in Jiao's study were freshmen of Zhangjiaguang Houchen High School in Shanghai. Jiao used one class taught with the task-based approach as the experimental class, and the other class taught with traditional teaching methods as the control class. Before the study, Jiao asked students to finish a questionnaire and a pre-test of English reading. At the end of the study, students were required to take a post-test of English reading. On the basis of the pre-test and post-test of both classes, Jiao concluded that the task-based approach is more effective than the traditional teaching methods in improving students' English reading. Jiao also

stated that the task-based approach could arouse Chinese high school students' interest in learning English, cultivate their ability to cooperate with each other, increase their self-confidence, develop their oral English, and improve their English comprehensive ability.

Xu (2008) conducted a one-semester study on using the task-based approach to teach English writing in an experimental high school in Xinyang, Hebei province. Students of two parallel classes with similar English proficiency were participants in this study. Each class had 50 freshmen, and both classes were taught by one English teacher. One class, the experimental class, was taught with the task-based approach, while the other, the control class, was taught with traditional teaching methods. For the reliability of the study, Xu asked two teachers to grade all students' pre-study and post-study compositions. From the mean value and standard deviation of students' scores, Xu concluded that the task-based approach worked better than the traditional teaching methods in improving the students' writing. According to the post-study questionnaire, seventy-six percent of the students of the experimental class stated that they actively collect writing materials, and eighty-four percent of the students of the experimental class stated that they had more confidence in writing English compositions. In addition, Xu found that the students taught by the task-based approach was also able to improve their oral English. Xu suggested that teachers should combine English writing with oral English to improve students' comprehensive ability.

Wang (2012) conducted a three-month study in freshman classes in Bishan High School located in Chongqing province. The study consisted of two steps. First, 200 freshmen were required to finish a questionnaire about their study of English vocabulary. Responses to the questionnaire showed that sixty-eight percent of the freshmen still used rote memorization to learn vocabulary. Next, Wang chose two parallel classes with similar students' English

proficiency and the same number of students taught by the same English teacher. One of the two classes was used as the control class, where vocabulary was taught with traditional teaching methods; the other was used as the experimental class, where vocabulary was taught with the task-based approach. A comparison between the control class and the experimental class shows that students who were taught by the task-based approach could remember vocabulary better and have more confidence to communicate with other students. Wang stated that various activities used in the experimental class aroused students' interest in vocabulary learning. Wang also suggested that the "task" of the task-based approach and vocabulary teaching supplement each other and that when teachers design a "task" in class, they should incorporate students' interests into the task.

Although the three studies reviewed above did not focus on students' oral English, they all show that the task-based approach can improve students' oral English as well as increase their interest in English.

Challenges of implementing the task-based approach. The task-based approach can effectively improve students' English proficiency, but scholars also found many challenges in implementing the task-based approach in Chinese high school English teaching.

Firstly, the large number of high school students in one class is a challenge in the implementation of the task-based approach in Chinese high schools. Jiao (2012) pointed out that the average number of students in one Chinese high school class is more than 40, which may present challenges to the implementation of the task-based approach in Chinese high school English teaching. The goal of the task-based approach is to give students more opportunities to use language in class, but it is difficult to give each student the opportunities due to the large class size. When teachers assign group tasks, the more students one class has, and the more

groups there are. It would be more challenging for a teacher to oversee the groups and accomplish a teaching goal.

Secondly, many teachers do not know how to effectively use tasks in their teaching. They may have paid lip service to the task-based approach. According to Cui (2009), many high school English teachers assign tasks as students' homework, which sometimes resulted in an unsatisfactory outcome. Furthermore, some high school students use their native language rather than English to communicate with each other to complete tasks in class.

Last but not the least, due to the current college entrance examination, most Chinese high schools adopt the "exam-oriented" education, which is contrary to the core principles of the task-based approach. On one hand, teachers know the task-based approach can do better in improving students' English proficiency; on the other hand, once students fail to get high scores in the English examination, schools and parents will doubt teachers' ability. The current examination system puts high school English teachers in a dilemma. Many high school English teachers thus choose to use the task-based approach in teaching presentations and use traditional teaching methods on a daily basis to conform to the "exam-oriented" education (Cui, 2009).

Summary

Language is a tool for communication, with which people build up and maintain social relations with others (Widdowson, 1996). The task-based approach, which became popular in the Western world in the 1980s, has had significant impact on language teaching. Various studies on the task-based approach have shown that it can be used to improve students' English, including oral English, as well as increase their interest in learning English. Factors such as procedures, difficulty level, accuracy, fluency, and authenticity should be considered for a speaking task. The review of the implementation of the task-based approach in Chinese high school English

teaching reveals that high school English teachers in China are faced with challenges in implementing the task-based approach.

Chapter III Conclusions and Recommendations

The literature review shows the benefits and challenges of using the task-based approach in Chinese high school English teaching. This chapter revisits the benefits; more importantly, it provides suggestions to address the challenges.

Conclusions

The task-based approach can create student-oriented classes rather than teacher-oriented classes, enhancing students' oral English skills. In a traditional high school English class in China, teachers usually impart knowledge, and students learn knowledge passively. In a task-based approach class, the role of the teacher is to be an organizer, guider, and observer; students learn a target language by actively using the language to finish various tasks in class. Students will not learn "dumb English" because they need to express themselves, communicate with each other, and take part in group discussion to finish tasks, during which they have opportunities to practice their oral English and to learn English actively. Furthermore, with the task-based approach, students will become more autonomous learners and less afraid of making mistakes in class, which is important for high school students' English learning.

The task-based approach can arouse students' interest and confidence in learning English. Compared with passive learning, attractive and real-life tasks will arouse students' interest in learning English and encourage them to use oral English to complete the tasks. A good task can motivate students to relate what they will learn to their daily life or put what they have learned into practice in class. Students will get a sense of achievement when they finish one task after another, which will contribute to their confidence in using English to communicate with others.

The task-based approach can build a good relationship between teachers and students. High school students are on a special and important stage in their life, so having a good

relationship with teachers will help them learn better. In a task-based approach class, a teacher may have more opportunities to communicate with students and give feedback to students about their performances. Students can benefit from this kind of good relationship. They may feel more motivated to learn with more attention from their teacher; with feedback from their teacher, they may become more aware of their learning needs.

Chinese high school English teachers should use the task-based approach not only because *The English Curriculum Standards for High Schools* (2003) recommended it, but also because the task-based approach reflects the essence of communication with incomparable advantages over the traditional teaching methods.

Constraints

As mentioned in Chapter II, there are constraints on using the task-based approach in Chinese high school oral English teaching. First, it is difficult for all Chinese high schools to offer small classes due to the huge population in China. A large number of students in one class will add difficulty to task design and completion. Second, the exam-oriented education in China may push teachers and students to give priority to scores rather than oral English, resulting in a constraint on the implementation of the task-based approach in Chinese high schools.

Recommendations

To address the large class size issue, teachers can try the following strategies. First, teachers should avoid big groups when grouping students. Small groups can enhance the solidarity and cooperation of group members, which is critical to the successful completion of a group task. Second, teachers can choose topics related to students' lives to engage students and create real-life settings to ease the pressure of the large class size. Students are more likely willing to participate in activities that they feel related to.

With regard to the conflict between the Chinese education system and the task-based approach, high school teachers in China can take advantage of the benefits of both the traditional teaching methods and the task-based approach, taking their local teaching conditions and needs into consideration. Above all, they should cultivate students' interest in oral English and help them become more autonomous learners.

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