USING TBLT IN ENGLISH WRITING IN BEIJING KEY PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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Paper Advisor
Date: May 31, 2020

Suggested content descriptor keywords:

Task-based Language Teaching
Key Primary Schools in Beijing
English Writing
A Seminar Paper

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty

University of Wisconsin-Platteville

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirement for the Degree

Master of Science in Education

English Education

By

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2020
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my seminar paper advisor and my dear family. I’d like to thank my advisor, Dr. Yuanyuan Hu. She is an example and a trustworthy mentor and friend to me. From my topic selection to my seminar paper proposal to the improvement of my seminar paper, Dr. Hu gave me careful guidance so that I could succeed in finishing this paper. In addition, I want to thank my family members for their encouragement and support, which enabled me to devote myself to my studies and work.
Abstract

USING TBLT IN ENGLISH WRITING IN BEIJING KEY PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Jiarui Luo

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Students’ English writing is far from satisfactory in key primary schools in Beijing. Teachers find it difficult to teach English writing, and students find it difficult to learn how to write in English. This paper aims to explore how to use task-based language teaching in key primary schools in Beijing to help students learn to write about their own daily life and feelings in English. Based on the review of relevant literature on TBLT including its definitions, development, types, and components and TBLT in China and the analysis of problems in English writing in Beijing key primary schools, the paper provides English teachers in those schools with suggestions on the use of TBLT in teaching English writing.
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Chapter I Introduction

Learning English as a foreign language is a process in which students actively construct meaning. In this process, teachers should help students develop their literacy skills including writing skills in English, gain an understanding of cultural differences, and improve their outlook on life.

The idea of task-based language teaching was put forward by N. S. Prabhu in 1987. At the same time, he also came up with an entire model of teaching that is emphasizing “Learning by doing”. He set the goal of task-based language teaching as helping students learn a second language with tasks (N. S. Prabhu, 1987).

With regard to English writing for Beijing key primary school students, the main goal is to apply the knowledge that they have learned from class to writing about relevant things in daily life. Students in key primary schools in Beijing are usually more interested in English writing. They have a relatively good language foundation in English, but their ability to express their ideas in English writing needs to be strengthened. In other words, some problems exist in English writing in key primary schools in Beijing.

In recent years, TBLT has been widely used in teaching writing in key primary schools in Beijing to address the problems. Teachers have been using writing tasks that are closely related to students’ actual life, which to a certain extent improve students’ ability in English writing as well as stimulate their interest in learning English.

Statement of the Problem

Whether in Chinese or in English, a composition is like a building: meaning and ideas are its designing style; vocabulary is its bricks and tiles; grammar is its steel and cement; and rhetoric is its interior decoration. All of them are indispensable. Strictly speaking, “English
writing” in key primary school in Beijing is not real writing. Students are usually asked to write some sentences about themselves, their families, their schools, and occasionally about hot social issue topics more or less to practice what they have learned. However, it is common that students cannot express themselves well in English writing. The researcher explores the following questions in this paper:

1. What is the status quo of English writing in key primary schools in Beijing?
2. Why can TBLT be used in English writing in key primary schools in Beijing?
3. How can English teachers in key primary schools in Beijing make good use of TBLT in teaching English writing?

Definition of Terms

Different researchers define “task” from different angles. Skehan’s definition of task includes the following characteristics:

- “meaning is primary
- there is a communication problem to solve
- there is a relationship to comparable real-world activities
- task completion has some priority
- the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome” (as cited in Brown and Lee, 2015, p. 47).

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to explore how to use task-based language teaching in key primary schools in Beijing to help students learn to write about their own daily life and feelings in English and to produce paragraphs and sentences that are coherent and logically connected.
Significance of the Study

English writing is the most difficult one among the four language skills. Students’ English writing is far from satisfactory in key primary schools in Beijing. Teachers find it difficult to teach English writing, and students find it difficult to learn how to write in English. A number of problems need to be analyzed, discussed, and solved. This study provides English teachers in key primary schools in Beijing with suggestions about how to use TBLT in English writing.

Methodology

To answer the research questions above, the researcher reviewed the relevant literature on TBLT including its definitions, development, types, and components and TBLT in China. The researcher also analyzed problems in English writing in Beijing key primary schools. Based on the literature review and problem analysis, some suggestions are provided on the use of TBLT in teaching English writing in Beijing key primary schools.
Chapter II Review of Literature

This chapter reviews the relevant literature regarding task-based language teaching, specifically five subtopics. The first section summarizes definitions of a task given by different scholars. The second section provides a brief review of the development of TBLT. The third section lists types of a task. The fourth section discusses components of a task. The fifth section reviews TBLT in China.

Definitions of a Task

Since researchers provide different interpretations from different perspectives, there is no widely accepted definition of a task. Breen (1987) thought a task is a series of work plans with specific goals, appropriate content, clear work procedures, and a series of results. Nunan (1989) chose to give the definition from the perspective of communication. In Nunan’s opinion, a task is a communicative classroom activity, during which learners should interact, convey their meaning in the target language, and pay attention to fluency as well as accuracy.

The Development of TBLT

The idea of task-based language teaching was put forward by N.S. Prabhu in 1987. He set the goal of task-based language teaching as helping students learn a second language by requiring them to finish tasks using the second language. He believed, in the course of learning a second language, a meaningful context is more important than grammatical correctness.

Cardlin (1987) tried to improve what N. S. Prabhu proposed. In their opinion, students could learn a language better by talking purposefully with their partners. Different from N. S. Prabhu, they gave a new mission to teachers, who are recommended to provide activities and tasks for learning. Cardlin (1987) took a further step and came up with a series of criteria for selecting tasks and measuring their difficulty.
Long and Crookes (1992) insisted that it is vital to conduct a needs analysis and design a task that is closely related to students’ daily life. They agreed that comprehensible language input can result in language acquisition. They argued that the most important way to turn language input into comprehensible input is to have students continuously cooperate with each other in conversational interactions, which will motivate them to modify possible comprehension problems and to pay attention to language forms. There were also a few limitations with the interaction hypothesis. For example, a teacher may draw students’ attention to a language form only when most of them made the same grammatical errors while they finish their task. However, the students tend to avoid complicated language forms by using communicative strategies to avoid making grammatical errors, which would not contribute to their interlanguage development.

Willis (1996) followed Long and Crookes’s step and put forward a series of guidelines that could help carry out task-based language teaching activities. She proposed the following five principles for the implementation of a task:

(1) Providing authentic and meaningful learning material;
(2) Utilizing the target language;
(3) Offering opportunities for learners to use the target language;
(4) Focusing on the language itself in the stage of task cycle;
(5) Stressing the different aspects of language in different periods of implementing a task. (p.157-158)

Skehan (1998) explained task-based language teaching in details. On one hand, second language acquisition is different from mother tongue acquisition. In the situation of information processing, L2 learners’ attention would be limited. In communicative activities, learners tend to
pay attention to meaning. On the other hand, L2 learners’ language use depends on their command of L2 grammatical system and lexical system. A well-designed task can help L2 learners give attention to both meaning and forms.

There have always been the challenge of balancing language form and meaning in L2 learning and teaching, the challenge of improving L2 learners’ fluency and accuracy, and the challenge of developing L2 learners’ interlanguage and communicative ability in the classroom. The task-based language teaching can possibly address these challenges.

**Types of Tasks**

Willis (1996) proposed that tasks could be divided into six types – “listing, ordering and sorting, comparing, problem solving, sharing personal experiences, and creative tasks”. According to Honeyfield (1993), tasks can be classified as communication or conversation ones, and learning and text-handling strategies. According to Richard and Rodgers (2001), tasks include role plays and simulations.

**Components of a Task**

Nunan (1989) proposed that a task is composed of six elements – goal, input, activities, teacher role, learner role, and settings. The goal is to enable students to perform the task under a general purpose. The goal-oriented task stimulates the learners’ intention and passion. Besides, the exposure to a target language should be closely related to real life, whether verbal (e.g., weather reports and travel guides) or visual (e.g., charts, photos, and traffic maps). What learners are expected to do should be directly related to the input. The relevance of the input can ensure that the learners make smooth progress on the task. Activities here refer to well designed ones that engage the learners, but not mechanic exercises. Focusing on students’ performance in classroom learning is a typical feature of task-based language teaching. Accordingly, team work, peer review, and collaborative learning should be encouraged during the implementation of the
whole task. In addition, teachers play multiple roles throughout the teaching process. Their roles change as the task progresses. Generally speaking, tasks ought to be as authentic as possible so that they can engage learners in the tasks, and the results should be presented in some ways.

**TBLT in China**

Research on the task-based language teaching is growing in China. The research of Chinese scholars mainly focuses on its theoretical basis, core concepts, and teaching process. Since 2001, elementary and middle school English teachers have studied and tried to apply TBLT to teaching.

However, more and more scholars believe that the foreign TBLT model is not in line with the reality of the current English language teaching in basic education in China. As a result, the localization of TBLT has become one of domestic scholars’ research focuses. Lu (1999) is the first scholar who attempted to study the localization of TBLT in China. Lu concluded that teaching requirements, teaching conditions, and other teaching factors based on primary and secondary English education in China should be carefully considered when TBLT is localized in China.

Lu (2000) elaborated on what is meant by TBLT, including its theoretical basis and implications, and the application of TBLT in primary and secondary schools in China. The goal is to integrate TBLT in the English classroom in primary and secondary schools in China, and promote the localization of TBLT in the English classroom.

Finally, the effectiveness of TBLT in China is reflected in task evaluations. Xia (2001) established three criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of a task: opportunity, ability, and effect. Li (2011) recommended formative evaluation to evaluate students’ performances in tasks;
he believes that formative evaluation can not only motivate lower-level students, but also help them truly become effective learners.

**Summary**

The review of definitions, the development of TBLT, types of a task, components of a task, and TBLT in China shows that task-based language teaching, under the framework of communicative teaching approach, can be effective in helping students improve their second language skills, including writing skills.
Chapter III English Writing in Beijing Key Primary Schools: Problems

In Beijing key primary schools, students are usually asked to write some sentences about simple topics, such as family and school, and occasionally about hot social issue topics. This chapter mainly elaborates on the problems existing in English writing in Beijing key primary schools.

Teacher-related Problems

In key primary schools in Beijing, no special English writing course is offered. English teachers usually integrate writing into a regular English class. It is common that teachers are faced with challenges in teaching writing.

**Insufficient attention to English writing.** In primary school exams, English has not been widely valued, and the writing section in English exams has a relatively low percentage of the total score. Many teachers think that it is more important for students to learn basic knowledge of English. Teachers usually pay more attention to students’ oral skills and recitation of words and sentences. Teaching English writing is not as interesting as teaching English songs or role play. Moreover, it usually takes teachers more time and energy to prepare a good writing class.

**Vague writing goals.** It is common that teachers do not know exactly what students should write about. For example, sometimes when a writing class is over, the students do not even know what the theme of this class is. When the teachers assign a writing topic, they oftentimes have not considered whether the students have life experience or inner feelings related to the topic. If the students do not have these, it will be difficult for them to write good compositions, and they may even lose the desire to express themselves in writing.

**Insufficient feedback.** When evaluating students’ English compositions, teachers often give a grade like A, B, C or D after taking a quick look, and they usually do not point out errors
in the compositions. Even if the teachers point out errors, they barely offer suggestions on how to correct the errors. When analyzing the compositions in a writing class, the teachers may simply tell the students whose composition is well written and encourage them to work hard. The teachers may explain the same or similar errors that most students have, but they usually do not give details or explanations for other writing errors. This kind of evaluation is relatively simple, which is not conducive to the cultivation of primary school students’ English writing ability.

**Student-related Problems**

Most students in Beijing key primary schools started learning English at a very young age, so they generally have a good English foundation. But because the students mainly focus on their English listening and speaking abilities, their English writing ability is usually weak. Their weaknesses in English writing are discussed below.

**Lack of ideas.** Some students lack general knowledge of life or life experience. What is more, they seldom read classic literature, which results in not knowing how to write or what to write about.

**Lack of structure.** The writing of primary school students often lacks structure. For instance, they often end their composition without a conclusion or writing a composition without a beginning; they often include unrelated information.

**Mother tongue mode of thinking.** Students tend to think in Chinese when writing their English compositions. A large proportion of them resort to “translating Chinese into English” when writing an English composition.

**Summary**

The English writing problems discussed in this chapter prevent Beijing key primary school students from improving their English writing.
Chapter IV Conclusions and Recommendations

This chapter offers some suggestions and a sample lesson plan to help key primary school English teachers in Beijing understand the use of TBLT in English writing. It also presents directions for further research.

Conclusions

The following conclusions can be drawn. The literature review on TBLT shows that it can be effective in helping students improve their second language skills, including writing skills. Problems exist in students’ English writing in Beijing key primary schools, which need to be addressed.

Using TBLT to teach English Writing in Beijing Key Primary Schools

In general, TBLT can provide students with more room for practice and stimulate their enthusiasm and innovation. The following suggestions are put forward to provide teachers in Beijing key primary schools with some ideas to address the English writing problems.

Teachers being good designers and assistants. The writing process consists of three stages: the pre-writing stage, the writing stage, and the revision stage. Teachers need to play their roles as good designers and assistants in the process of writing, not just as readers and reviewers. Teachers should not simply assign a writing topic and expect students to complete it in one class. Instead, teachers should provide appropriate guidance in the process of student writing.

Selection of writing materials and topics. Several factors are worthy of our attention when writing materials and topics are chosen. Firstly, the writing materials and topics must be authentic and interesting, and be closely related to students’ life, learning experience, and social reality. Secondly, the materials and topics ought to be diversified to cover different styles. Thirdly, the difficulty and length of the writing materials ought to be appropriate for the students.
More efforts on English writing. Teachers should cultivate students’ language ability and writing ability in particular in daily tasks. Primary school students cannot learn grammar like high school students. What teachers can do is to design appropriate tasks to help their students accumulate words and useful expressions, which are essential to their writing.

A Sample English Writing Lesson Plan

The following lesson plan for 6th grade English is provided as a sample to illustrate how TBLT can be used to teach English writing in Beijing key primary schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching Goal</th>
<th>Students learn to write a composition consisting of at least 5 sentences about their family.</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| Teaching Objectives | 1. Knowledge and ability  
| | • cultivate students’ initial writing ability  
| | • cultivate students’ basic ability to make sentences  
| | • teach some English expressions  
| | 2. Learning strategies  
| | • paragraph organization  
| | • group work feedback  
| | 3. Attitude  
| | • develop a positive attitude towards English writing |
| Key Points | 1. Students should learn to write about their family in English.  
| | 2. Students should learn to write a paragraph consisting of at least 5 English sentences. |
| Teaching Method | Task-based language teaching |
### Teaching procedures

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<tr>
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<th>Pre-writing Task: Warm-up</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher (T): Is it easy to write something about your family?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students(S): No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T: And is it easy to say something about your family?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S: Yes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T: So who can say something about your family?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S: Me!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>While-writing Task</th>
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<td></td>
<td>(1) After discussing and sharing their own family situations, the students make an outline.</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>(2) Students write their own compositions in their notebooks.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3) Students are divided into groups with 3 people in each group. They are asked to exchange compositions and give suggestions in their group.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(4) Revise their composition by themselves.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(5) Exchange their compositions with other groups.</td>
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<th>Post-writing Task</th>
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<td>• The teacher selects 2-3 compositions and shows them to the whole class.</td>
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<td>• Other students may put forward their suggestions.</td>
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<td>• The teacher summarizes strengths and weaknesses of students’ compositions and gives scores to them.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The lesson plan above is likely to work because sixth grade students in Beijing key primary schools are relatively more proficient in English and have stronger writing skills than those in regular primary schools. In addition, teachers and students tend to pay more attention to English because it plays an important role in the sixth grade, the last year of primary school.
Recommendations for Future Research

Although TBLT can be an effective way of teaching English writing in Beijing key primary schools, there are still some questions to be answered in future research. For instance, in what ways can teachers design tasks to engage students in writing? How can TBLT be used to improve students’ English writing in the long run? More thorough studies on the application of TBLT to English writing in Beijing key primary schools are needed.
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