

TASK-BASED APPROACH IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING IN CHINA

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# TASK-BASED APPROACH IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING IN CHINA

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## ABSTRACT

Task-based approach is a foreign language teaching method which has been used since 1980s. It is appropriated and accepted by application linguists and foreign language teachers. It's also a foreign language teaching method recommended by the Ministry of Education in China.

Traditional teaching ideas and teaching modes once promoted in teaching foreign language in China. They reflected a kind of restrictive, formalistic and passive teaching mode. They emphasized the teachers' leading role while ignoring learners' motives and purposes. Using the task-based approach, the teaching process is conducted with real life tasks. Learners participate, experience, communicate, and cooperate together when carrying out the task. They exert their cognitive ability and use their existing target language resource to perceive and practice the target language. They learn the target language in real life applications.

The approach presented in this paper, which embodies advanced teaching idea, is an effective popular foreign language teaching method. A brief review of literature on task-based approach and its theoretical basis was conducted. A second review of literature relating to its application in English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom

was conducted. A third review on its advantages over traditional teaching methods was conducted. The findings were summarized and recommendations were made.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Task-based approach is a teaching technique that involves classroom activities and the understanding and application of the target language and interaction among learners. It focuses on the meaning rather than the form of language and the task itself should be a complete unit which can be related to fulfilling an independent social activity. The purpose of task-based approach is to provide learners a natural and real environment to use language in which they will get many opportunities to communicate in the target language when they are trying to complete the task so as to acquire those language skills.

Task-based approach has been widely applied since the 1980s. It profits from theories like Krashen's second language acquisition, Vygotsky's constructivism theory and many others. Task-based approach is a dynamic and developing teaching method which advocates learning and training language knowledge and skills when completing tasks. Teachers are no longer just initiators but guides, nor are learners just receivers but principal agents. Through this approach, learners will learn how to make full use of their own communicative ability to transfer from mother language to target language. It provides an opportunity for them to learn together and mobilizes their potential abilities to use and handle the target language skillfully.

Those real and natural tasks will undoubtedly stimulate learners' knowledge acquired before, and activate their cognitive pattern. Learners are constantly active and positive in their learning during the task, thus they together form a favorable environment for learners to gain knowledge of the cultures and customs of English-speaking countries. In this way, learners naturally acquire the knowledge of English language and cultures and strengthen their abilities to comprehensively use the target language.

#### Statement of Problem

The research addressed two essential problems related to the task-based approach to teaching and learning a foreign language as a departure from traditional methods of teaching. The questions are:

- (i) what is the theoretical basis of task-based approach, and
- (ii) what is the relationship between task and learners' learning achievements.

There is much evidence to show that task-based approach plays a very important role in foreign language teaching and learning. The objective in this paper is to find out its theoretical basis. The other objective is to explain how it works in foreign language teaching classrooms better than traditional audio-lingual methods.

### Purpose of the Research

Experts and scholars have been looking for an effective teaching approach, which can make learners learn during communication in foreign language classrooms for years, even for centuries. Task-based approach seems to satisfy this need to the greatest extent possible. The purpose of this paper is to give foreign language teachers a vivid picture by explaining what task-based approach is, how it works and its benefits.

### Significance of the Problem

Educators believe that using appropriate teaching approaches is the best way to convey knowledge. People have dedicated time, money and energy to seek better ways to make language learning more interesting and more efficient. Task-based approach was researched and reported in this paper to inform people of a better way to teach and learn foreign languages.

### Assumptions

For the purpose of this paper, it is assumed that all research and review of the current literature of task-based approach was accurately reported. It is also assumed that the literature of task-based approach will make recommendations on how best to use the research available.

### Delimitations of the Research

The research was conducted at the YWICC Library in Yiwu Industrial and Commercial College and at the Karrmann Library in the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, over sixty (60) days. Primary searches were conducted using the Internet and EBSCO host with ERIC and Academic Search Elite as the primary sources. Searches were also conducted using the Internet through Google Scholar. Key search topics were “task-based approach” and “task-based teaching”.

### Method of Approach

A brief review of the literature on task-based approach and its theoretical basis was conducted. A second review of literature relating to its application in English as a second Language (ESL) classrooms was conducted. A third review on its advantages over traditional teaching methods was conducted. A discussion on how to design a good task was developed. The findings were summarized and recommendations were made.

### Link of Theory

Task-based approach benefits from theories like Krashen’s second language acquisition, and Vygotsky’s constructivism theory. It involved from Prabhu’s research in Bangalore.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### Theoretical Basis of Task-based Approach

Task-based approach is a teaching approach which uses tasks as its core programs to organize language teaching. Its advocate presented the idea that task-based approach is the logical extension of Communication Linguistics because they share similar principles in teaching. For example, they both agree that activities for real communication are of most importance in language learning; they both agree that using language to complete meaningful tasks can promote language learning; they both agree that the language which is meaningful to learners can facilitate the learning process (Willis, 1996).

Task-based approach is a dynamic and developing learning method. It advocates learning language knowledge and training skills in the process of completing tasks. Teachers are no longer just instructors but also guides, nor are learners just receivers but also principal agents. Through this approach, learners will learn how to make full use of their own communicative abilities to transfer from mother language to the target language. It provides an opportunity for them to learn together and mobilizes their potential abilities to use and handle the target language skillfully.

Task-based approach in second language teaching was first carried out by Prabhu, who published the Bangalore research report in 1982 and developed the concept of task-based approach (Wei, 2004). Researchers of task-based approach have acquired experience from language research, the research of language learning and the research of foreign language acquisition, and it is becoming more and more mature together with them. Its functions and value in building learner-centered classrooms and language learning environments, providing learners with chances to communicate and interact and developing learners' ability to use the target language and solve communicative problems were highly appreciated and recognized by experts and scholars in the field of language teaching.

Since the 1980s, task-based approach has attracted more and more attention in the foreign language teaching field. It is a learner-centered approach, which considers language as a communicative tool. It is in accordance with the direction of English teaching reform in China. Task-based approach aims at providing opportunities for learners to learn language both in speaking and writing through learning activities which are designed to engage learners in the authentic, practical and functional use of language for meaningful purpose.

### The Implementation of Task-based Approach

Brown (1994) referred to task-based approach as a series of tasks which directly serve and connect with teaching purpose transcending merely practicing language for language. It is the core of task-based approach to complete a real and meaningful task through the common effort of both teachers and learners (Willis, 1996). Therefore, learners learn the language skills naturally rather than take language as fragments and practice some language components mechanically. The common essence of task-based approach and communicative approach is that they both give top priority to fostering learners' communicative ability in target language.

Traditional foreign language teaching approaches in China place too much emphasis on instruction; pay too much attention to explaining language forms. All the practices focus on grammar teaching and seldom give consideration to authenticity and communicative function of language. While in task-based approach, an independent teaching unit consists of only one task; all the classroom activities center on the task and serve the task.

As a teaching approach, it is not persuasive when it only stops at the theoretical level; the key issue is the way teachers put it into practice. So far, the research of practicing task-based approach has been best represented by Skehan (1998) and Willis (1996) who both agreed on the key issue and fully suggest the idea of using task-based approach in teaching. Now, I am going to take Willis's framework as an example to talk about the teaching pattern of task-based approach.

Generally speaking, Willis's (1996) teaching framework can be divided into the following three stages: pre-task, task cycle and language focus. Willis put language focus in the last stage, which is totally different from traditional language teaching process.

Communicative tasks which involve the four basic language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are the center of the whole teaching framework. Learners start with experiencing the practice of language, and end with reviewing the rules of language.

1. *Pre-task*: Topics and tasks are introduced in pre-task stage. Teachers introduce tasks to learners (Willis, 1996). They present necessary knowledge, explain the requirements and procedures of the task in details and help familiarize them with the topic, vocabulary and expressions. In this stage, teachers should take the individual differences among learners into account.

2. *Task cycle*: Task cycle can be divided into three parts: task, planning and report (Willis, 1996).

i) *Task*. In this part, learners are given plenty of chances to express their ideas in target language. The fluency of language is emphasized. Learners implement tasks in pairs or groups. Teachers supervise the process without interrupting their speech and correcting their errors so that the learners feel safe to express themselves freely. Teachers should

help learners gain confidence in language learning. Emphasis lays on communication not accuracy of language.

ii) Planning. This part is the preparation for report. Each group is getting ready to show classmates their process and achievements of the task. Since learners have to report publicly, emphasis of language naturally transfers from fluency to accuracy. In this part, teachers should give suggestions and correct grammar.

iii) Report. Several learners report to the class while other learners should listen carefully and compare those reports. In this way, all the learners are involved. At last, teachers should be commentators to assess the implementation condition of tasks.

3. *Language focus*: Learning by doing motivates learners to fulfill their potential.

Learners master the language by using it communicatively in the classroom, and they still have to learn grammar and memorize vocabulary. Teachers lead learners' attention to language forms. Some exercises are necessary to consolidate the learnt knowledge and improve their sensitivity to language form. It is divided into two parts:

i) Analysis. The purpose in this part is to help learners explore the usage of language, become aware of syntax, phrase arrangements and vocabulary etc.; and help them to systemize the language features they observed in learning process, so as to discover new language knowledge.

ii) Practice. It is necessary for learners to do some exercises under the guide of teachers.

This part makes the whole teaching procedure be accepted by learners more easily. It also functions as a conclusion of the whole teaching procedure.

### The Advantages of Task-based Approach

Compare to traditional teaching methods, task-based approach can give learners better initiative and make them more active in class. In traditional English teaching process, the contents and outcomes of teaching are completely controlled by teachers. There is no real language environment and meaningful communication. Learners can just passively learn some isolated grammar rules or expressions and can't use the target language to communicate and express their feelings and thoughts freely. On the contrary, in task-based approach, teachers design some familiar activities in everyday life to create real or relatively real language environment to stimulate learners' interests and teach them how to socialize and communicate in certain occasions. Task-based approach highlights its feature of the Chinese saying "learning is to use". It is an effective teaching method whose tasks can improve the structure of classroom teaching, propel learners to learn and to utilize English in activities and help learners get together to cooperate and experience the success and joy in English learning. Its advantages are as follows:

1. Task-based approach shortens the distance between teaching contents and everyday life. The ultimate goal of language teaching is to make learners fulfill the communicative

purposes in the target language in everyday life. Traditional English teaching seldom involves itself in daily practice in the real society. Thus learners are trained to be “dumb” English learners, who has been learning English for years but can’t communicate in everyday life. While task-based approach is exactly designed for this ultimate goal. It emphasizes the combination of language learning in class and activities out of class so as to improve learners’ communicative abilities in the target language.

2. Task-based approach also pays considerable attention to learning process. In the process of communicating in English to complete their tasks, task-based approach emphasizes on learners’ interaction and cooperation. In order to complete tasks, learners are inspired to apply and share their existing experience together. Meanwhile, it transfers the teacher-centered teaching mode to a mode which emphasizes the input of language skills and productions of language learning.

## CHAPTER 3

### DISCUSSION

#### The Definition of “Task”

There are a lot of definitions for the word “task”. First of all, according to the Modern Chinese Dictionary, “tasks” are the assignments one gets, or the responsibilities one has to do. Long (1985, p89) defines “tasks” as “a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward. Thus, examples of tasks including painting a fence, dressing a child, filling out a form, buying a pair of shoes, making an airline reservation, borrowing a library book, taking a driving test, typing a letter, weighing a patient, sorting letters, taking a hotel reservation, writing a check, finding a street destination and helping someone across a road. In other words, by ‘task’ we mean the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play and in between. Tasks are things that people will tell you they do if you ask them and they are not linguists.” Prabhu (1987, p24) said that a task is “an activity which require[s] learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allow[s] teachers to control and regulate that process.” But in foreign language teaching, especially when we refer to task-based approach, “tasks” always mean activities which make reference to real life and can form language meanings. In Nunan’s (1989, p15) opinion, 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 the meaning rather than the form. The task should have a sense of completeness, being also to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right.” Breen (1987, p23) thought that a “task” is “... any structured language learning endeavor which has a particular objective, appropriate content, a specified working procedure, and a range of outcomes for those who undertake the task.” He considered all the classroom activities that are helpful to achieve the language learning goals as tasks, including those small grammar exercises or complicated time-consuming activities. Richards et al (2000, p468) hold the opinion that a task is “...an activity which is designed to help achieve a particular goal.” Their definition also mentioned that a number of dimensions of tasks influence their use in language teaching, such as goals, procedures, pacing, learning strategy and many others. Nunan’s definition is similar to the one in traditional communicative teaching approach, which lays much importance on language learning behaviors and language meanings. Breen’s definition gives prominence to the goal, content, procedures and result of tasks. Richards et al put the goal of a task in the first place, and endue the task with features of communicative tasks in the real world. Many definitions can be summarized from the above review. Tasks are a series of correlative and purposeful activities in which learners perform when learning a language, absorbing information, solving problems, and achieving goals with the target language as they do in the real world. “Task” in task-based approach is not as simple and isolated as in-class or after-class teaching activities. It can not be used and combined at random. “Task” is an essential part of the

whole course that leads to fluency in speaking the target language. It is also the process in which learners solve simulative or real-world problems with the target language. It can help learners acquire language knowledge and develop their comprehensive abilities in solving problems.

### The Classification of “Task”

The tasks in task-based approach are similar to the tasks in real life in many aspects.

According to the differences or the similarities of the tasks, Nunan divides tasks into two categories: “real-world tasks or target tasks” and “pedagogical tasks” (1989, p40-41). As you can see from these names, the tasks in real world are designed for daily life usage that aim to improve the learners’ abilities to fulfill similar tasks in real life while the teaching tasks do not always directly reflect the concert tasks in daily life. They involve the theories and practices of second language acquisition and are applied in certain teaching situations only. Pedagogical tasks are derived from the tasks in real life; and could be sub-tasks in real life. They also involve exercises in language skills. Pedagogical tasks are not apparently similar to the real life and mainly apply to class teaching.

Teachers should select real life tasks subject to learners’ practical needs concerning the purpose for which learners use the target language. The design of the pedagogical tasks should be based on second language acquisition theory.

## The Essential Elements of Good “Tasks”

During the process of task-based approach to learning the design of a task is very important. Nunan (1989) describes the task as a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. When designing a task, teachers should consider learners’ cognitive abilities, age, psychological features, interests and cultural background. Moreover, both the manipulation and communicative function of language should be considered. Just as Eva Lai (2003) concluded that a good task should have:

- i) a specific purpose, which makes learners use language for a specific communicative purpose, not purely practice;
- ii) a language environment, in which it brings out the specific purpose;
- iii) learners’ participation. All learners will think and participate in the whole teaching process;
- iv) well-defined outcomes. This makes learners complete tasks with certain purposes and attain certain achievement; and
- v) require some background knowledge and basic language skills. It is a process that learners have to constantly use their acquired background knowledge and skills.

Besides the five essential elements for a good task Eva Lai mentions above, difficulty is also an important element. “Task-based approaches, therefore, need to focus on task

difficulty as a precondition for any task work (Skehan, 1998, p134).” If a task is so difficult that learners will lose confidence and motivation in the communicative process, they will fail to achieve the teaching objective. Equally, a good task should not be too easy. Learners will be bored when performing a task that is too easy and not challenging. They will not be seriously engaged in performing the task. Therefore, they will learn nothing in such a teaching process. Just as Skehan (1996) said, we should give learners communication problems to solve at the right level of processing difficulty.

In the teaching process of task-based approach, it is necessary for teachers to have a clear idea of the elements that influence the difficulty of tasks, which enable them to design tasks of appropriate difficulty levels according to different teaching objectives, content and learners’ abilities. If the task is too hard, the learners will be intimidated and lose interest in the learning and self-confidence. This will result in failure and the teaching objectives will not be met. If the task is too easy, it will not be challenging and may not fully attract the learners’ attention in carrying out the task, which means inferior outcome in teaching and the possibility of learners’ getting bored in class. From a good teaching point of view, the factors that have a close link with the difficulty of the tasks are teaching objectives, teaching materials, teaching activities, teachers’ role and the class environment.

1. *Teaching objectives.* Teaching is an activity with a definite objective. When the teachers are designing the tasks, they must make sure that the tasks are intended to help the learners acquire certain knowledge or language skills. There are two main objectives in using task-based approach. One of the objectives of the task-based approach in learning is to perform the task; the other purpose of the teaching using the task-approach is to learn the skills and knowledge involved in carrying out the task. For example, when we are designing a task for learning telephone dialogues, the objective of the task is to learn how to leave a message while making the telephone call. The teaching objective is to help the learner make use of the communication in the course of fulfilling the task to strengthen the awareness of the language, improve communication ability and use expressions in the target language such as: *May I speak to...* or *Hold on, please*. Teachers pay more attention to finding out if the teaching objective has been met because it is designed to facilitate learners' communication skills. Therefore, performing the tasks should lead to the fulfillment of teaching objectives.

2. *Learning materials.* Learners directly use a variety of learning materials. The content and types of the materials attract learners' attention and demand various learning or performance efforts from the learners. Different materials will result in different amount of effort that the learner will make or make the task become more difficult or easier. It is much better to provide instructions, accompanied by news reports or pictures and graphs that will make the task to be more real and practical.

3. *Teaching activities.* Teaching activities refer to the way in which learners become involve with the learning materials. They must be designed in line with the teaching purpose and simulate real life problems that the learners might come across. They must have an authentic context that can provoke students' interests. If the activities are not so real, learners may lose initiative and concentration. Teaching activities should be selected to make the tasks more realistic.

4. *Teachers' role.* In the course of fulfilling the task, teachers should not only be supervisors and instructors but also be participants who provide learners with demonstrations and instructions so as to reduce the amount of learners' frustration and decrease the difficulty of the tasks. If teachers only show up as observers or judges, the difficulty of the tasks maybe more frustrating for the learners. The designer of tasks could also assign teachers and learners specific roles to help them to fulfill the tasks more smoothly and efficiently.

5. *Classroom environment.* The environment of the tasks refers to settings or location in which the tasks are originated and fulfilled. Teaching tasks are mainly carried out in the classrooms. Familiar environment could help learners focus on the tasks. If teachers use multi-media facilities to set the context or background related to the tasks, the difficulty

could be reduced. If the learners are in a strange environment without any auxiliary resources, the difficulty of the task could be increased.

All factors mentioned above can affect the difficulty of the tasks directly or indirectly.

Teachers should have a clear idea about how these factors work so as to manipulate the factors to adjust the difficulty of the tasks to fit different learners' levels of language abilities.

### The Principles of Task Design

Task-based approach has changed traditional ways of language learning and teaching from direct presentation and explanation of language rules turning out passive learners into more task-oriented and active learners. It creates a favorable environment for learners to think about how and why the task should be done in this way and to analyze and summarize what they have in the course of fulfilling the task. When applying teaching based on real tasks, teachers should design effective tasks according to learners' level. A good teaching task should conform to educational principles as follows:

1. *Focus on learners.* Focusing on learners is the key feature in which task-based approach differs from other teaching modes. In task-based activities, teachers should be organizers and instructors who provide learners methods and skills of learning, plenty of opportunities and time to practice by themselves and who also organize and control the class or learning environment. Only when learners are involved in the task and think

actively, can they have the opportunities to use the target language in different situations, to enhance their understanding of the language. They also recognize the nature of the language and know better how to use the target language in real life. Learners will be active learners only when they are the center of all teaching circumstances and endowed with chances to perform and improve their communication skills. Also, active learners have the space for their self-development.

2. *Design real tasks.* Tasks should be realistic in three aspects: first, the designer of the task should choose language and expressions used in daily life communication, selecting the plot and background of the task from real life. Secondly, the circumstances involving the task should enable learners to experience and practice real language skills. Thirdly, the task-based activities should be as close as possible to the learners' backgrounds.

Tasks could be relatively real but teachers should try to create tasks as real as possible to provide learners with substantial unrefined language and information so as to get them actively involved in the activities.

3. *Design tasks of proper difficulty level.* It must be noted that the tasks should not be too easy or too hard. If the tasks are too easy, learners will lose interest because of the lack of challenge; if they are too hard, the learners will be intimidated and lose interest and confidence, which will result in learners' negative attitude in the learning process.

Teachers should design tasks of proper difficulty level according to learners' language proficiency to stimulate their interest and the desire to learn.

4. *Design interesting tasks.* Interesting communicative activities in class can effectively stimulate learners' initiative, which is one of the advantages of task-based approach.

Mechanical and repetitive tasks would deprive learners of their interest to participate in performing the task and will result in the lost of learners' initiatives. Teachers should design varying, interesting and challenging tasks that stimulate the learners' desire to learn.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Many instructional methods are available in second language teaching and each of them has its strengths and weaknesses. In China, for over 200 years of second language teaching, people have been using receptive methods. These methods are teacher-centered, and stress on language grammar and vocabulary, as main objectives of language learning. The main objectives of learning a language should not be that of just learning the rules and vocabulary. Other methods overcome this weakness.

The task-based approach, which is not widely used in all levels of English teaching in China, especially in junior and senior high schools, overcomes the weakness mentioned above. Although the introduction of task-based Approach has brought important reference for current foreign language teaching in China, educators still need to think about how to integrate this approach into the practical situation in China so as to give full play to it at all levels.

The task-based approach embodies a new concept in language teaching. The purpose of teaching is not to help learners reach scheduled targets but to offer them the environment and conditions in which language acquisition can take place. The teachers' roles have

also been changed from instructor to creators of study environment, assistants, supervisors, and supporters of the learning activities. Learners are the subjects in the class, which means they are the main players in the learning process. They are no longer empty vessels to be filled by the teachers but torches to be lit through providing good learning environments and tasks.

Task-based approach has closed the distance between class and real life and has changed the malpractice in which teachers completely separated traditional foreign language teaching from real life. Task-based approach helps learners spontaneously acquire language skills and trains learners' ability to solve problems in real life.

But the task-based approach also has limits in some aspects if not properly used. Firstly, some tasks are randomly selected. The way of choosing tasks should be clearly stated in task-based syllabus, but so far all examples we have are those applied in Prabhu's "Bangalore experiment" in 1980s, which is too old to be instructive and cannot achieve the anticipated teaching goals. Secondly, in most schools in China, learners cannot get involved in authentic English environment. The process of language teaching and learners' experiences are too limited to put to effects the concept of helping learners master the language systematically through their experiences of the language. Thirdly, language teaching in China is carried out in classes with over 30, and sometimes, even 40 learners, which makes it very difficult to organize activities of good quality. The

implementations of task-based approach are also affected by the general proficiency level of the language teachers. As assistants, supervisors, and supporters to language learners, teachers should design the class from the learners' points of view and deal with the learners' problems when they come across in fulfilling the tasks. These approaches set up higher standards for the teachers' language levels and abilities to deal with emergencies and to keep the class on task. At present, the proficiency level of language teachers in China has been improved but most of them have not received specific training for implementing task-based approach, which will extensively affect the quality of teaching and learning.

In reference to authority in language teaching, Richard and Rogers (2001) expressed that there are still many aspects of task-based approach to be verified. Such as task model, task assessment and others. The point of view that task-based approach is better than other methods is still an assumption and not a fact. The introduction of task-based approach has brought more reference to traditional foreign language teaching methods, but educators must note that there are many more differences in the environment and conditions of language teaching and learning between the east and the west. Educators in China should not imitate the form of the task-based approach but focus on its essence, connected it to the traditional teaching methods and make them complementary.

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