

# Task-based Language Teaching Activities in College English Course in a Public University in China

<sup>1</sup>Wang Xinran, <sup>2</sup>Li Jinghan, <sup>3</sup>Li En, <sup>4</sup>Li Shuqing

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**Abstract:** This research aims to demonstrate the application of Task-based Language Teaching activities in EFL oral class in a public university in China. As an international language, English plays a vital role in not only international communications but also in culture exchanges. College students are asked to equipped with English communication skills to do real-life communication nowadays. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is a non-traditional approach in teaching language whereby learners learn language incidentally through performance of meaningful tasks. It has generated great interest among EFL researchers and practitioners. This research scoped in a public university in North China and the teaching materials were chosen from 4 units of College English Course Book-1. The purpose of this research also lies in broadening the strategies of using activities in EFL classes which aims to develop the communicative competence within pronunciation, accuracy, fluency, discourse management and complexity.

**Keywords:** ask-based Language Teaching, teaching activities, oral communicative competence.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

As one of the most widely used languages, English has become an important tool for both international cross-cultural communication and scientific exchange (Wen, 2004). In addition, English language is one of the compulsory courses required of college students in China and similarly practiced in many countries around the world (Hu, 1993). Nowadays, English teaching time has been recently shortened by administration in universities in China. For instance, in a science and technology public university in North China, it has been shortened from two years into one. Consequently, instructors are pressured to ensure lessons on oral communication skills are effective for the learners within the given limited time.

English today remains an important lingua franca in the world (Gay, L. R., Mills, G. E., & Airasian, P. W, 2011). It plays an increasingly important role in all different kinds and levels of schools in China, such as in primary schools, middle schools, colleges and universities. In education institutions entrance examinations, from primary school to middle school as well as college entrance examination, English is considered as an exam-compulsory course. Teachers and parents are highly aware of its critical role in the education of students.

During the decades, several revolutions on College English Teaching have taken place in China (LUAN, 2014). The first revolution took place in 1950s to 1980s. China, then, had few professional foreign language teachers because during that time China undertook a strong responsibility to build the foundation for the newly formed country. The government was busy at organizing and encouraging its citizens to work in the countryside and encouraging people to go to the rural areas. In other words, English teaching was very underdevelopment during 1950s to 1980s (Sun, 2006; Tian, L., & Liu, N. C, 2019). However, there was a turning point around 1980. With the aim to further improve the comprehensive national power and cultivate international applied composite talents in accordance with the needs of China's development, it is essential to enhance undergraduates' English proficiency, especially the expression ability of oral English. In accordance with the

College English Curriculum Requirements (CECR) , cultivating students' comprehensive language proficiency to apply English in comprehensive approach is one of the main aims of college English teaching. The teaching objective corresponds to the ultimate goal of language acquisition, which refers to the learning of the communicative competence (Widdowson, 1996). While oral expression as an important aspect of demonstrating actual communicative competence, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has received much more attention, as well as has attracted much interest in China's English language teaching (ELT).

## II. TBLT IN EFL

TBLT is a widely used teaching approach in reading , writing, listening and speaking. This chapter will discuss the application of TBLT method in oral English teaching and further explore previous researches that have been done in oral communicative skills of TBLT.

A task is a piece of activity that undertaken for learners or for others, freely or for some rewards. This is to say, by doing a 'task' is to do the hundred and one thing that someone do in their everyday life, at play, during work and in all between (Long, 1985:89).Prabhu (1987:24) considered task as a piece of activity which asks students to get to a destination and gain outcome from designed tasks and given hints through some process of activities, and which helps teachers to organize and regulate the whole process.

Wills (1996:23) stated that tasks are kinds of activities where the target language is organized by teachers that to help learner to accomplish communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve better outcomes.

In conclusion, a task refers to the hundreds and one thing that people use to learn in L2 acquisition. Task should have a particular object, appropriate content, a specific teaching procedure, based on a range of outcomes the learner to finish the task. It focus on meaning itself rather than form in real context through comprehending, manipulating, producing, interacting, in pairs or groups ( Prabu, 1987; Nunan, 1989; Ur, 1996; Willis, 1996 ) .

Clark, F (2005) , Schwartz, J (1985) and Brown, J. D. (1985, p. 135-158) believed that a task has four components: a purpose, a context, a process and a product. Purpose is to ensure the reason to undertake the task the teaching procedure. A context or material means it can be true or simulated staff that involves sociolinguistic issues or other essential factors. A purpose means to let the learners to finish learning approaches/activities such as reasoning;inquiring;conceptualizing and communicating and problem solving. Product is also an important component of task, it refers to some outcomes, either visible or invisible during the procedure of accomplishing a task.

Nunan (1989: 40) defines tasks as a piece of "real-life" activity which specific described as follows: Tasks must contain a usage of real-life rationale, this is to say, in classroom teaching, the arrangement of behaviors should meet the requirement in real-life which is beyond the classroom. On the other hand, tasks with a methodology, require learner to do things seriously although these activities are seldom done outside the classroom.

All in all, most researcher believed that task should contain variety of activities. The tasks may contain applying real information and arousing arguments to assess one's opinion, but for demonstrating the results of task, there is no proper way to judge these outcomes according to individuals or under different situations.

The model proposed by Willis (2002) is the most representative one, and it embodies the TBLT theory quite well. It was cited most commonly, and employed by many teachers and TBLT researchers. It provides a guidance to the practical usage of TBLT method. The framework includes three phases:

### Phase 1 : Pre-task

According to Willis, the pre-task phase is usually the shortest stage in the entire framework. In this phase, the teacher gives the introduction and topic of the task as well as necessary background knowledge (e.g. new words, phrases and grammar that may be useful to complete the task), during this phase, teacher mainly equipped to let the learners to be familiar with the topic and have a general preparation of the background of the whole task.

### Phase 2: Task Cycle

Task cycle includes : task, planning and report.

Task asked the students to accomplish the task groups or pairs. All group members should be given chances to get prepared to participant and then speak. Meanwhile, the teacher acts as a helper and facilitator to help the students to be active in the task.

Planning is the second stage in task cycle. During this phase, the students prepare a report and tell to the class what should they do in the task and what they had discovered. While, the teacher acts as language adviser, ensuring the aim of the report is obvious and helping students rehearse oral report and encourage more members to give a presentation.

Report is the last round in task cycle. During report stage, the students are volunteered to present their report to the whole class. The language presented by the students should be grammar accurate and the fluency of language should also be oversaw by teachers. And the students are encouraged to make comments and give feedback on the task. At the meanwhile, the teacher acts as chairperson and organizer who is selecting the next presenter, ensuring all the students have the equal chance to perform.

#### Phase 3: Language Focus

This language focus includes : analysis and practice .

Analysis requires students to do consciousness-raising activity to identify and deliver specific language features from the task context as well as interpret. While, the teacher reviews each analysis activity and appraise the importance of the language that the students used in the task for them to be aware of particular features of language form and usage. The teacher also may bring other useful words, phrases and patterns as supplement.

Practice asked students do some additional activities to practice words, expressions and language structures from the performed activities and other factors which occurred in the task or report stage (Willis, 2002) .

All in all, Willis' framework offers a fairy model for language teachers to act appropriately in their EFL teaching. By following this teaching procedure, the application of task in real classroom teaching has a clear guiding structure.

TBLT originated in western countries, compared with the researches of TBLT abroad, the study of TBLT in China is much later. Xia jimei was the first person who introduced TBLT into China and she claimed the importance of the usage of task in this method (Xia, 1998). The application of task-based activities and the proper usage of task as well as the evaluation for teachers are some of the basic key terms of TBLT.

As required in CECR, the purposes of College English Curriculum are made to facilitate the students' language competence of using English in a comprehensively in order that they are able to use written or oral English to do effectively communication. Being one of the most efficient and new teaching structures, TBLT has been brought into a increasing numbers of teachers' view. Xia Jimei and Kong Xianhun (1998) pointed out that TBLT should be more closely related to real-life as well as real teaching practice.

### III. COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

From the above reviews we know that oral communicative skills (also known as oral communicative skills) is the key term of using the language especially for undergraduates who are mostly go out of the school gate to shoulder the responsibilities of real communication. But, relying on the responses of college English teachers, students' oral communicating skills are far away behind their reading, writing and listening ability (Hu, 1993; Wen, 2014; Zhang; 2016). Sun wanying (Sun, 2018) said that accuracy, fluency and complexity are key features to assess students' oral competence. By reviewing the related literature, oral communication skills concludes: accuracy; fluency; complexity and discourse management (Hu, 1993; Wen, 2014; Zhang; 2016; College English Band Four Oral Test Assessment Paper; 2021). Accuracy also concludes correct and precise pronunciation as well as the correctness of the whole sentence. Fluency reflects the degree of fluent of the speaker in using this language, it should be measured by less correction and pauses. Complexity is considered a higher requirement of communicative skills in using a language. Because it asks the speaker to compose longer and complex sentence rather than short and simple sentence structure. Discourse management shows the skill of managing language patterns (Li, 2012).

To conclude, improve oral communication skill is essential and vital in college English teaching, but it still facing much difficulties and obstacles which need to be solved according to existed researches.

#### IV. ACTIVITY TEMPLATES IN ORAL CLASS

##### A. Page Layout and Font Face

Phase 1 Pre-task (5 mins)

(1) Introduction

This unit draws a brief sketch of college life. The aim is to help students to make an analysis of their own college life and understand it is a new journey full of opportunities and challenges. Students are encouraged to find out the differences between their pre-college life and college life so that they can be better prepared for the new stage of life.

(2) Teaching Objectives

- 1) talk about college life by using new vocabulary
- 2) have a better understanding of college life

Phase 2 Task Cycle (20mins)

(1) Opinion Gap Task

- 1) What are your expectations for college life?
- 2) Have you found any differences between your expectations and your college experiences?

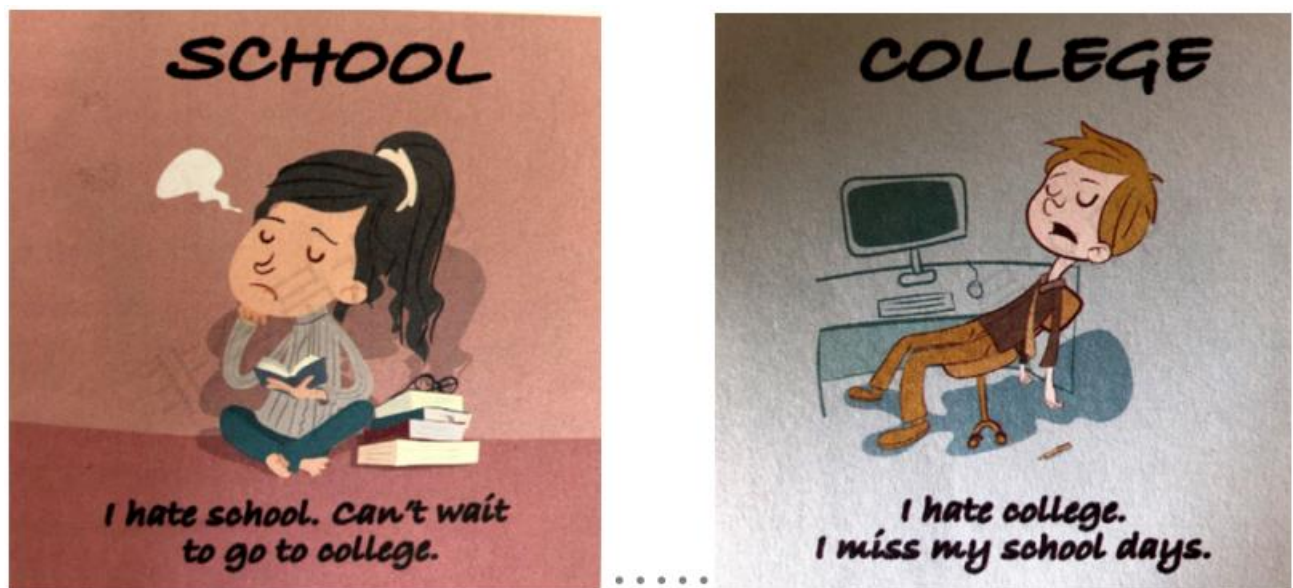


Figure 1: Task Cycle

(2) Planing

Please think about above questions and discuss with you partner. Try to illustrate your ideas from different aspects. Remember, this is a pair work and you have to communicate with your partner and after 5 minutes, you will be welcomed to share.

(3) Practice

Teacher : “ Okay everyone, time is up and now let’s share”.

All the volunteers will be welcomed to share their opinions in front of the classroom in pairs. Please be careful on your pronunciation, accuracy and fluency during your speech.

The rests of the students please listen carefully when others are giving their presentation and try to make some notes.

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Phase 3 Language Focus (15mins)

(1) Analysis

In this phase, teacher will ask students to do consciousness-raising activity to identify and deliver specific language features from the task context as well as interpret.

Teacher: Now let's try to identify some words and expressions that can be used in talking about college life. Please turn to page to the new words and expressions on page 19.

The aspects that we can use to talk about campus life.

- ① Sports
- ② Events and activities
- ③ Student union
- ④ Parties and gatherings
- ⑤ Food and drinks
- ⑥ Dorm rooms
- ⑦ Lectures

While, the teacher reviews each analysis activity and appraise the importance of the language that the students used in the task for them to be aware of particular features of language form and usage.

References 1. What are your expectations for college life?

I will talk about my college life from following aspects , such as making friends and hanging out with them; going to the library and studying; participating in various activities; developing interests and hobbies; enjoying the beautiful campus, etc.

References 2. Are there any differences between your current college life and your expectations?

Actually, there is a huge difference. Before entering college, I assumed that college is a paradise and one would have a lot of free time and one does not need to study that hard. But it turns out not to be the case. After I came here, I find that we have a lot of classes, and we also need to study really hard so as to keep updated.

(2) Practice

Watch a video clip and try to describe what your campus life is like by using the words and expressions which we have just learned.



**Figure 2: Practice**

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## Unit 2 Learning English

## Phase 1 Pre-task (10 mins)

## (1) Introduce the topic and task

This unit introduces views about learning a foreign language. The point of this unit is to help Ss get a relatively overall view of English learning and inspire Ss to find out their own views on learning English so as to complete the report for the unit project. Teacher is expected to enable Ss to talk about language learning by using new vocabulary and try to express personal opinions about it.

## (2) Task plan

Teacher give new words of this unit, and briefly introduce these new words.

## Phase 2 Task Cycle (20mins)

## (1) Pair Task

Watch the video, work in pairs and discuss the following questions.

Q1: Do you think the ways introduced in the video clip work for you in learning English?

Q2: Do you have any other ways to recommend?

## (2) Planing

Please discuss with you partner about these two questions. For each group, you have to make a short report by using above new words.

## (3) Practice

Teacher : “ Okay everyone, time is up and now let’s share”.

All the volunteers will be welcomed to share the reports in front of the classroom in pairs. Please be careful on your pronunciation, accuracy and fluency during your speech.

The rests of the students please listen carefully when others are giving their presentation and try to make some notes.

## Phase 3 Language Focus (15mins)

## (1) Analysis

In this phase, teacher will ask students to do consciousness-raising activity to identify and deliver specific language features from the task context as well as interpret.

Teacher: Now let’s try to identify some words and expressions that can be used in talking about college life.

Q1: Do you think the ways introduced in the video clip work for you in learning English?

Reference: I find some of the ways mentioned in the video clip effective in learning English. For example, the skills of mnemonics and shadowing help me a lot to learn vocabulary.

Q2: Do you have any other ways to recommend?

Reference: Other effective ways of learning English may include: practicing as much as one can; visiting the English corner on campus; speaking with foreign friends whose first language is English; building up vocabulary and working on grammar; reading English articles or listening to VOA or BBC on a daily basis

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**(2)Practice**

Please refine the reports by referring to above references and practice the refined report with your partner.

**Unit 3 Culture Links****Phase 1 Pre-task (10 mins)****(1)Introduce the topic and task**

Culture differences contribute to the diversity of our world. But on other hand, cultural differences may also cause problems to communication. A good cultural understanding provides a basis for building effective culture links.

**(2)Task plan**

For this unit, we are going to do a task named Information Gap. You have to do it within groups. In each group, there are 4 students. Each students have got different information,you have to communicate with each other and try to figure out the whole information.

**Phase 2 Task Cycle (20mins)****(1)Information Gap**

How to be a good guest?

Seven steps to be a good house guest

Step 1: Communicate. Make sure you and your host agree to the length of 1) \_\_\_\_\_, what you might need and your itinerary.

Step 2: Use common sense. Don't show up with surprises. Don't bring unexpected 2) \_\_\_\_\_.

Step 3: Give 3) \_\_\_\_\_. Surprise your host with a small token of appreciation such as a candle.

Step 4: Be courteous by 4) \_\_\_\_\_. Your host may love to wait on you, but offering to 5) \_\_\_\_\_, do the dishes or take out the trash might be a pleasant change of pace for them.

Step 5: Keep your room 6) \_\_\_\_\_.

Step 6: Leave 7) \_\_\_\_\_ for utilities and any other incurred expenses.

Step 7: Tell your host how much you appreciate their hospitality. Immediately after your visit write a 8) \_\_\_\_\_.

**(2)Planing**

Please discuss with you group members and exchange your already known information. For each group, you have to make a short report by making the whole passage complete.

**(3)Practice**

Teacher : “ Okay everyone, time is up and now let's share”.

All the volunteers will be welcomed to share your conversation in front of the classroom in pairs. Please be careful on your pronunciation, accuracy and fluency during your speech.

The rests of the students please listen carefully when others are giving their presentation and try to make some notes.

**Phase 3 Language Focus (15mins)****(1)Analysis**

In this phase, teacher will ask students to do consciousness-raising activity to identify and deliver specific language features from the task context as well as interpret.

Teacher: Now let's try to identify some words and expressions that can be used in talking about culture difference.

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Hospitality: As each culture shows hospitality in its own way, to learn about the rules and develop an awareness of cultural differences is important, especially in a globalized society. Based on what they've learned from the video clip, the students will be able to know more about how to be a pleasant house guest through a careful reading of the text.

### (2)Practice

Please refine your passage by referring to above references and practice the refined conversation with your group members.

Please check your answers by reviewing the notes that you have written.

## V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, TBL teachers should teach language in proper ways that treat the relationship of form and function properly. The combination of form and function must be paid in task design. This is not the requirement of Form-function Principle but also the needs to face challenges in activating students' interest in this principle. These principles also ask task-designers to use both inductive and deductive method to build the accurate understanding of the relationship between form and function.

All in all, Willis's (Willis, 2002) framework offers a fair model for language teachers to act appropriately in their EFL teaching. By following this teaching procedure, the application of task in real classroom teaching has a clear guiding structure.

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