

Application of task-based teaching in a foreign language course

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ABSTRACT: With the increasing *internationalisation* at various types of universities in China, several of them have now increased the number of foreign language courses taught. This has created new requirements and challenges for foreign language teaching. As a result, there has been an increase in task-based and self-communication teaching of foreign languages. These promote *learning by practice* and their use will inevitably increase. The characteristics of *task-based teaching* and its promotion as a practical method for foreign language teaching for engineering and technology, is presented and discussed in this article.

INTRODUCTION

Task-based teaching is a foreign language teaching method that was developed gradually in the mid- to-late 20th Century, with *learning by practice* as the guiding principle. It developed from the *communicative teaching method*, which was a teaching method proposed by language teaching researchers following much practice and exploration. The main teaching approach is to have learners complete a series of tasks. Each teaching unit is composed of a series of such tasks and, hence, the language study becomes the completion of tasks. This is a teaching method of *student orientation and learning from practice* as developed by the American educator Dewey, and reported by Nunan [1].

Through five years of research (the Bangalore/Madras Communicational Teaching Project), Prabhu concluded that the teaching outline should not be used during task-based teaching. Rather, the tasks corresponding to the course should be issued, and the students must undertake the tasks through reasoning and independent activity [2].

Skehan experimented and tested task-based teaching for second language teaching from the aspect of psychological linguistics. He proposed that the application of this teaching method must be from the perspective of students, i.e. the language learning cognition [3].

Willis narrated the design of task-based teaching in detail. She designed a three-stage task-based teaching theory, viz. the first stage (pre-task); the second stage (task linking); and the third stage (language focused) [4].

With the increasing internationalisation of universities, various types of universities in China have an increase in the proportion of foreign language courses. Through the learning and mastering of a foreign language, engineering graduates can better access foreign enterprises and activities. Hence, foreign language teaching can help students enrich their life experience and expand their horizons, and improves the cultivation of *internationalised engineering talent*.

However, these developments mean there is a greater stress on engineering students' mastery of a foreign language. Moreover, engineering students' effectiveness in using a foreign language involves more than just dealing with an examination. To become an internationalised engineer, the engineering students must be able to solve actual problems using the engineering foreign language. They also must understand the cultural backgrounds of different countries, leading to higher and more specific requirements for the foreign language teaching of engineering students.

Nunan claimed, *...task is a kind of classroom work that covers learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing and interacting in the target language when their attention devotes their mind to mobilizing their grammatical knowledge so as to express meaning, and in which the intention is to transfer meaning rather than to manipulate form* [5].

Dai specified how to implement task teaching in practice, to develop students' communication skills [6]. Chen advocated task graduation, from easy to hard, from simple to complex. Learners should pay attention to the meaning of language, with language skills permeating across subject areas [7].

In a journal article, Li refers to Lu Reina who analysed the advantages and disadvantages of existing foreign language teaching of writing, such as the *product teaching method* and the *process teaching method* and, then, introduced Willis' *task-based teaching model* [8].

Zhu applied situation-task teaching for business English at vocational technology colleges. Real situations were used in business English courses to improve students' English communication competence [9].

With the increasing normalisation and internationalisation of engineering education, universities have been carrying out bilingual teaching of engineering majors, with the fundamental purpose of providing engineering education to international standards. Task-based teaching guides students to master language by undertaking activities involving language, rather than simply training in language skills.

The bilingual teaching of engineering at Heze University in China uses a variety of building and civil engineering tasks, so that students can learn English as they complete the tasks. Students acquire English by actively participating in and completing specific tasks. This teaching method is highly practical and effective.

IMPLEMENTATION OF TASK-BASED TEACHING

Characteristics of Task-based Teaching

Task-based teaching uses specific tasks as the vehicle for learning, and task completions measure the teaching achievements rather than examination scores. This task-based learning process pays more attention to the *multilateral interaction* between teachers and students, and between students. The teacher strives to form a real, natural language environment as far as possible. Students complete tasks by virtue of discussion and communication, with language used as *practice* to develop communication ability in the language.

In this process, teachers respect students' differences; the students' development is taken as the basis of the learning with the student as the subject. Best efforts are made to exploit their subjective incentives, so as to maximise the learning.

In the process of implementing the task-based teaching method, the thread running through the whole teaching process is the *task*. This teaching method is organised according to the task and students' progress by virtue of co-operation, communication, interaction, experience and participation.

The essential characteristic of the task-based teaching method is to plan and organise the teaching by virtue of tasks. Its essential similarity with communicative teaching is that both take the cultivation of students' *language communication ability* as the prime objective. However, the task-based teaching method, with the basic unit of organising teaching as the task, and the teaching objectives as the completion of tasks, has all teaching activities as *satellites* to support the completion of tasks.

Generally, there is a clear teaching objective, with students concentrated on *the first consideration of task completion and practice with language*. The intent is they can take *clear expression of ideas* as the essential objective without excessive attention to the language form.

In the process of implementing task-based teaching, it is worth considering how students solve the actual problems by interaction and communication, but without an emphasis on proper use of the language form. The task defined generally has some basis in reality; the students' key objective is *how to complete the task*, and the evaluation of the learning outcome is whether the task was completed successfully.

Principles of Task-based Teaching

In the process of implementing task-based teaching, teachers are required to design it from the aspect of *learning*, so that the students can improve their language ability through co-operation, participation, practice, experience and perception.

In the process of task design, the teachers must pay attention to five important guidelines. First, the starting point of task design should be the students' interests - and even their learning and life experiences. These should be reflected in the methods and contents of the task.

Second, the task activity should improve foreign language skills. Third, the task activity should fully emphasise and promote mutual interaction between subjects. This is to stimulate students' creative development, co-ordination, artistic perception, aesthetic taste and imagination.

Fourth, the task activity should, to a great extent, be related to multicultural factors, so as to help the students understand foreign customs, history and geography, etc. Fifth, the task should be results-evaluated to ensure students completing the task acquire a sense of achievement through an appropriate and pertinent evaluation.

Implementation Steps for Task-based Teaching

The purpose of task-based teaching is to create a *substantial environment*, close to reality, for the language-learning activity. The intent is to improve the students' ability in language perception, and achieve the objective of their *subconsciously* smoothly and accurately using the foreign language. The implementation steps for task-based teaching are shown in Figure 1.

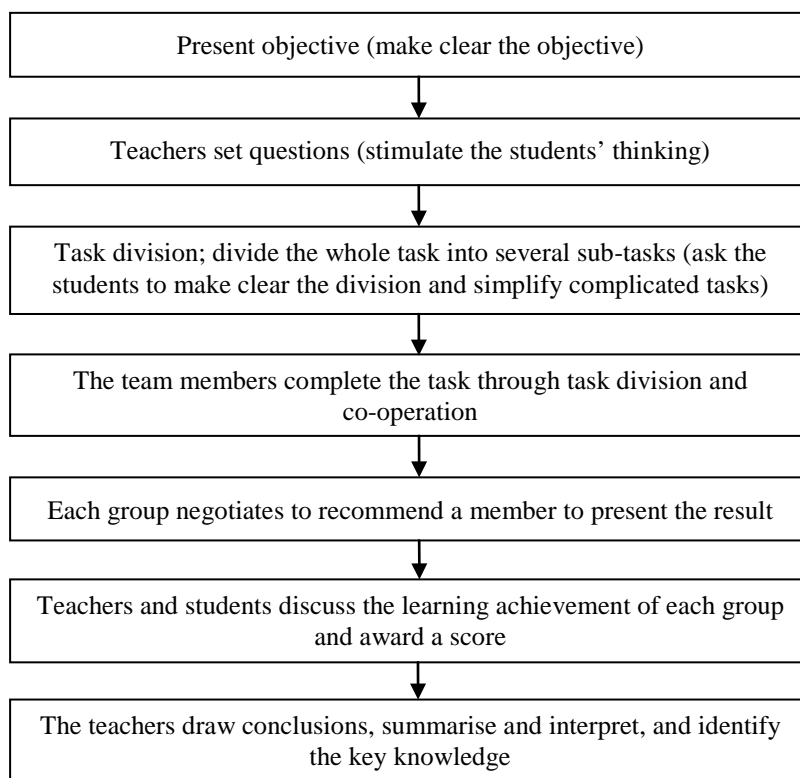


Figure 1: Schematic diagram of task-based teaching.

The teaching stages are as follows:

- The first stage is the preparation. The purpose in this stage is to stimulate the students' enthusiasm for the language and arrange the task. The preparation in this stage includes two aspects. One is the design of the task scene, perhaps using music, a story, games and dialogue to stimulate the students' curiosity and arouse their interest. The second is for teachers to arrange the learning task, propose various task completion, sub-tasks and the respective objectives.
- The second stage is task implementation. In this stage, the students should complete a specific task, and in the process of implementing this task, the students often will start to use the foreign language subconsciously.

Specifically, task implementation involves the following:

- Task decomposition: after the students have clarified the task objectives and requirements, they can move on to the task implementation stage. This can be defined as the process by which the students learn and explore the new knowledge in an independent or co-operative manner, while the teachers mainly play the role of *steering* the students' activities.
 - Planning: in this activity, the students discuss and communicate their experiences in the group and also develop the task-completion plan.
 - Report and summary: in this activity, the students report on the task completed in the group and explain their conclusions. The teachers *monitor* the students' discussion, so as to ensure that each student has an equal opportunity to report. Students can pay attention to the *typicality* of the report, while other students should *listen to* the report and opine on the process.
- The third stage is task evaluation and learning improvement. In the process of the former, the teachers should jointly evaluate the task completion of each group. The latter is dominated by students' summaries and reflections on the task and how this has strengthened their language capability.

In the process of implementing task-based teaching, a clear relationship of interaction, co-operation and communication exists between teachers and students, and both share the language environment. On the one hand, the teachers act as communicators, and on the other hand, they also guide and promote the students' learning. This process draws on various fields of work or scenes from actual life. This enables students to improve their abilities in communication, language, negotiation, co-operation and co-existence.

SIGNIFICANCE OF TASK-BASED TEACHING FOR ENGINEERING FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Engineering foreign language teaching has a strong practical element, and so it is well suited for task-based teaching. The following guidance applies to task-based teaching of engineering foreign languages.

Realistic Material Improves Interest in Learning

None of the students of engineering foreign language teaching will have the experience of living in the target language country. Hence, there is a lack of a ready-made realistic language environment. Teachers need to spend time and energy on the task design activity, to introduce material that conforms to the students' skill level, but also to help them understand the local customs, geography and history of the foreign language target country.

In task-based teaching, the teachers who directly are imparting knowledge, are no longer the key to the teaching, as it depends instead on the students' experience. In the process of task-based learning and practice, each student can master the language and also its use and application.

Task-based Learning Cultivates Autonomous Learning

In task-based learning, evaluation of the students' learning is determined by their task completion results. In the original teaching model, great emphasis was placed on the grammar and vocabulary of the foreign language, while the actual ability to use the language was ignored. The foreign language grammar and vocabulary that a student uses to complete the assigned task, is no longer the most important part. The task-based teaching starts from the students' cognitive level, life experience and learning interests, and emphasises a learning style involving communication, co-operation, participation, practice and experience.

The evaluation of the learning is not the scores of tests, but the task-completion result. In language teaching, in addition to paying attention to a student's use of language, attention is also paid to the student's ability to actively apply the language, which improves cross-cultural awareness and autonomous learning.

New Teaching Relationships Help to Cultivate Character

With traditional foreign language teaching, the teachers play the role of knowledge conveyor and controller of the teaching. In task-based teaching, the role of teacher and student has been transformed. The teacher's role has been *transformed* to that of organiser and guide of the class. The activity of the teachers is limited to providing appropriate guidance to the students, and to help students solve problems encountered in the learning. Students no longer play the role of *passive receiver* in the learning, thus forging a *new type of teacher-student relationship* appropriate to foreign language teaching.

In the process of task implementation, each student will communicate and co-operate with other students. For a learner of engineering English, this does not only exercise language ability, but also is an opportunity to improve communication ability and enhance self-confidence.

In the process of learning, each participant will play different roles and undertake different responsibilities in completing a task. This helps identify shortcomings and stimulates students' desire for self-improvement. To complete the tasks, team members are required to co-ordinate, co-operate and work closely together. But, there also should be competition between groups to promote competitive awareness and a collective sense of achievement, as these are beneficial in cultivating the students' quality.

CONCLUSIONS

Foreign language learning is a dynamic and complicated process. The organiser of foreign language teaching must consider the foreign language learners' motivation, time, status and age. Effective and targeted measures need to be taken to help the engineering foreign language learners improve their foreign language learning.

Learning an engineering foreign language is not only for the purpose of passing examinations, but to learn to solve problems in a foreign language. This concept has become the consensus for contemporary foreign language learning, both in China and abroad. Foreign language learning cannot rely on one method for all stages of leaning and for all subjects. Aimed at the engineering foreign language learners and different learning stages, it is necessary to carry out continuous teaching reform, so as to improve the effect of the teaching.

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