An Experimental Study on Task-Based Language Teaching in the Academic English for Humanities

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Abstract

To enliven the English class and improve student's involvement, there is an experiment on Task-based language teaching. Based on the ideas of student-oriented and learning by doing, the contents of the tasks are closely related with the text and the question-and-answer method is taken to put the tasks into practice. In this way, teacher and students go hand in hand to enjoy the class.

Keywords: Task-based language teaching; Student-oriented; Learning by doing

1. Background

Task-based language teaching (TBLT), with American educationist Dewey's pragmatism as theoretical base, first appeared in the 1980 and became very influential in the language teaching from 1990. Its striking feature is to trigger study motives by a series of tasks with clear purposes of pushing students to study and practice language actively. Its core idea is to disintegrate the life activities into concrete tasks by imitating all varieties of life activities with help of language. In this way the process of finishing tasks is the process of language acquisition. This teaching ideas like "students-oriented" and "learning by doing" develop from the base of language acquisition theory and social constructionism (Gong Yafu, Luo Shaoqian, 2003).

Constructionism is a branch of cognitive psychology which believes study is a process for students to construct knowledge actively and not to attain information easily and passively. Study means that learners choose, process and manage the external information actively with their past experiences as the base and then interpret the information to conclude personal meaning or understanding. With the past different experiences and different knowledge experiences, the interpretation and understanding are different. So, teaching must take the learner's past experiences into consideration and regard it as the new beginning to guide the learners to construct knew knowledge based on the past experiences. It is not wise to impart knowledge to learners easily and violently. Teaching is not to transfer knowledge but transform it.Teachers and students, students and students should explore some questions together and communicate and question each other during the process.

With this new value of teaching and learning as guidance, language study must have three conditions: language contact, language use and study motive. That is, enough input materials, attractive language practice, strong study motive, enthusiasm and teacher's guidance, early preparation and materials choice are all necessary. English teaching is a process for a teacher to give students real and natural tasks to experience, discover and create, which not only enlighten student's past knowledge structure but also stimulate passion to study new knowledge because of new tasks to achieve the re-association and reconstruction of the past and new knowledge. During this process, a teacher is only guide, not feeder; students cooperate each other to show the communicative feature that conforms to the instrumental quality of language.

In practice, Wills put forward three periods of Task-based language teaching: pre-task, task circle and language focus (Willis,1996). Pre-task includes three activities: introducing the content, meaning and importance of the task to motive student's involvement, supplying the real input language materials to help students to prepare the tasks and analyzing the materials to guide students to focus on certain forms and important points. Task circle is the practice of the task, also including three periods: performing the task, planning after-task activities and reporting. This is the whole process about how to finish the task and how to cooperate, study and present together. Language focus includes teacher's analysis and feedback about the process with emphasis on the accuracy of language form and practice or effectiveness of the tasks.

Skehan (1998) put forward three steps of task-based language teaching: pre-task, while-task and post-task.

Pre-task activities include teaching, conscious-improving activities and plans with the purpose as reconstruction, the decision of target language and relief of the cognitive burden. The teaching skills are to attract the student's attention, make the teaching plan and teach new language points.

While-task activities include three aspects: performance of the tasks, preparation of the report and report itself. The point is to design many mini-tasks and to form task chains.

Post-task include analysis and practice.The teaching object of the first period is not the fluency, but accuracy with the open show, analysis and test. The teaching object of the second period is the recycle of analysis and summary. The point is the order of the tasks, even the repeat of the certain tasks.

Based on the theory about task-based language teaching, there is an experiment of Academic English for Humanities in the class.

2. Design and Enforcement

2.1 Cause

There is a complete teaching reform of the public English courses in the School of Foreign Languages, CUPL. The result is a new course system of academic English in the grade one; liberal English in the first term of grade two and discipline English in the second term of grade two.

Academic English for Humanities is one of the discipline English courses. The textbook *Academic English for Humanities* published by the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press is used for this course uses . It includes three parts: literature, history and philosophy.

At beginning, the author used the traditional teaching method, but some students didn't follow and did their own things in a distracted condition. For improving the student's involvement, the task-based teaching method is tried with a fact that the author is so familiar with the contents that she can extract the important parts and transform into tasks.

2.2 Target group

Undergraduates, the year of 2017, the second term of grade two.

2.3 Principle

For use of the task-based teaching method, the first thing is to know what is task? Wills argues the task is language activities, with which learners use target language to communicate and achieve something（Willis, 1996）. She underlines the aim of language teaching is to complete the communication task and the teaching activities should be based on this aim. These tasks should not focus on language but on communicative tasks in the real life, which require these teaching activities should be as much real and social as possible.

2.4 Details

The whole term has 16 weeks covering 6 units and accordingly, the whole class is divided into 6 groups. The group responsible for the specific unit is called Duty Group. The Duty Group must finish the tasks and get

ready for the questions from other students.To make the question-and-answer seems formal, the Duty Group will take the seats in the first two rows of middle class. The questions from other groups are about everything related with the text from the meaning of words, sentences to background information or other critical questions. The purpose is to enliven the class by asking and answering questions just like attack and defending. The tasks are of two kinds: one kind is for the Duty Group, the other kind is for other groups.

Take Text A of the Unit 3 for example: the title is: How to Write about Hemingway? This is a continuation of the previous two units, that is, how to write a critical article about Hemingway based on the literary theory of Unit 1 and literary criticism of Unit 2. The structure is clear: The first part is about the four challenges to write about Hemingway.The first one is how to distinguish the myth Hemingway, real Hemingway and his fictional characters. The second is Hemingway's economy of language and lack of narrative commentary. The third is Hemingway's careful use of symbols. The fourth is Hemingway's innovative form and intertextuality. The second part is how to deal with these challenges: thorough background research and careful, critical thinking.

The following is the tasks for the Duty Group responsible for Unit 3

1. New words, expressions and difficult sentences in Text A

2. Introducing Hemingway's Iceberg theory with examples from his works. (please find some help from relative academic articles.)

3. Interpreting *The Old Man and the Sea* with at least two schools of criticism. (please find some help from relative academic articles.)

4. What is the Lost Generation？

5. Telling the story of Jake Barnes in The Sun Also Rises.

Some tips: Task 4 about Lost Generation will be introduced when expatriate community in Paris in the 1920s in the first paragraph is told.

Task 5 about Jake Barnes story will be inserted during paragraph 3.

Task 2 about Iceberg theory will be told during paragraph 4.

Task 3 about interpretation of *The Old Man and the Sea* will be told after paragraph 5.

New words, expressions and sentences understanding will be questioned anytime.

This example shows that the tasks of Duty Group from text understanding (words, phrases, sentences) to background information or comprehensive knowledge are closely related with text contents. The way how to present tasks is free for the students -- oral presentation or other forms. The purpose is to achieve the fact that the teacher and students are together to finish the text study. For all the tasks, teacher are also ready to teach in case of student's insufficient presentation.

The following is the tasks for other groups except Duty Group

Paragraph 1：To write about Hemingway, we must distinguish the difference among three entities. What are the three entities?

Paragraph 2：What it the first pitfall to write about Hemingway?

Paragraph 3：What it the second pitfall to write about Hemingway?

Paragraph 4：How to understand "deceptively simple"

Paragraph 5：Have a try to interpret the meaning of symbols in The Old Man and the Sea

Paragraph 6：1.What is the final challenge faced by us to write about Hemingway?
            2.What is intertextuality?

Paragraph 7：How to cope with/deal with these challenges to write about Hemingway?

The tasks for other groups are guidance to preview the text aiming to put forward high-quality questions.

2.5 Enforcement

Take Text A of Unit 3 for example, when the first paragraph is told, teacher will ask students to challenge the Duty Group by questions first---words, sentences, text understanding, background information etc. If they have no question, teacher will ask the students except Duty Group to check their preview. When the background information is necessary, the presentation by Duty Group will come, for example, to understand "expatriate community in Paris in the 1920s" the presentation about Lost Generation will be given (Task 4). In this way, presentation and text study will be connected closely. Another example is paragraph 4 about Hemingway's writing style, related with the presentation of Iceberg Theory (Task 2); Paragraph 5 is about the symbolic meaning of *The Old Man and the Sea,* related with the interpretation of *The Old Man and the Sea (*Task 5).

Besides the questions about text, students also ask some comprehensive questions, for instance: why *The Old Man and the Sea (*more or less 40 thousand words) help Hemingway win two awards--Nobel prize and Pulitzer prize? Why is Hemingway's writing style so deceptively simple?

3.Results and Improvements

Because of the clear tasks, all the students, whether they are Duty Group or not, have improved their involvement in the class. In order to meet the challenge from other students, most of them from the Duty Group are well-prepared.

There is a questionnaire at the end of the term. One question is asking students to rate their involvement in English Class, the average score is 3.68 (full score is 5). The other question is asking students to rate their achievements in English Class, the average score is 4.01 (full score is 5). Last question is asking students to rate the English Teacher's teaching, the average score is 4.77 (full score is 5). It shows that the task-based teaching method is suitable to improve student's involvement in the class.

The first attempt enlivens the class and triggers student's involvement and study interests. But, there are still some problems. The presentation about background information or comprehensive knowledge is too far from expectation. A teacher has to spend more time to give additional information. Sometimes, no student wants to give questions, or the question is too broad to give a definite answer. All the problems will become motives to continue the attempt.

References

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