

The Application of Task-based Learning to College Oral English Teaching Practice

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Abstract

After briefly introducing TBL, the paper applies the theory to the college oral English teaching practice. In the theoretical introduction about TBL, the paper points out four possible misunderstandings about it and offers corresponding corrections. In the case-study part, the paper uses two examples to illustrate how TBL is sensibly applied to the college oral English teaching practice.

Keywords

task-based learning(TBL), application, college oral English, teaching practice.

1. Introduction

Task-based Learning(TBL), a systematic methodology that can be studied from various aspects, is adopted by many college English teachers nationwide for its effectiveness in facilitating teaching. While the theoretical study on TBL is of vital importance, the application of this very teaching methodology to the teaching practice is equally important. However, a small proportion of teachers have some misunderstandings about TBL and have difficulty applying this theory to their teaching practice. To help teachers better comprehend TBL and use it sensibly in their teaching practice, the present paper systematically introduces TBL and then illustrates how to apply the theory to the teaching practice with a case study.

2. Body

2.1. Introduction to TBL: Misunderstandings and Clarifications

This teaching approach is created from the perspective of students instead of teachers and is thus labeled as a way of “learning” rather than “teaching”. So TBL is generally student-centered and its teaching effectiveness is achieved through students’ participation in a series of meaningful and interrelated tasks. TBL emphasizes “learning by doing”, which greatly stimulates students’ interests in learning and improves their autonomous learning abilities. According to Willis, TBL undergoes three stages: pre-task, task-cycle and post-task.[1]

There are some misunderstandings about TBL. First of all, many teachers hold the mistaken belief that TBL merely refers to the tasks that imitate or represent those in the real world. Actually, TBL can be divided into two categories: “real world” tasks and “pedagogic” ones. The former provide students in class with the real-situation tasks in the real world that may take place in their daily lives and studies or on their future jobs. The latter are activities designed to facilitate students’ learning.[2] For example, in a typical English class, a teacher may ask his or her students a question before they begin to read the text. The question here can be considered a mini task that belongs to the “pedagogic” type. While the “pedagogic” tasks are unconsciously and commonly used by most language teachers, the “real world” tasks are relatively more challenging and meaningful and are gaining popularity.

Still, a large number of teachers think that TBL is an approach peculiar to English courses. The truth is that as an effective teaching method, TBL is widely used in many other subjects such

as chemistry, biology, geography etc. The uniqueness of the application of TBL to English courses is that TBL and English courses make a perfect match. "Real world" TBL for English courses often offers tasks of interactive situations that require students' communication through English language, which greatly helps to achieve the language goals of college English teaching.

Thirdly, many teachers tend to underestimate the pre-task stage, especially the "tasks" desired on the part of the teachers. The "tasks" designed by the teachers should be not only appealing to the students, but also enlightening and linguistically beneficial to them. How to design meaningful and interesting tasks, especially the "real world" ones poses great challenges to teachers. To cope with this challenge, college English teachers are supposed to work together to come up with decent teaching designs based on TBL. The teachers' reference books should be reformed to include some detailed TBL-based teaching designs so that teachers nationwide can adopt them directly as what they lack is not the ability to carry out "what to teach", but "how to teach".[3]

Fourth, TBL is by no means a universal teaching method. It is necessary for college English teachers to combine TBL with many other teaching methods or philosophies, because in most cases TBL shows its compatibility and its inclination to such combination. For instance, teachers may use traditional teaching method---lecturing, content-based instruction or CBI, and pair and group study together with TBL all at once. Here is a specific example. An English teacher teaches senior students Chinese traditional culture. Since the target students all have medium or high level of English proficiency, the teacher intends to adopt CBI, a philosophy that emphasizes the ideas rather than the language which in the holders' eyes can be learned unconsciously as a by-product. Suppose the students are going to learn tea ceremony. The teacher may turn to TBL for assistance to ask students to finish the task of performing tea rituals. But before the students' show in class, the teacher may like to lecture a bit on tea ceremony, which is a most traditional teaching method. The above example is an example of perfect combination of TBL, CBI and traditional lecturing method.

2.2. Application of TBL to College Oral English Teaching Practice

In the rest of the paper, I will use two teaching designs in unit 2 of "Speaking English in Use" Book 2 designed by myself to illustrate in detail how TBL is sensibly applied to the college oral English teaching practice. My discussion will be focused on teachers' teaching designs and the implementation of them in the light of TBL. Let's come to the first teaching design. The following is the background information for the required task: "A singing contest is to be held at the school auditorium in 2 weeks. You and your teammates from the Students' Union are going to make a poster to attract some audience." [4] Although the task I have assigned to students is to make English posters manually, I start by giving students some tips on how to make a good poster. The tips given are also task-oriented in that I type out the four steps to be taken to make a good poster, create some blanks for the missing information and ask students to fill in the blanks by listening to the tips. I also ask students to repeat the main points orally. These two tasks as part of my teaching design not only enhance students' listening and speaking abilities, but also give students clues as to how to make a good poster, thus laying foundation for making their own posters afterwards. Then, I ask students to get their pencils and paper ready and work in teams to design English posters based on the information given in Chinese. I also ask students to make a PowerPoint presentation to report how their groups have designed the posters.

Through the teaching design of several activities, students can cultivate their comprehensive abilities and team spirits. They also must apply what they have just learned in the first activity to their oral presentation. From the above example, we can see that good tasks in the teaching design should be interesting and meaningful and should be closely related to students' real-world concerns. The tasks should not be given once and for all without relevant clues or hints.

Rather, a big task is usually divided into several small tasks. Apart from the necessary scaffolds and sensible splitting of a major task in the teaching design, teachers' guidance and students' cooperation are equally important.

The second task-based teaching design goes as follows. I first ask students to watch a video clip about a 1995 Oscar awards ceremony. Then I ask them to play the role of Tom Hanks and deliver a speech before their classmates with the help of the script. If a teacher does nothing but ask his or her students to deliver the speech, it is obviously far from being a qualified teaching design in the light of TBL. So, I offer the following tips to help students better accomplish the task as part of my teaching design: "Tip 1. Watch the clip several times to get a general idea. Tip 2. Read the script and look up any new words in a dictionary to ensure understanding and accurate pronunciation. Tip 3. Listen to Tom Hanks' speech sentence by sentence, and try to imitate. Tip 4. Rehearse your speech with the help of the script within your group before you show to the whole class." [4]

The choice of the task material is appropriate because a video clip is more appealing and vivid than a mere audio material. By watching the video clip, students can feel the atmosphere on the spot and experience what has truly happened in reality. For this task, students cannot muddle through because they must end up giving their performance in class. Besides, they must work in groups so that they can help and supervise each other. The task also follows a step-by-step principle. The students start with listening and comprehending, followed by reading and consulting dictionaries. Then they must conduct detailed listening and repeating. Finally, they imitate Tom Hanks by giving the whole speech with the help of the script. By dividing the major task of delivering a speech into several smaller tasks, students are quite clear about what they are to do step-by-step to accomplish the major task.

3. Conclusion

The paper briefly introduces TBL and applies this teaching philosophy to the college oral English teaching practice. For the first theoretical part, the paper clarifies four possible misunderstandings about TBL and offers corresponding corrections. First, the tasks for TBL can be classified into two categories: real world tasks and "pedagogic" ones rather than real world tasks only. "Pedagogic" tasks are often unconsciously given by teachers in class, while real world tasks, which usually require teachers' careful designing in their teaching plan, appear more challenging and more significant. Second, while TBL is not an approach peculiar to English courses, it is a teaching methodology that well fits language teaching. Third, many teachers tend to underestimate the pre-task stage, often failing to design interesting, enlightening and step-by-step tasks. So there is an urgency to reform the students' textbooks and the teachers' reference books that contain detailed guidance for the tasks given. Fourth, TBL can be used together with many other teaching methods, which is especially true when the target students are higher level learners whose learning objectives are about ideas in the form of language rather than language itself. In the second teaching practice part, the paper picks up two examples to illustrate how TBL is sensibly applied to the teaching practice. Both examples emphasize the step-by-step approach by combining listening(watching), reading and speaking. They both emphasize group work and the product-oriented checking out standards. Through the analysis, readers can get acquainted with TBL theory, and learn how the theory is sensibly applied to the teaching practice.

References

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