The Application of Task-Based Language Teaching in Picture Books Reading Classes among Children

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Abstract

At the end of the 20th century, TBLT (Task-Based Language Teaching) has been widely used by foreign English teachers and young learners' teachers. More and more English educators and education experts in China are aware of the effectiveness of TBLT and begin to apply TBLT to their English teaching. Task-Based Language Teaching originates from Communicative Language Teaching, which is a kind of method which emphasizes to let students master the target Language by completing English learning Task. This kind of teaching method absorbs the advantages of many previous teaching methods and has attracted wide attention in language teaching all over the world. TBLT is consistent with the learner-oriented language learning process, which enables students to make full use of the target language for communication and stimulates students' learning enthusiasm. This paper mainly discusses the implementation of TBLT in picture book reading classes among children aged 8 to 10. This paper first introduces the background of TBLT. Then, it describes the definition of TBLT and summarizes the advantages and disadvantages of TBLT in children's picture book reading activities and teaching methods. On this basis, this paper also discusses the application of TBLT in children's picture book reading, focusing on the application principles, application strategies and teaching procedures of TBLT, as well as the role of teachers in TBLT and the comparison between TBLT and the traditional 3P teaching model.

Keywords

Task-Based Language Teaching; Children's Picture Books Instruction; Children's Language Education; Young Learner Education.

1. Introduction

In the process of teaching English picture book reading, the use of TBLT is very important for teachers and students. This method can help teachers achieve teaching objectives by designing specific practical tasks, thus stimulating students' interest in learning. Secondly, students can actively participate in task-based activities related to picture book reading to maintain their interest and focus in learning. At present, TBLT has been widely used in all kinds of English picture book reading classes. Therefore, this paper first introduces the background of task-based teaching. Then, it points out the types of TBLT activities and the advantages and disadvantages of TBLT in picture book reading classes. On this basis, this paper also discusses the application of TBLT in picture books reading, focusing on the practical principles, application strategies, teaching process and the role of teachers in TBLT, as well as the comparison between TBLT and the traditional 3P model.

1.1. Background of Task-Based Teaching Approach in Picture Books Reading Classes.

Task-based teaching approach is an important language teaching model proposed by foreign language teaching researchers and experts in the 1980s (Candlin,1987).

Task-based teaching method is a new teaching method based on communication developed in the past 20 years. In children's picture book education, it changes the book-style teaching language into the use of language in the real learning environment. TBLT came into being in foreign countries, and its theoretical basis comes from many aspects, including psychology, sociolinguistics, and education and so on. There are several typical theoretical sources. The First source is that American educator Dewey (1950, cited in Nunan, 1989) took the lens of pragmatic epistemology into educational field and put forward the "the idea of student centerness and learning by doing mode. He advocates that the center of education should be shifted from teachers and textbooks to students, and that teachers should guide students to learn a language in various activities (Hall,2011).

From my perspective, Dewey's concept holds that education should be transferred from teachers and textbooks to students, activities and interaction. The purpose of learning is not to remember rigid rules of grammar, but to solve the problems in the real society. This is in line with the idea of TBLT in children's picture book education, because teachers not only enable students learn the knowledge in picture books, but more importantly, allow students to correctly use the knowledge in life. The second origin is that the acquisition theory holds that language acquisition refers to the creation of an authentic environment similar to the environment where students learn their mother tongue. It is a kind of relaxing and unconscious interaction between teachers and students (Young,2008). Interaction makes students acquire practical usage of language. According to Krashen (1985), if teaching materials slightly exceeds the current language ability of learners, this is more conducive to cultivating further learning and the acquisition of language. In the 1970s, the Indian Linguist N. S. Prabhu in southern India carried out a five-year research on students of 8 to 12 years-old reading picture books. He found that students could pick up the language in the communicative activities from the picture books (Prahu,1987). Prabhu's experiment can be seen as first try of task-oriented teaching, and this research attracted a great attention from education experts (Richards, 2016).

Apart from these two theoretical foundations, Krashen (1985) believes that a large amount of comprehensible input of the target language is a necessary condition for second language acquisition. Language mastery is likely the result of using language in communicative activities, rather than the result of simply drilling language patterns and doing written exercises. Willis (1996) said that Language can be used for doing things. Based on Willis's idea, learning a Language is neither reciting isolated words, nor memorizing sentences out of context, nor memorizing boring grammar rules from the picture books, but teaching students to do things well with target language. This means that both vocabulary and grammar serve to get things done or complete educational assignments. Teachers need to combine vocabulary and grammar in classroom activities.

Picture books as a storytelling form, its special value is being increasingly recognized and explored. Primary education for children, is the best stage of the culture of language skills, also long-term development of the golden age of reading ability. For the development of children's characteristics, picture books reading for children will undoubtedly provide a suitable reading material. Picture books reading is a beautiful feast that is made of refined short words and beautiful pictures. Picture books of high quality, high level picture and text improve children's cognitive ability, the training of imagination, thinking strength enhancement, the improvement of aesthetic temperament and interest, rich emotional experience has a subtle influence. Meanwhile, the development of picture books for students' language skills, thinking and

imagination, social and other aspects are also important. Teachers have some contact with picture books and picture books teaching, but the ability to use picture books to carry out teaching activities should be improved.

2. Types of Task-Based Language Teaching Activates in Picture Books Reading Classes

Numerous experts define that tasks are all kinds of things that people do in real life (Richards, 2016, & Nunan, 1989). Some scholars define tasks from the perspective of classroom teaching, emphasizing the relationship between tasks and language, especially the role of tasks in promoting language learning (Yalden, 1987). Based on this understanding, Nunan (1989) divided tasks into two categories: real world tasks and pedagogic tasks in picture books reading classes.

Real tasks are tasks that are close to or similar to what students do in real life. For example, in the plot of picture books, teachers can design the activities for young learners such as booking a plane ticket, reflective writing of the stories, finding the destination on a map, and presenting the weather forecast and so on. The reason why Nunan advocates the adoption of real tasks is that the ultimate purpose of language learning is to enable children to complete various things with the knowledge of picture books (Ellis, 2003). Therefore, TBLT helps teachers to teach the content of picture books. However, TBLT cannot be useful for every picture books. So how teachers design and choose real tasks for picture-books instruction is a significant issue in language teaching. Nunan (1989) believes that the design and selection of real tasks on picture books should be based on a needs analysis. Syllabus designers and the tasks from picture books should first analyze what students may need to do with the language in their future life and work. These echo what Long (1985) calls "target tasks." The activities related to picture books should simulate or rehearse these tasks as much as possible.

There are several types of picture books that teachers can design different tasks for young learners. They are divided by Genres including Children's song, children's poem, children's fairy tale, children's fable, children's story, picture story, children's prose, children's drama, etc. Teachers can be based on the kinds of picture books to design tasks for training students' language competence. Learning tasks from picture books are things that also happen outside of the classroom. For example, students work in pairs to find the differences between the two pictures, draw geometric shapes according to the teacher's instructions, number a group of pictures according to the plot of the story, and propose solutions to a hypothetical problem from scientific picture books. Learning tasks are specially designed to achieve a certain learning purpose. The theoretical basis of learning task is second language acquisition theory. According to the theory of psycholinguistics, although learning tasks generally do not occur in real life, they are conducive to promoting language teaching (Richards, 2016). However, in the process of completing learning tasks, learners also need to receive, process and transfer information, as well as express opinions.

Nevertheless, there is no absolute boundary between real tasks and learning tasks(Karsh, 2011 cited in, Richards, 2016). Most learning activities in the classroom fall somewhere in between the real and the unreal. That is to say, the real task also has a less real component, and the real task is simulated in the classroom. In addition, the information input provided in the real task may not be completely true, and students may say some "unauthentic" words in the process of completing the task. Similarly, there is a real component to learning tasks. For example, the content provided to students is authentic, and the opinions from students are also real. The degree of authenticity here refers to the similarity with real life.

3. The Application of Task-Based Language Teaching in Picture Books

Nowadays, increasing English teachers in China learn TBLT and apply TBLT in English picture book teaching (Zeng, 2011). Many picture books system such as RAZ and Oxford Reading Tree also suggest that teachers should creatively design TBLT activities related to students' current abilities according to the overall objectives of the curriculum and the teaching content, so as to help students complete learning tasks through thinking, investigation, discussion, communication and cooperation (Hall, 2011). Based on my observation, Chinese teachers usually use task-based language teaching approach in reading classes, which takes topic and language structures and functions as the main line, and organizes students to carry out listening, speaking, reading and writing activities to achieve learning goals. Moreover, TBLT emphasizes the principle of learning by doing that is to take students' life experience and interest as the starting point and ask them to comprehensively apply the language to complete some tasks (Long,1985). However, through classroom observation and research in picture books teaching, I found that the model has not achieved the ideal effect, because some task designs cannot link to the actual life situation such as asking students use English to borrow and return the books in Chinese library. Furthermore, there are several problems in the application of TBLT. For instance, the preparation and learning of picture books of oxford trees series before the task is not sufficient, or the evaluation after the task is monotonous, or teachers design too many tasks or the tasks are too simple. Based on these problems of application in TBLT, I will discuss the roles of teachers in TBLT, as well as the comparison between task-based language teaching and traditional 3P model in the following sections. When teachers understand these parts of TBLT, teachers can have better understanding of employing TBLT in picture books classes and solve the problems above.

An increasing number of language teachers are using picture books with young students because this activity offers engaging materials from a linguistic, psychological, cognitive, social, and cultural point of view (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Picture books are gaining weight and have been broadly applied in literacy education (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 2008; Zarapaín & González, 2010). Many teachers implement picture books in their classes as supplemental materials for learners in order to expose them to authentic language usage (Chang, 2007; Chien, 2015). The use of TBLT in picture books reading is mainly due to the literariness and artistry of picture books. Children have great imagination in the process of reading, which also makes picture books are more efficient to teach language. As the primary way for children and teachers to communicate and influence each other, TBLT runs through the whole process of picture book reading teaching activities to arouse children's thirst for knowledge. In such a class, students' interest can be greatly stimulated, and the combination of learning and life experience is naturally realized in the process of reading. Apparently, the widespread application of using TBLT in picture books reading class is influential for language learners.

4. The Roles of Teachers in Task-Based Language Teaching on Picture Books

Task-based teaching is an interactive process of communication between teachers and students. The traditional English teaching activities mainly focus on "preciseness and practice" when teaching picture books, so teachers play the roles of "main lecturer" and "command" (Young,2008). But in the task-based activities, the teacher is no longer a commanding the elder, is no longer "preaching, knowledge and to reassure" a wise man, but one of the students complete the study task of designers, help scholars, is the organizer and activities to complete the task to complete the task of supervisors, more students to experience the life activities of the partners and a medium and bridge (Hall, 2011). Hence, we can see that in TBLT of picture

books classes, students from the past passive listeners to active participants, collaborators, researchers.

4.1.   Task Designer

Task-based teaching fully embodies the student-centered concept. In task-based teaching, teachers design the content of teaching activities to achieve the goal of learning by doing. Students' activities are clearly target-oriented and have specific requirements (Richards, 2016). The key to task-based learning activities is to create authentic language situations to encourage students to participate, communicate and learn together (Hall, 2011). Therefore, the role of the teacher in the reading classes is to be the designer of the task according to the plots of picture books rather than the authority figure or to control the whole activity, because if the teacher always controls the whole activity or makes students obey his or her orders, students will lose the opportunity and motivation to explore and learn the content of picture books independently. For instance, Oxford Reading Tree (grades 1-9) is the core of the whole reading system, mainly centering on a family of three children, which is called Biff,Chip&Kipper Stories. Of course, there's another black family and a few other characters in the middle. Among them, stages 1 to 4 are life stories; In phase 5, Kipper gets a magic key, and the story begins with a colorful fantasy. Children can understand not only the language from the books, but also explore life skills via design tasks and conversations, rather than teacher-self talk in successive classes.

4.2.   Student Assistant and Activity Partner

In task-based language teaching activities, the teacher is a member of the activities. Teachers act as partners with equal status to assist learners plan learning goals, discuss problems and share opinions with them, encouraging students to pay attention to construct good sentences and use new vocabulary as much as possible (Candlin, 1987). For instance, in The Magic School Bus series of picture books, teachers can help learners role-play a dialogue or give students a chance to share happiness and growth with others. Teachers are not only teachers and experts, but also students' friends and activity partners. As a result, students are bound to feel a kind of comfort, a kind of trust, a kind of confidence and a kind of courage, thus accelerating the learning progress.

5.   The Comparison between Task-Based Language Teaching and Traditional 3P Model in Picture Books Instruction

One of traditional teaching modes refers to the 3P mode (Presentation, Practice, and Production). 3P teaching method is the product of the communicative language teaching model in the 1970s (Prahu, 1987). 3P teaching method divides language teaching into the following three stages: Presentation, Practice and Production. This traditional teaching model always appears in picture books reading classes in early 2000 (Zeng, 2011). Teachers require students to learn the target language under a control or semi-control through 3P structure, so as to achieve teaching aims and form the language in reading classes. 3P teaching method is convenient for classroom management, and all learning activities and processes of students are designed and controlled by teachers. Students' language learning and acquisition is based on knowledge rather than real life communication. Therefore, it is a teacher-centered and one-way knowledge transfer process.

There are four differences between task-based language teaching and 3P model.

Firstly, traditional 3P mode emphasizes the structure and function of language, while task-based language teaching emphasizes the practical application of language. 3P model focuses on explaining grammar of picture books, ignore the cultivation of English listening and speaking ability, and lack of real communication. Task-based teaching is organized and implemented around tasks. Skehan (1998) summarized the characteristics of "task" reflect task-based

language teaching in essence: first, meaningfulness is the top priority. Second, there is a real-time communication. Third, it is related to similar activities in the real world. Four, completing the task is the first consideration. Fifth, evaluating the implementation of the task according to the results. From the perspective of teaching practice, TBLT changes the structure of lesson and organizes more student-centered activities. Moreover, students' practical experience in the real context is conducive to the cultivation of students' communicative competence. Through the completion of tasks, students can communicate, inquire and discuss in English, which improves the frequency of English use. In the process, they also pick up words and sentences from the characters' expressions in the picture books, which develops students' sense of English, and stimulate their motivation to participate in tasks. Therefore, TBLT in reading classes can stimulate students' interest in language learning more than traditional 3P models that is one-sided analysis of language structure and under a controlled situation.

Secondly, traditional 3P method is knowledge-centered, while task-based teaching is activity-centered. Knowledge-centered teaching inevitably leads to the dominant position of teachers. Therefore, all the teaching activities in the "3P" teaching are completed under the guidance and control of teachers. First of all, the separated language points are explained and practiced under the control of teachers and text books, without paying attention to the needs and emotions of students and ignoring the status of students in learning. In some exercises of 3P model, students' thirst for knowledge and creativity are inhibited, and they may not have interested in learning content, unwilling to participate in classroom activities, and unable to achieve teaching results. Moreover, some research of second language acquisition shows that language learning is not a linear and cumulative process (Lightbown, 2012). Traditional teaching emphasizes terminal mastery, which is content-centered and results-oriented, so it neglects the natural learning process and the active cognitive participation of learners, thus failing to achieve the expected learning effect. Nunan (1989) suggests that as the subject of learning, students themselves are the core element in the process of knowledge construction. If the teaching ignores the feelings and emotions of learners, they will have resistance and have difficulty in accepting what they have learned. Task-based teaching in reading classes advocates that students are the center, and the main body status of students is taken into consideration (Lightbown, 2012). Through the arrangement of teaching tasks, TBLT enables students to actively participate in the classroom, make them experience the language in the process of completing the task, and learn to use English to communicate and solve practical problems. Therefore, TBLT largely changes the passive learning status of students in traditional teaching.

Thirdly, traditional 3P mode lacks meaningful language application, while task-based teaching emphasizes the authenticity of tasks. The importance of meaningful language use in language learning should not be underestimated. It is not only the purpose of language learning, but also the means of language learning. The traditional 3P mode attaches importance to the training of language forms, and the teaching content is established. However, the use of the input material in TBLT should be derived from the real life and the conversations from the books written by native speakers. At the same time, the task of scenes and specific activities should be close to the real life as far as possible, allowing the student to contact and to process real language as much as possible. In this way, the use of language and skills in the classroom can also be effectively transferred and applied in real life.

Fourthly, 3P model of classroom teaching is boring, whereas classroom atmosphere of TBLT is more active. Willis (1996) mentions that "Interest is the best teacher", but the whole lesson of 3P model is limited to drilling of words, sentence patterns, learning contents, teaching activities are far from real life and learners may not feel the necessity of studying these patterns, and therefore learners feel it difficult to generate interest, form the intrinsic motivation. Nevertheless, while completing tasks, students' enthusiasm and initiative are well displayed, and students are willing to participate in independent learning. Through heated discussion and

earnest communication, learners can really integrate into the language in the classroom and students' learning interest and motivation can be triggered.

In a word, in teaching picture books, we can see that TBLT is more helpful to stimulate students' interest in learning than traditional teaching. In the process of completing tasks, combining language knowledge and language skills is helpful to cultivate students' comprehensive language abilities.

6. Conclusion

With the continuous progress of English education in picture books among children, tradition teaching methods are gradually not suitable for the current teaching environment. Therefore, a new teaching method like task-based language teaching approach has emerged. In this paper, I first introduce the background of TBLT. Then I also describe the types of TBLT and as well as the advantages and disadvantages of TBLT employment in teaching picture books. In addition, this paper also focuses on teacher's role in TBLT and the comparison between TBLT and traditional 3P teaching mode in picture books classes.

We can see that TBLT has both advantages and disadvantages, but in general, this approach gains increasingly popularity in picture books instruction, for it can promote students' motivation to learn English and improve students' communication ability. Therefore, as long as meaningful tasks are well designed, the teaching quality can be effectively improved.

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