Feasibility Study of the Application of Task-Based Language Teaching in English and American Literature Courses in China

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Abstract

Task-based language teaching has been applied widely with positive outcomes. However, its efficiency on the course of English and American literature in the Chinese context has not been studied yet. This paper conducts a thorough study of the literature and hypothesizes that Task-based language teaching would also exert positive influences on the course of English and American literature.

Key words: Task-based language teaching; Literature courses; Efficiency

INTRODUCTION

The past decade has witnessed the increase of concern and interest in educators and researchers over the issue of English education in China (Guo & Roehrig, 2011; Hu, 2002, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2008; Hu & Ren, 2012; Nunan, 2003; Zhang & Hu, 2010). English is currently a compulsory course from elementary school to tertiary and postgraduate schools in China. Many recent educational reforms and language policies have been carried out at different levels of English language teaching (Hu, 2005b). According to Hu (2005c, 2010), there are two main driving factors, together with others, behind these language policies and educational reforms: One is the widespread acceptance of the essential connection between China's modernization and the whole country's English proficiency, and the other force is an increasing dissatisfaction with the quality of present English language teaching practice among the policy makers and other stakeholders.

The traditional English language teaching methods were criticized for their overemphasis on grammar and vocabulary, and the neglect of the importance of practical language communicative skills (Zhang & Hu, 2010). All these factors resulted in a nationwide top-down language pedagogical reforms, aiming to increase English provision and improve the effectiveness of English language teaching in the school system (Ibid., 2010). The task-based language teaching approach was selected as the desired pedagogy to promote students' communicative skills and overall language competency. Task-based language teaching is also adopted for English courses in colleges and universities, and is viewed by many teachers and school authorities as the basis for teaching reforms. College and university students in China are accordingly expected to gain "oral language and literary skills in English in order to be proficient for the purpose of communication" (Guo & Roehrig, 2011). This paper aims to explore the applicability and effectiveness of this approach in courses of English and American literature, by way of a careful study of its benefits and limits in applicability and potential for enhancing students' cultural and social awareness, as well as the development of language proficiency.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Task-based language teaching is not a new approach in language teaching; it has been in place for more than three decades (Shehadeh, 2005). Before scrutinizing this approach's benefits and limits on second language acquisition and/or foreign language acquisition, it would

be more advisable to take a close look at perceptions on the nature of language learning and teaching, as well as the traditional ways of language teaching. The nature of second language or foreign language learning determines the effectiveness of teaching methodologies. That is to say, if a teaching method matches the nature of the language learning and facilitates learners' language development, this method can be potentially viewed as an effective method; otherwise, it would be ranked as ineffective. Therefore, the effectiveness of task-based language teaching should be evaluated in view of the nature and features of language learning.

2. LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING

Language learning is often simply viewed as a "system of wordings governed by a grammar and a lexicon" (Shehadeh, 2005). Teaching approaches in accordance with this understanding are the traditional grammar-based approaches (structural-based approaches), which more often than not overemphasize the importance of vocabulary and grammar at the cost of communicative aspects of language (Zhang & Hu, 2010). Many studies have shown that learners taught by grammar-centered methods do not achieve an "acceptable level of competency in the target language" (Shehadeh, 2005), and most learners taught by this grammar-based approach, except some highly gifted students with great motivation, could not achieve "a usable level of fluency and proficiency" even after years of L2 instruction (Skehan, 1996b). Moreover, grammar-based approaches are also criticized for not being based on "sound theoretical background or empirical evidence" (Shehadeh, 2005).

Research in recent years has brought some new understandings of language learning and language teaching. Language is considered "primarily as a meaning system" (Ibid.). Learners may pick up a lexico-grammar as they struggle to find meaning in a language and to communicate in this language. This process of struggling to communicate stimulates language development (Ibid.). Meanwhile, language learning does not simply follow teachers' instruction. Language development is not determined by what teachers teach; it is mainly determined by learners' internal factors (Skehan, 1996b). Therefore, teachers can only "compose the circumstances and conditions that promote learning" (Lantolf, 2005, p.346), and there is no guarantee that learning will happen at any given time or in any given manner. This new understanding of language acquisition and teaching implies that language is acquired when learners believe the language is meaningful, useful for communication purposes, and teaching is to use proper approaches and contexts to activate learners' internal determinant factors to learn the language. In fact, learning is now widely believed to depend on learners' ability to: a) attend to relevant language features (Harley, 1998), b) restructure knowledge (Dekeyser, 1998), c) focus on form when learners notice a gap in their interlanguage, and 4) on the extent of learner-initiated noticing (Long & Robinson, 1998). To be short, all these studies argue that to pay occasional attention to the forms of the target language is still very important while focusing dominantly on meaning, communication and fluency.

3. TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING

New interpretation of language learning and teaching brought forth the task-based language teaching approach. Task-based language teaching (communicative language teaching) is a popular language teaching method of Western origins, which "valorizes meaning negotiation and construction in the classroom, language learning through using the target language to communicate, and authentic and meaningful communication as the goal of classroom activities" (Zhang & Hu, 2010, p.124). The Ministry of Education in China has adopted an updated task-based language teaching as the "desired pedagogy" (Zhang & Hu, 2010, p.124). According to Richards and Rodgers (2001, p.151), the task-based language teaching aims to "reconcile methodology with current theories of second language acquisition." Therefore, task-based language teaching is different from traditional language teaching that instructs grammar structures according to the sequence contents of the textbook (Ellis, 2002; Swan, 2005). Due to its potential advantages, task-based language teaching has been popularly adopted worldwide, and its effects on learners' language development have long been the research target of many researchers (Aliakbari & Jamalvandi, 2010; Sugita, 2009).

Even though task based language teaching has been the focus of many researchers, there is not a single comprehensive definition of the term "task", due to the fact that studies and descriptions of task have been approached from different perspectives and for different purposes. For instance, Nunan (1989a) presents the most commonly cited pedagogical definition of a classroom task, while Ellis (2003, pp.2-10) presents nine sample definitions, and further argues that tasks "can involve any of the four language skills." However, researchers in the task based language teacher field do achieve some consensus over the core characteristics, especially for pedagogical tasks, and these core characteristics are summarized here (Shehadeh, 2005, p.18):

A language learning task is
· an activity
· that has a non-linguistic purpose or goal
· with a clear outcome
· and that uses any or all of the four language skills in its accomplishment

· by conveying meaning in a way that reflects real-world language use

To convey meaning and reflect the real-world language use is viewed by many researchers as one of the most crucial features of task based language teaching. For example, Long and Crookes (1991), Skehan (1996a) and Willis (1996b) all stress the importance of meaning and real-life language use. It is this approach's usefulness and benefits in language teaching that results in so many thorough studies over the last three decades.

4. TASK BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING BENEFITS AND LIMITS

The booming number of studies and classroom practices worldwide has shown this approach's potential advantages in promoting learners L2 acquisition.

First of all, task-based language teaching lays its foundation on a theory of language learning rather than a theory of language structure. While the traditional grammar- based approaches are critiqued for lack of solid theoretical background or convincing empirical evidence, the theory behind this approach is the activity theory based on Vygotsky's theoretical framework, holding that "all higher forms of human activity arise as a direct consequence of motives and goals" (Lantolf, 2005, p.345). Contrary to the traditional language teaching theories which view language just as "a system of wordings governed by a grammar and a lexicon" (Shehadeh, 2005, p.13), task-based language teaching approach considers the language mainly as "a meaning system" (Ibid.), a system for communication. This different theoretical basis prioritizes the approach's special emphasis on the authenticity of language use and learners' communicative competence. Guided by these ideas, language teachers just attend to formal features of the target language when these features appear in meaningful classroom contexts; however, the main focus remains on meaning.

Secondly, the task-based language teaching approach constructs a new relationship between language teachers and learners. According to Skehan (1996b, 18), it is widely accepted that learning does not happen in the same order of instruction, and learning is observed to be largely independent of instruction. Language development is believed to be determined by, in Skehan's words (1996b, p.18), "learner-internal, rather than external factors." What language teachers can do to learners' language acquisition is to use proper approaches and provide the context to "activate" the language acquisition process inside the learners (Shehadeh, 2005), and provide proper guidance and scaffolding. As a result, language teachers no longer dominate learners' learning process; learners gain much more control over their own learning. At the same time, learners are evaluated more on their communicative competency.

Thirdly, the various forms and variables of task based approach can improve learners' language competency in many aspects. Till now, studies on the effectiveness of task- based language teaching approach are mainly conducted in four perspectives: the interaction perspective, output perspective, cognitive perspective and socio-cultural perspective. Studies concerning these four perspectives have yielded very persuasive results. There are, however, rather mixed findings.

The interaction hypothesis holds that interaction facilitates SLA, particularly when negotiation for meaning and feedback is involved (Gass & Ross-Feldman, 2005). Interaction in the task based language learning approach involves receiving comprehensible input, interactional feedback and a push for L2 learners to make changes in their output, which are believed to be beneficial factors for learners (Gass, 1997; Pica, 1994b; Swain, 2005). Interaction may provide learners with opportunities to "notice the gap" between what they utter and the target language (Schmidt & Frota, 1986), which is very important for L2 development. The interaction connects input and output. Empirical studies informed by the hypothesis show that there is a relation-ship between interaction and L2 learning (Gass, Machey, & Ross-Feldman, 2005).

The output hypothesis views learners' output not just a sign of acquired knowledge, but also a sign of learning at work (Swain, 2000). It is argued that the gap learners notice between their output and the target language drives them to "to stretch their current interlanguage capacity in order to fill the gap" (Shehadeh, 2005, p.22), "enabling them to control and internalise linguistic knowledge" (Swain, 1995, p.126). Researchers have been able to demonstrate that task-type does provide learners with varied opportunities toward modified output (Shehadeh, 2005). Studies have demonstrated that learners' production of modified output was found to promote successful L2 learning (Swain & Lapkin, 1995), and different types of tasks, variables and dimensions would have different effects on L2 development and its progress.

The cognitive aspect of task-based language teaching was carefully analyzed by Skehan (1998), who distinguishes learners' language performance into three aspects: fluency, accuracy and complexity, and holds that different types of tasks and communication can influence these three aspects of performance. Several studies have been conducted to demonstrate the extent of enhancement that task based teaching approach has on learners' L2 fluency, accuracy and complexity. For example, Birch (2005) demonstrated that fluency, accuracy and complexity of the target language could be positively influenced by planning time and type of tasks.

Socio-cultural perspective studies of the task based language teaching, with its original roots in Vygotsky, examines how tasks are collaboratively accomplished

by learners, and how this action can lead to L2 learning. Studies from this perspective found that dialogic interaction enables learners to jointly accomplish tasks and solve linguistic problems that are out of their individual reach. Ellis (2000, p.209) explains that: "learners first succeed in performing a new function with the assistance of another person and then internalize this function so that they can perform it unassisted."

Various studies from different perspectives on task based language teaching have provided concrete evidence to show that this approach indeed can promote learners' language development, in aspects of vocabulary, grammar, structure, reading, speaking, and overall competence. Due to its theoretical basis and rational understanding of language learning and teaching, together with the development and wide application of modern technologies, the task-based language teaching approach is becoming more and more influential in facilitating learners' language development.

Nevertheless, its obvious advantages could not cover the potential limitations. Just as Zhang and Hu (2010) mentioned, task-based language teaching originated from the Western educational context, and its embodied communication norms and particular social psychological components might not be suitable for the teaching and learning context in other countries, especially in China (Hu, 2005c). The differences in learning environment, learners' unique conditions, as well as the nature of courses, render the improperness of global application into all classrooms for any language courses. Meanwhile, the great differences arising from different class setting and learners' differences require much diversity in task types and material designing; meanwhile this is a rather huge time-consuming task for individual teachers. Otherwise, there is the danger of using the task approach merely for the sake of using tasks in the class. To make this long-lasting task-based language teaching approach productive in local conditions, all the above-mentioned factors deserve great concern.

SUMMARY

From the literature, it is easy to see that the task-based language teaching method has been studied over the past three decades, including the features of effective tasks, task variables and effects, task settings, and tasks' impact on the four skills of language, to name just a few aspects. However, very few studies have been conducted for the applicability of task approach into literature courses and translation courses. The limited studies on the application of task-based language teaching in English and American literature courses should promote a comprehensive study in this aspect. Literature courses are compulsory courses for university students majoring in English in China. The importance of this type of courses lies in the belief that courses of English and American literature can

integrate all the four or five essential language skills into pragmatic practice while raising students' awareness and understanding of western cultures and social and historical backgrounds. In view of the advantages of task-based language teaching approach, and the feature of Literature courses, this approach is very likely to exert great positive influence on the learners' language development and enhancement of socio-cultural awareness. For this reason, two questions are raised:

a) Can the task based language teaching approach be applied into courses of English and American literature?

b) What effect might this approach has on learners' language development and enhancement of socio-cultural awareness?

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