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Task-Based Language Teaching: Responses from Chinese Teachers of English

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Abstract

The Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) method has been the proposed teaching method under the current national English curriculum since 2001. However, few studies have investigated in-service teachers' response to this proposed language teaching method. In this study, thirty public school English teachers were recruited in Beijing across school levels. Through participant interviews and class observations, the researcher examined how Chinese teachers of English at different school levels in Beijing respond to TBLT. Results suggest that teachers' responses to the proposed teaching method ranged from negative denial, passive acceptance, to active application of the TBLT in their classrooms and they served as the examiners, technicians, and explorers accordingly. Furthermore, teachers who actively applied the TBLT method into their instruction demonstrated different instructional foci in terms of task selection and task implementation. The study addresses pedagogical implications of TBLT for curriculum development and English instruction in Beijing, China.

Key words: Task-based language teaching, teaching English as a foreign language, curriculum implementation, teaching pedagogy, China.

Introduction

English has long been considered as one of the most vital subjects in school curriculum in China. During the past decade, the government has been addressing the necessity of being able to communicate effectively in English as students' English mastery is directly associated with future educational opportunities, career and income. Under the proliferation of English language learning, a revised National English Curriculum

Standard (NECS) has been developed by the Ministry of Education in China (MOE) and implemented in public schools in China since 2001 (MOE, 2001). In this curriculum, one of most important changes is the implementation of student-centered, task-based language teaching (TBLT).

In contrast to the traditional grammar-translation method or the audiolingual method of language teaching, TBLT, evolved within the Communicative Language Teaching framework, called for students' active participation in pair and/or group work. TBLT suggests that teachers support students with meaningful classroom tasks and help them complete those tasks through modeling, experiencing, practicing, participating, cooperating, and communicating (Klapper, 2003; MOE, 2001; Nunan, 2004; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). This student-centered, teacher-facilitated teaching model challenged the Chinese Confucian-heritage tradition, which emphasizes hierarchical relations between teachers and students; teachers are the authority in the classroom and the expert on the subject and students behave modestly, listen attentively, and do exactly what they are asked to do (Nisbett, 2003; Watkins & Biggs, 1996, 2001).

Teaching, regardless of the subject area, is a cultural activity. Many English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) teacher programs are often rooted in Western ideology, which promotes the use of Western language teaching methodology. Chinese EFL teachers, however, are influenced by Confucian culture and a traditional teaching model (Rao, 1996). This government-mandated TBLT innovation in classrooms calls for Chinese teachers of English to move from traditional ways of teaching to the proposed language teaching method.

Task-based language teaching

Four teaching methods that have been using prominently in English instruction in China include the grammar-translation method, the audiolingual method, communicative language teaching, and task-based language teaching. TBLT originates from Dewey's view about the importance of experience for effective learning (Ellis, 2009) and emphasizes purposeful and functional language use by using real-life tasks in classrooms for students to experience learning. Central to this approach is the task. Long (1985) defines a target task as:

> A piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward. Thus examples of tasks include painting a fence, dressing a child, filling out a form, buying a pair of shoes…In other words, by 'task' is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play and in between. (p. 89)

When those tasks are transformed from the real world to the classroom, they become pedagogical tasks, which Nunan (2004) defines as:

> A piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to

> express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning, a middle and an end. (p. 4)

Skehan (1996) and Carless (2007) distinguish between strong and weak forms of TBLT. The strong form acknowledges the importance of meaning-making under real life situations and emphasizes the authenticity of tasks. The weak form offers the flexibility of using different kinds of tasks to facilitate communicative language teaching. In the TBLT method, learners assume the roles of participants, monitors, risk-takers, and innovators. They are required to actively participate in pair-work and group work, facilitate learning and reflection, and create and interpret messages for which they lack full linguistic resources and prior experiences (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Teachers become facilitators, participant analysts, advisers, and process managers. Teachers are also responsible for selecting, modifying and creating tasks to meet students' learning needs and providing demonstrations of how to complete the task successfully. Ellis (2009) discusses four additional criteria that may distinguish a pedagogical task from a regular language-teaching activity. In order to be considered as a pedagogical task, the activity should focus on meaning, include some kind of 'gap' so learners are expected to convey information, express an opinion or infer meaning, allow learners to rely on their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources to complete the activity, and state a clearly defined outcome.

Numerous studies explored the application of TBLT in language classrooms in different countries. Karavas-Doukas (1995) studied the implementation of a communicative approach in Greek public secondary schools and found that EFL teachers had incomplete understanding of the adopted language teaching approach. As a result, teachers reduced the implementation of this approach in their classrooms (Karavas-Doukas, 1995). In South Korea, Li (1998) found that EFL teachers had little time to administer process-based tasks due to the need to prepare students for the grammar-based language test. In Japan, Gorsuch (2001) reported that teachers preferred the highly-controlled communicative language teaching activities rather than those that were student-centered. Moser, Harris, and Carle (2012) argued that in order for Japanese teachers to provide dialogical teaching in English, they first needed to gain experience conducting communicative tasks in English. In Hong Kong, Carless (2003, 2007, & 2008) studied the implementation of TBLT in primary and secondary classrooms and summarized six issues that affected the implementation, including teacher beliefs, teacher understandings, the time available for task-based teaching, the textbook and topic, preparation and the available resources, and students' language proficiency. In addition, Carless called for the implementation of situated task-based teaching approaches in Hong Kong classrooms (Carless, 2007).

In mainland China, considerable amount of scholarly attention has been given to TBLT in EFL classrooms in recent years (Zheng, 2008). While many studies have investigated the application of TBLT in reading courses at the tertiary level (e. g. Li, 2005; Qian, 2008; Wen, 2009; Wu, 2011; Xiao & Pan, 2009), only a few empirical studies have explored

TBLT in public school classrooms (Chen, 2008; Deng & Carless, 2010; Zheng, 2008). These studies investigated individual teachers focusing on the issues that constrained the implementation of TBLT in classrooms. These studies have also highlighted the fact that the implementation of TBLT was affected by teachers' beliefs and the contextual factors in China, such as the rigid national examinations, availability of resources, students' different needs and language proficiency levels. However, what is lacking is a more comprehensive picture of how teachers across varying instructional levels implement government-mandated task-based language teaching.

Beliefs about teaching and learning

The current study assumes that teachers apply pedagogical innovations based on their beliefs about teaching and learning (Pratt, Kelly & Wong, 1999; Zheng & Adamson, 2003). Research has demonstrated that teachers' ideas and theories about effective teaching and learning are culturally embedded and not easily changed (Clift & Brady, 2005). In contrast to Western Socratic dialogical teaching approaches, which value "questioning, criticizing, refuting, arguing, debating and persuading" (Major, 2005, p. 85) and emphasize learner participation and the co-construction of knowledge, the Chinese Confucian-heritage teaching model cherishes the transmission of knowledge and tends to be teacher-directed (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2006; Watkins & Biggs, 1996). Teachers, as the authority in the classroom, present knowledge based on her/his best ability, and students, on the other hand, are expected to respect the knowledge, wisdom, and expertise of their teachers.

Because TBLT is rooted in Western culture, Chinese teachers' application of this teaching approach in EFL classrooms may pose challenges and conflicts. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate how Chinese teachers of English in different instructional levels respond to TBLT.

Method

A snowball sampling method was used to recruit 30 teachers from six public schools in Beijing (Patton, 2011). Teacher participants included 11 teachers from three elementary schools and 19 teachers from three complete secondary schools (including both middle school and high school). Ten of the 19 secondary school teachers teach middle school and nine teachers teach high school. The education these teachers received ranged from graduating from professional teaching high schools to achieving a Master's degree in English education from an English speaking country, such as the United Kingdom. The years of experience teaching English ranged from four months to 36 years across the sample with an average of 9 years. In addition, four teachers also had prior experiences of working in companies or teaching subjects other than English. Detailed information about the 30 teachers is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Teacher Information

Teacher	Grade Level taught	Highest Degree and Major	Years of Experience teaching English	Prior Experiences
1	3rd and 4th	BA in English Ed.	9 months	
2	2nd and 5th	Professional High school – Education	15 years	Taught English in a middle school for 8 years
3	1st and 4th	BA in Physics Education	9 months	
4	6th	AA in English	5 years	
5	5th	BA in English Education	11 years	
6	2nd and 4th	AA in Chinese	11 years	8 years teaching Chinese
7	1st and 3rd	BS in Biology	1 year	Took 3 education courses to obtain the teaching certificate after graduation
8	1st and 6th	Professional High School – Education	4 years	10 years teaching Chinese
9	1st and 2nd	BA English	17 years	
10	4th	AA first, then studied for BA English on the job	4 months	5 years teaching PE
11	3rd	BA in Environmental Engineering	6 months	Obtained the teaching certificate while working on BA degree
12	7th	BA in English Education. Working on her MA in English Education now.	8 years	
13	8th	MA in Linguistic Education	4 years	
14	7th	AA first, then obtained BA in English Education 3 years ago.	20 years	
15	8th	BA in English Education	10 years	
16	8th	BA in English Education	3 years	
17	9th	BA in English Education, working on MA in English Education now	5 years	
18	7th	BA in English	5 years	

Teacher	Grade Level taught	Highest Degree and Major	Years of Experience teaching English	Prior Experiences
19	8th	AA in Foreign Trade, then obtained BA in English Education	14 years	Working in a Company for 2 years.
20	8th	MA in English Education	2 years	
21	9th	Professional High School – Education	36 years	
22	10th	BA in English Education	14 years	Being an exchange teacher in the US for 6 months.
23	11th	BA in English Education; MA in English Education (UK)	10 years	6 years after getting BA; 4 years after getting MA.
24	12th	BA in English	20 years	
25	11th	BA in English, MA in Linguistic	1.5 years	
26	11th	BA in English Education	12 years	
27	11th	BA in English, MA in English Education	15 years	
28	12th	MA in English Education	13 years	
29	12th	BA in English Education	5 years	
30	12th	MA in English Education	10 years	

Data collection and analysis

In order to protect the privacy of the teachers, a number was assigned to represent each teacher during the data collection and analysis. Data included semi-structured interviews, field observations, and documents, which contain published instructional documents and teaching artifacts. Two interviews were conducted with each teacher once before classroom observation and once afterwards. The second interview allowed the researcher to clarify any questions or concerns raised during observations and for teachers to clarify certain teaching points. All interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed by the researcher. Participants preferred to conduct the interview in Chinese.

Each teacher was also observed by the researcher in the classroom at least twice. Observations were also recorded digitally and transcribed by the researcher. Published documents and instructional materials include the 2001 National English Curriculum Standard, textbooks, teachers' manuals, students' workbooks, teachers' lesson plans, PowerPoint presentations and handouts. Data from classroom observations were used develop a deeper understanding of participants' responses to TBLT.

Inductive and deductive analysis (Purcell-Gates, 2004) was used in data analysis. Inductive analysis was conducted on the interview transcriptions by assigning codes, grouping codes into categories, and merging categories into themes. Observation transcriptions and other documents were analyzed deductively to look for instructional examples that supported the categories and themes identified from interview transcripts. It is important to note that as a Chinese national who learned and taught English in China, I bring an unavoidable cultural insider's perspective to data interpretation. Hence, this paper reports on my understanding of teachers' responses to TBLT.

Findings

Results indicate that teachers' responses to the proposed teaching method ranged from negative denial, passive acceptance, to active application of the TBLT in their classrooms. Teachers whose responses fall into these three categories served as the examiners, technicians, and explorers accordingly (Figure 1). Furthermore, teachers who actively applied the TBLT method to their instruction also demonstrated different instructional foci in terms of task selection and task implementation.

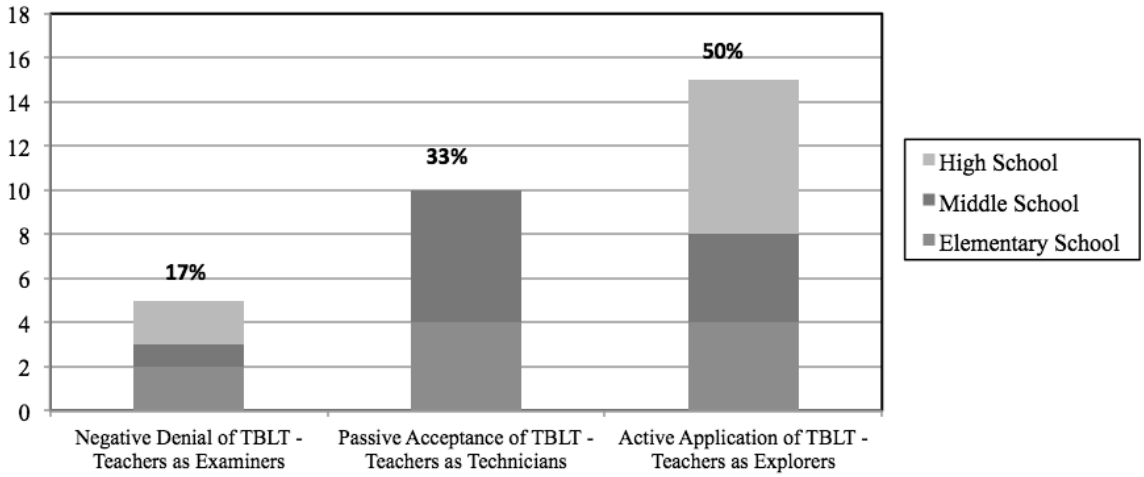

***Figure 1*. Summary of the teacher categories**

Negative denial of TBLT – Teachers as Examiners

Of the 30 teacher participants (17%), five teachers held negative opinions about TBLT and denied the implementation of TBLT in their classrooms. Two of these teachers taught in elementary schools, one taught in a middle school, and two taught at a high school. These teachers doubted the effectiveness of the method, and discussed reasons why they could not adopt this new method based their teaching on the Examination Guide. For instance, an elementary school teacher wondered, "Can my students really master the content by playing games? I don't think so". A middle school teacher preferred "explaining to my students and asking them to take notes and use their memorization", and another teacher in high school argued, "They won't pass [the College Entrance Examination] if my teaching is task-based."

Traditional teacher-centered teaching models characterized the instructional practices in this category. For example, one elementary school teacher was observed reviewing grammar points (how to use *what* and *when* to ask questions in future tense) and spelling (days of the week). She explained grammar rules in Chinese, asked students to recall strategies, asked a couple of students to answer her questions, then finally asked students to finish the workbook activities as a way to reinforce what they have learned.

A middle school teacher indicated that she was confused about grammar instruction under the TBLT method. She said, "It seemed that the book promoted learning grammar through completing tasks and activities; however, the exams required teachers to explicitly teach grammar rules, forms, and usages. I have to follow the Guide to ensure a good testing result." Before starting a reading passage – *Six rules for a safe and healthy life*, the teacher taught key expressions, phrases/collocations, and grammar. She listed the key points on the blackboard and explained each one in great detail (Figure 2).

Thanks to – 由于(积极的意义), 多亏了, 幸好
live/lead a + adj. life - 过着…样的生活
in future vs. In the future - 今后 vs. 将来
for easy + adj. 构成系表结构
…also mean…意味着
E. g. Climbing may also mean falling. What's comes up must come down. 爬得高， 摔得很。
couch potato - 不健康的生活方式
keep fit - 保持健康，苗条
It's important to do… 做很重要
…as something very special - 作为很特别的东西.
plenty of + countable nouns/uncountable nouns. 许多
put on weight - 增加体重
effect on - 有作用

***Figure 2*. Language points of 9th grade**

Another high school teacher pointed out the importance of knowing multiple meanings of basic vocabulary words for the College Entrance Examination. In a vocabulary lesson, she reviewed each word and summarized the multiple meanings of those words. Next, she read aloud her notes and asked students to copy down what she said. She then asked students to memorize their notes as homework. Figure 3 provides an example of her teaching three words – *part, pass, and past*. When she was asked in the following interview about why she did not print out her notes to distribute and use the class time for other learning activities, she answered, "No activity is better than to ask them write down something they need to remember. It is the best way to memorize".

PART

1. Noun. 部分. Taiwan is part of China.
2. 部件. Spare parts 多余的部件
3. Role, 角色，重要性. take an important part in life.
4. Verb. 分离. They are parting at the station.

PASS

1. Verb. 穿过，穿行. Pass the street
2. Verb. 路过，经过. Turn right after passing the building.
3. Verb. 通过，递给. Pass the ball to somebody; pass me the water; 6 months have passed; pass the bill.
4. Noun. Fast pass; express pass. 快速通过卡
5. Phrase. Pass away = die; pass something onto somebody 把东西给传下去

PAST

1. Adj. past tense 过去时; in the past few days 在过去的一些日子里。
2. Prep. Walk past the post office; Ten past eleven; 11 点 10 分
   (gain 5 minutes by my watch 快 5 分钟 or lose 5 minutes 慢 5 分钟)

***Figure 3*. Key vocabulary in 12th grade**

In conclusion, teachers who denied using TBLT were mostly concerned with examinations and scores and adhered to a traditional teacher-centered method. Instructional tasks involving pair work or group work were not evident in their teaching. Teachers also used Chinese as the dominant instructional language and devoted the majority of their class time to review and practice for tests. They also made their own decisions about what and how to teach based on the Examination Guide, rather than the textbook or teacher's manual. All of these teachers except one taught at the graduating grades (Grades 6, 9, and 12), in which students need to take high-staking tests in order to enter the next school level. Teachers thus attended to students' achievement on the nation-wide high-stake examinations and focused on helping students achieve high scores on examinations. They took on the role of "examiners" and studied the Examination Guide carefully to ensure that all the testing points in the Guide were clearly explained.

Passive acceptance of TBLT – Teachers as Technicians

Of the 30 participants (33%), ten teachers held a passive attitude toward TBLT, even though they reported that they have implemented this method in their teaching. Four of these teachers were from elementary schools and six from middle schools. Teachers in this category shared three characteristics: they did not give much thought about what TBLT was, they had incomplete understanding about the method, and they implemented TBLT because they were required to do so. One elementary school teacher stated:

> I don't know much about this method, but the Manual has detailed direction about what types of activities I can do, what should I say, how I can help students,

> etc. I just follow this guide. And you know, at this level students do not learn much, following the manual is, what I believe, the most appropriate way.

Another teacher added, "I teach following the manual and textbook regardless of whatever the proposed instructional methods are…some tasks in the textbook are interesting and fun, but some are really not. We go over everything since they are all required." Several other teachers also talked about how to implement TBLT in their classrooms,

> I start to include more activities for students to do in groups or pairs in class rather than just myself presenting.
> I leave more time for students to complete the tasks by themselves in class, such as the exercises on their workbook and listening activities.
> My students are getting better with following directions of doing all these types of activities."

Nonetheless, most teachers in this category understood "task-based" teaching as teaching with activities. They presented different activities and required different participatory structures, such as group work, pair/partner work, and independent work, as suggested by the book. For example, when the 4th grade teacher taught a unit (Unit 10 – *Let's go*), she started the lesson by playing the tape reading out loud the texts. She then asked students questions listed on the manual to assess their comprehension. Finally, she led students through each activity listed in the book, such as *Words to Learn*, and *Talk Together*. *Words to Learn* was a listening activity that required students to match what they heard from the tape to the pictures and words provided in the book. The teacher asked students to complete the activity independently and then check with a partner.

In another activity called "*Talk Together*", the teacher asked students to collaborate in groups of four. Following the given example (below), students were supposed to communicate with group members using the given words (museum, library, park, supermarket) to replace the underlined part in the example.

> Mocky: Let's go to the amusement Park.
> Ken: Do we have enough time?
> Mocky: Yes, we do. It's only three o'clock.
> Ken: Shall we go to a movie?
> Mocky: Do we have enough money?
> Ken: No, we don't. We have only 7 yuan.

At middle school level, when a 9th grade teacher taught the unit *Teenagers should be allowed to choose their own clothes*, she did not provide any other activity than those found in the textbook. She followed the order of the activities, starting with the Agree and Disagree activity (1a), the listening True or False activity (1b), and finally the pair work activity (1c) (Figure 4). Another middle school teacher taught a lesson focusing on reviewing language points. She asked students to read in pairs and assigned each pair a

similar task of underlining key vocabulary words and important sentence structures. Next, she selected three pairs to share what they have underlined. After that, the teacher explained the important vocabulary and expressions based on her prepared list rather than what students picked. Finally, one of her assignments to students was to recite the useful vocabulary and expressions she explained in class.

1a. Read the statements below. Circle "A" for agree or "D" for disagree.

A D 1. Teenagers should be allowed to go out with their friends every night.
A D 2. Sixteen-year-olds should be allowed to drive.
A D 3. Students should not be allow3ed to have part-time jobs.
A D 4. Sixteen-year-olds should be allowed to get their ears pierced.
A D 5. Sixteen-year-olds should be allowed to choose their own clothes.

1b. Listen and circle "T" for true or "F" for false.

T F 1. Anna can go to the mall with John.
T F 2. Anna wants to get her ears pierced.
T F 3. Anna is allowed to choose her own clothes.

1c. Pair work – look at the statements in 1a and make conversations. Use the phrases below.

too wild	not serious enough
too young	not old enough
too silly	not calm enough

Example:
A: I don't think sixteen-year-olds should be allowed to drive.
B: I agree. They aren't serious enough.

***Figure 4*. Language activities of 9th grade students**

To conclude, either teachers in this category were not concerned about the current proposed teaching method or they had very limited knowledge about TBLT. What they mostly cared about was the textbook or the teacher's manual and they ensured that all activities in the book were completed. Their classrooms were full of activities of different kinds and in different participatory structures. They used both Chinese and English as the instructional language, and students were motivated to participate in different learning activities. Based on what they said and did in classrooms, it is reasonable to assume that teachers' responses to TBLT were no different than responses to any other proposed teaching method. They believed that if the textbook was designed to promote the use of TBLT method, then they have done their job. In this sense, they were like "technicians", who did exactly what they were told to do.

Active application of TBLT – Teachers as Explorers

The remaining 15 teachers belonged to this category (50%). Four teachers were from elementary schools, four from middle schools, and seven from high schools. All the teachers held a positive attitude toward TBLT and were eager to learn about this

method. They tried to implement TBLT in their classrooms and demonstrated different instructional foci in terms of task selection and task implementation. They believed that TBLT made learning interesting, meaningful and practical. One elementary teacher said that her class was full of fun. She created many tasks and activities, such as puzzles and guessing games, for her students to complete individually, in pairs, and in groups. She compared her current teaching in an elementary school with her previous teaching in a middle school and stated:

> When I taught 7th grade in the past, teaching English was not much fun. We used different series of textbooks too, and everything was very structured. As a teacher, I asked questions, explained key words, talked about the passage with detailed explanation of grammar rules… Students wrote down the key points, rules, new vocabulary on their notebooks. And then we did lots of dictations, examinations, and required students to recite a lot. Very different from today that students can just learn from playing and experiencing. We do so many activities in class and students are active learners.

A high school teacher also commented on the TBLT method by saying "the activities made learning meaningful, hence, students have learned practical stuff to use in daily life."

A majority of these teachers also indicated that participating in different types of professional learning opportunities equipped them with new knowledge about the proposed teaching method. The teachers reported three different ways for professional development. They could either go back to school to further their education, self-study, or attend The English Corner [1] to improve their oral English skills.

Several teachers chose to expand their knowledge of teaching by going back to a normal university (university focusing on teacher education programs) to either obtain a higher degree or enroll in a non-degree program. They reported two reasons for continuing their education: they did not have education method courses during their undergraduate study or they had insufficient knowledge about teaching English under the proposed TBLT method. One teacher said:

> I was an English major, so I know English well. However, I felt that if I want to be a good teacher, I need to understand more about different teaching methods. And that is why I went back to my university to get a Master degree on English Education.

The other teacher said:

> Compared with how I taught English 10 to 15 years ago, TBLT requires teachers to do a lot more. Teachers need to be able to design different tasks and facilitate the implementation of these tasks. Teachers need to be able to communicate with students in English. All these requirements forced me to keep learning. In this program (the non-degree program) I am enrolled, I met other teachers and we

> exchanged our teaching experiences. We learn from different professors. I am feeling more prepared and ready!

Several other teachers chose to study by themselves and referred to the Internet, education journals, books, and their colleagues for help. One teacher admitted that she was not well-prepared to teach English under the TBLT method, so she read several education methodology books and journals articles to increase her knowledge of this method. Several other teachers explored the Internet to learn about the TBLT. One said:

> I learned from the Internet that teachers should really think about the goal that you want your students to achieve, and then you design a series of activities or tasks helping students to achieve the goal. The biggest difference between TBLT and using different activities maybe is just that TBLT is to use the task to achieve a learning objective.

Another teacher acknowledged the importance of teachers' oral fluency under the new curriculum. She has been participating in public English corners held at a university every week. She said:

> If I require my students to be fluent in speaking, I think I should first set up an example for them. However, at the time that I received education, I did not have much opportunity to practice my oral English. So I do it now. Since last semester, I have been going to the English corner at RenDa (the name of the university) every Saturday to practice my oral English.

Task Selection

While these teachers tried to find ways to expand their knowledge, their classroom teaching also demonstrated different instructional foci in terms of task selection and task implementation. Several teachers focused on the practical aspect of language learning when selecting tasks. When teaching the unit on problem solving in Grade 8, a teacher asked students to think about the real problem they were having instead of using the activities suggested by the textbook. For instance, one student told the class that his biggest problem was managing the different opinions on extra reading he and his parents held. This student loved to read novels (such as Chinese classics and Wuxia Xiaoshuo written by Jin Yong) and he considered reading a good extracurricular activity. However, his parents warned him that he should not read those novels because of the pressure to study. Hence, the conflict with his parents became a big problem and he was in need of advice about how to deal with it. The whole class discussed his problem and suggested that he put more time on his schoolwork, have a conversation with his parents about reading novels, and make a reading schedule. After the observation, the teacher clarified her purpose of conducting the activity:

> I think TBLT suggests that students should learn from conducting meaningful real life tasks. Even though in China, we may not have an authentic language atmosphere, I believe that I can create an atmosphere in classroom for students

> to use the language in real situations. This activity is very practical – we helped him solve the problem and we did it IN ENGLISH.

Another teacher in a high school was concerned if the tasks they used in class could broaden students' knowledge. He believed that English should be a content area subject, similar to math and history, rather than a language skill. Therefore, the purpose of teaching English was to broaden students' knowledge. He considered English as a fun subject to teach because "students can learn things through a different language" and "the language provided a pathway for students to learn many unknown". He regarded teaching and testing pressures as "something you feel if you think about it all the times, but it will be gone if you make your teaching outstanding because students learn so much that meeting those standards is just a piece of cake. "

One unit in the 10th grade textbook includes a reading passage about *Marco Polo and His Travels*. In addition to completing the activities and exercises in the textbook (filling in blanks with key words and comprehension questions), this teacher designed a research project on Marco Polo, and topics included his life, his contributions to Europe and Asia, and books and movies about him. Students were asked to work in groups, write project reports, and share them with their classmates. In the following class, students watched an English movie about Marco Polo. In the post observation interview, the teachers made the remark:

> I truly believe that my lessons were effective. Students have learned a lot of information about Marco Polo – they have to read extensively in order to find the information, they have to use the key words and the key grammar points in writing the report, they practiced their oral English in order to present. You saw it – they did a wonderful job. I think my students' level are beyond those standards.

Several other teachers were concerned about students' different ability levels when determining classroom tasks. They divided students into groups based on students' different ability levels and assigned tasks that had different difficulty levels. For example, in one of the high school teacher's writing class, she divided the class into two groups assigning them different writing tasks: the lower ability group was asked to write an essay on the topic – how can I help to save energy following the text template and using some of the key sentence structures learned in the reading passage; the high ability group was asked to write freely on issues with global warming. Later in the interview, she explained her rationale for grouping students:

> I have to divide them into groups. Some of my top students won't be interested if I ask them to complete the very structured writing task. They have creative minds. On the other hand, my lower ability students won't be able to write freely if they were not provided with certain structures. They need step-by-step guidance… And in this way, I found my students are willing to ask more questions, especially the lower ability group, sometimes they would feel shy asking a basic question in front of those advanced students.

Task Implementation

When implementing classroom tasks, teachers presented different instructional concerns including meeting the expected objectives, promoting students' interest, and applying learning strategies to practice.

For instance, a couple of teachers emphasized "using learning objectives to guide task implementation" during teaching. They praised the current textbook as "a book with specific learning objectives", "goal-oriented material", and provided instruction based on the objectives. A lesson in the 9th grade textbook was about places students like to visit and the learning objectives are to be able to talk about places you would like to visit, use *would* and *hope* for expressing desires, and memorize and use key vocabulary words such as *thrilling, fascinating, peaceful, tiring, educational, take it easy, jungle, trek, touristy, pack, light, heavy, provide, offer*. In order to meet these objectives, a teacher designed a series of tasks. First, students in groups of four were asked to design a role-play activity to discuss a trip they recently took using the key vocabulary words and expressions. Next, group members were asked to collaborate with each other to write a summary/narrative of their role-play. Finally, every other group exchanged their writing and offered feedback and comments to each other.

Teachers at the elementary school level were most concerned about students' interest during task implementation and used multiple resources to facilitate learning. For instance, in a lesson about friends, a 5th grade teacher used the computer to show a movie clip, a tape recorder to help students practice listening and listen to music, picture/word cards for vocabulary learning, and hand puppets to perform a short play (similar to the readers' theatre). She stated that by incorporating all these resources to her lesson, students were always eager to learn English. Another teacher used extrinsic motivation strategies such as offering stickers and stamps in class to increase active participation in class.

Several other teachers were most concerned about students' success in using learning strategies and provided numerous opportunities for students to practice these strategies in and out of class. After reading a passage about *Zheng He and His Seven Voyages*, a teacher asked students to conduct group discussions, which was a comprehension strategy she had just taught. She emphasized the rules for creating effective discussion, including participation from all students, providing reasons rather than simply agreeing or disagreeing, and reading carefully to think deeply to understand the author's inference. Other learning strategies mentioned included using context clues, activating background knowledge, guessing, predicting, and focus reading. The teachers, mostly in the middle and high schools, constantly reminded students to apply these different learning strategies when they read by themselves, with a peer and in a group. Furthermore, a couple of the teachers also modeled how students could use the learning strategies. For instance, a middle school teacher demonstrated how she predicted from the showed students how she chose a reading text that was easy to understand by activating her background knowledge.

In conclusion, teachers in this category were most positive about TBLT and have demonstrated their willingness to learn TBLT in English instruction by continuing their education at a university self-studying, and attending public English corners. They actively implemented TBLT in their classrooms, and their teaching has demonstrated different instructional foci. When selecting appropriate tasks for classroom instruction, the teachers were concerned with the practicability of language learning, and whether the task can broaden students' knowledge, and students' different ability levels. When implementing the tasks, the teachers were most concerned about meeting the expected learning objectives, promoting students' interest, and applying learning strategies to practice. Teachers in this group were explorers, learning about this proposed teaching methodology by themselves and implementing it based on their understanding and beliefs about TBLT. Figure 5 summarized the characteristics of teachers in this group.

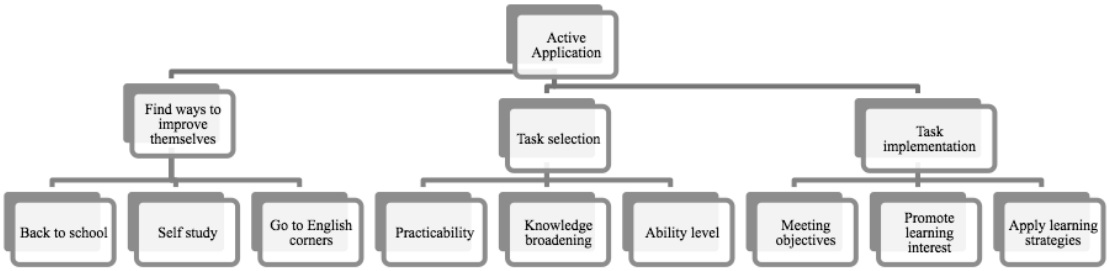

***Figure 5*. Characteristics of the teacher as explorer group**

Discussion and Conclusion

In contrast to previous studies that focused on individual cases (Chen, 2008; Deng & Carless, 2010; Zheng, 2008), this study investigated how 30 English teachers from six public schools at different levels in Beijing, China responded to the proposed TBLT method. Their different responses have been grouped into three categories. A small portion of the teachers (5 out of 30, 17%) were examiners, who were only concerned about students' achievement on examinations and remaining faithful to the traditional teaching methods that they were used to. One third of the teachers (10 out of 30, 33%) were technicians who taught scripted lessons based on the textbooks and manuals regardless of the proposed teaching methods. Half of the teachers (15 out of 30, 50%) were explorers, who selected appropriate tasks and finding ways to implement TBLT in their classrooms.

We can conclude that teachers in the first two categories were doubtful of the effectiveness of this proposed TBLT in English classrooms in China, similar to the implementation of TBLT in many other countries such as Greece (Karavas-Doukas, 1995), Korea (Li, 1998), and Japan (Gorsuch, 2001). Therefore, teachers in the first category taught to examinations and teachers in the second category provided scripted instruction based on teacher's manuals. This finding has also been supported by prior research targeting English classrooms in China. Hu (2004) reported that pedagogical

practices in many Chinese classrooms have not changed fundamentally regardless of the top-down promotion of the proposed teaching method. Deng and Carless (2010) explained how examination preparation has become some teachers' major concern in terms of pedagogic innovation. Hu (2005) and Rao (1996) also pointed out that some teachers' resistance toward the proposed teaching method might be due to the fact that the activity-based, student-centered learning challenged Chinese traditional belief about learning.

While these teachers were cautious about implementing TBLT in their classrooms, another half of the teachers in this study were passionate explorers who found ways to implement this proposed language teaching method in their classrooms. These teachers tried to equip themselves with new knowledge about TBLT, carefully selected and designed classroom tasks, and implemented TBLT with different instructional foci. This finding demonstrated the success of curriculum development and the improvement achieved by these teachers in Beijing, China, and suggested a different perspective on the traditional Chinese teaching model. While implementing this government-initiated TBLT method, these teachers strove to learn about this promoted teaching method and adapt their teaching to provide effective instruction accordingly.

Furthermore, a closer investigation of task selection and implementation among the teachers in the 3rd category revealed the application of weak forms of TBLT in these classrooms. While the teachers used different kinds of tasks in created situations to promote students' communicative ability, traditional ways of teaching were also prevalent in their instruction. Similar to Zheng and Adamson (2003) and Carless (2007)'s findings, it is reasonable to conclude that the weak form of TBLT was more appropriate and practical to implement for English teachers in China. Ellis (2003) argued that the weak form of TBLT was actually the task-supported teaching and Carless (2007) addressed the need for adaptation to provide a "situated version of task-based teaching" in foreign language classrooms in China.

In addition, findings also suggest that teachers understood the notion of 'task' differently. Some teachers saw a task as including goal-orientated activities or self-created games, while others viewed it as the exercises listed on the textbook and the teacher's manual. Some teachers understood it as activities that served the real life purposes. In regard to what 'task' really meant by TBLT, the 2001 NECS failed to provide a definition. Previous literature has offered a couple definitions of the term 'task', but Nunan (2005) also stressed the importance of language context when defining it:

> [T]asks could include, completing a grammar bingo game after a contrastive analysis, grammar-translation based presentation (para. 14)… Tasks can be also fun and highly student centered when borrowing on effective games and other such activities though task is not a substitute word for games. (para. 8)

Therefore, the TBLT method does not deny that

> In some Asian classes – or anywhere in the world for that matter- that certain traditional approaches need to have their day. Rather it is especially supportive of an integrated approach, or even where the needs of the learner may be solely communicative. (Nunan, 2005, para. 14)

Nunan's (2005) argument applies to the context of this study. In fact, this group of teachers constructed their understandings of the TBLT method and implemented it based on what they believed as most important. Therefore, curriculum development agencies need to better support teachers with TBLT knowledge in order to ensure the successful implementation of this proposed method in classrooms. Littlewood (2007) provides a useful five-category framework that would allow teachers to develop instruction from the most form-focused, non-communicative teaching to finally the most meaning-oriented, authentic communicative teaching.

It is worth mentioning that this study does not aim to uncover the differences among teachers at different school level in terms of their responses toward TBLT. Rather, the study focuses on all teachers as a whole and aims to provide a macro picture of the teachers in public schools across different levels. This could be one of the limitations of the study, but it suggested a need for future research to compare teachers' understanding and implementation of TBLT across different school levels.

As a final point, scholars who believed the limited applicability of TBLT for foreign language classrooms at the most basic school levels (Bruton, 2005; Swan, 2005) and those who suggested that TBLT challenged the Confucian heritage school context (Carless, 2004; Li, 1998), this paper provided empirical evidence to suggest the possibility of implementing TBLT in foreign language classrooms across different school levels in Beijing, China. Implications of this study include recommendations for curriculum designers, teacher preparation institutions, and educators who create policies for English instruction.

Note

[1] The English Corner refers to a specific location within the Renmin University campus in Beijing China. Students and citizens gather there every Friday evening to practice oral English skills. The place is open to public.

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