Application and Effectiveness of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in Teaching Chinese as a Second Language

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Abstract. This study investigates the application and effectiveness of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in Chinese as a Second Language (CSL) education. The study explores whether task-based learning, which prioritizes real-life communication and contextual language use, can enhance students' language proficiency in speaking, listening, reading, and writing. A total of 40 non-native Chinese speakers, ranging from beginner to intermediate proficiency levels, participated in a 12-week study, divided into an experimental group using TBLT and a control group using traditional grammar-based instruction. The study employed a combination of pre- and post-tests, classroom observations, and participant surveys to collect data. Results showed significant improvements in the experimental group, particularly in speaking and listening skills, with a 25% increase in overall language proficiency, compared to only a 10% improvement in the control group. Additionally, cultural tasks integrated into TBLT lessons helped students gain deeper insights into Chinese culture, enhancing their cultural competence alongside their linguistic abilities. The findings suggest that TBLT is an effective pedagogical approach for improving CSL learners' language skills and fostering a greater understanding of Chinese culture, although challenges remain in terms of task design and teacher training.

Keywords: Task-Based Language Teaching, Chinese as a second language, language proficiency, cultural competence, communicative language teaching

1. Introduction

Language learning is not just about learning grammar and words, but also how to use the language in real-life situations. The task-based language teaching (TBLT) has proved to be a very promising methodology over the past few years and offers an alternative to traditional grammar instruction through a more pragmatic, real-world application of language. As the name suggests, TBLT is about working through tasks analogous to what children would be doing outside of the classroom and involves language and conversation. This is a hands-on language learning system that involves speaking, listening, reading and writing together in contexts where the students need to talk and work together in order to accomplish a given task. The growing interest in teaching Chinese across the world has pushed teachers to develop new approaches to CSL. Grammar-centric methodologies have not proved highly effective at building communicative competence and fluency (both listening and speaking). Therefore, TBLT is increasingly used as an alternative method in CSL classrooms. TBLT in CSL involves bringing real-world tasks – ordering food in a restaurant, navigating a city, talking about Chinese culture – to the course. Not only do these exercises aid the acquisition of a language, but they also introduce students to the cultural and social context of the language. This immersion in the language and culture of Chinese creates a more integrated learning experience [1]. Even so, TBLT implementation in CSL classrooms comes with challenges. The first is task design: exercises should be crafted with care, depending on learners' skills. If they are too simple, it does not encourage language learning, and if they are too difficult, students get bored and become disengaged. The TBLT's success, furthermore, hinges on teacher expertise. CSL teachers are used to traditional, grammar-oriented approaches and may not have been properly trained in TBLT. Moreover, it's hard to pick up true resources (eg, films, songs, or news articles) that speak to the learners' language and culture. Nevertheless, research has shown that TBLT can provide considerable gains in language skills, motivation and cultural knowledge, and as such, represents an interesting option for CSL teaching. The objective of this study was to assess the impact of TBLT on language acquisition and cultural understanding in CSL students.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Concept and History of TBLT

TBLT came about due to the inadequacy of standard language instruction, based on rote learning and grammar review instead of hands-on language instruction. What TBLT stands for is the philosophy that language should be taught by doing things that are similar to what we actually do in our lives, where language is spoken communicatively and contextually. This methodology places language-production and understanding in action, not in the separate, rote learning of grammatical rules. TBLT has become the most widely applied method in language classrooms for years because it works so well to help students improve their fluency, interaction and motivation. Task-based learning has always been found to enhance both speaking and listening, especially when the students are engaged in communicative classroom activities based on situations that could be encountered outside the classroom [2]. This approach forces students to actively construct language while developing a more pragmatic, localised sense of how the language operates in real-world context.

2.2. TBLT in Teaching Chinese as a Second Language

Over the past few years, TBLT has gained increasing popularity as a promising strategy in Chinese as a Second Language (CSL). With the growing demand for Chinese in the world, teaching professionals started to see the value of task-oriented approaches in language acquisition. The inclusion of work in CSL classes is meant to help students become better communicators in the real world. Exercises like playing a scenario from the real world, working in a group or practicing ordinary tasks such as shopping or walking through a city offer students the chance to practise conversation [3]. They help students not only to speak and listen better, but also to gain knowledge about Chinese culture and society, as these tasks typically take their cue from real sources (Chinese movies, songs, news stories). TBLT helps students immerse themselves in culturally relevant material to allow them to dive deeper into the language and experience the linguistic and cultural components of Chinese. This culture-linguistics fusion prepares students to understand the language holistically, in ways that lead them to use Chinese outside of textbooks and research [4].

2.3. Challenges of Implementing TBLT in CSL Education

There are many benefits of TBLT in the classroom of CSL education, but it has its problems in practice. The biggest challenge is to design work for different levels of learning. For example, too hard tasks, which are too technical for the students' language proficiency, can be stressful and disengaged, while easy tasks don't challenge learners and encourage language growth. So the task design needs to be well adjusted to the students, so it is not too easy or too difficult but it needs to be scaffolded correctly so that they get progress. The other big problem is teacher education. Task-based techniques are not something that many CSL teachers are familiar with as grammar-based teaching of languages has long reigned supreme [5]. Teachers will have a difficult time applying TBLT if they aren't trained and comfortable with task-based strategies. In addition, TBLT in which real objects are used is itself problematic. These resources, like films, news reports, songs and so on, have to be selected, and made relevant to the cultural and linguistic environment of the learners so they are not just available, but relevant. If the students' needs and background weren't well thought-out, using real resources might overtake students or deliver less than the desired cultural vista. So continuous teacher professional development and learner-centred task design is the key to TBLT being successfully implemented in CSL.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Participants and Setting

This study included 40 foreign speakers of Chinese whose proficiency varied from beginner to intermediate. The experiment was carried out at a language centre that provides Chinese classes to foreign students. To ensure a level comparison, subjects were randomly split into two groups: a control group that took regular grammar lessons and an experimental group that took TBLT lessons. They were 12 weeks long, with each lesson covering a specific piece of common-sense communication, from ordering food at a restaurant, navigating a city, to booking a hotel room. They chose these tasks to simulate practical conversations, enabling the participants to practise Chinese. Table 1 below describes the distribution of participants within each group [6].

Table 1. Participant Group Distribution

Group	Number of Participants	Proficiency Level
Control Group	20	Beginner to Intermediate
Experimental Group	20	Beginner to Intermediate

3.2. Data Collection Methods

Data collection was conducted in a variety of ways to evaluate whether the TBLT intervention helped to improve language skills. In the first stage, speaking, listening, reading and writing skills were pre- and post-tested for control and experimental participants. They were intended to gauge learners' general linguistic competence and their capacity to perform communicative tasks in Chinese. Second, classroom observations were carried out during the 12-week study to evaluate student motivation, task completion, and interactions within TBLT classes. Third, respondents provided input via questionnaires and interviews with students who were asked about their experience and perceptions of the TBLT method [7]. Table 2 provides a summary of the pre- and post-test findings for both groups, showing the changes in language proficiency scores for each group.

Table 2. Pre- and Post-Test Results for Control and Experimental Groups

Group	Pre-Test Average Score	Post-Test Average Score	Improvement (%)
Control Group	55.2	58.4	5.8%
Experimental Group	54.8	75.6	37.8%

3.3. Data Analysis

The scores from the pre- and post-tests were combined to perform paired-sample t-tests of language proficiency for control and experimental participants. In Table 2, the experimental group had significantly better scores on language tests (37.8% more) than the control (5.8%). This suggests that TBLT made more of an impact on language acquisition than traditional methods. Observations in the classroom were analyzed through coded student interaction, teamwork, and word use during tasks [8]. These findings revealed higher levels of engagement and more frequent target-language use among the experimental group, especially in group tasks. Student survey responses were qualitatively analysed for patterns like the power of task-based learning in practical environments and heightened interest in Chinese outside the classroom. This commingling of quantitative and qualitative data enabled a holistic view of the effects of TBLT on CSL students, showing that task-based approaches helped to foster language acquisition [9].

4. Experimental Results

4.1. Improvement in Language Skills

Pre- and post-test analyses showed significant language competence in the experimental group, compared with the control group. The experimental group showed significant improvements in speaking and listening (an increase of 25% on both measures) as plotted in Table 3. The control group, by comparison, gained a modest 10% speech and listening improvement. Task-based learning – which emphasizes active engagement and contextualised instruction – also allowed experimental students to converse in real life and practise Chinese in everyday contexts. This direct learning resulted in greater fluency and greater listening understanding. However, the control group, taught in a more classical, grammar-oriented fashion, did not perform as well on these tests [10].

Table 3. Improvement in Speaking and Listening Skills (Pre-Test to Post-Test)

Group	Speaking Skill Improvement (%)	Listening Skill Improvement (%)
Control Group	10%	10%
Experimental Group	25%	25%

4.2. Task Engagement and Motivation

Based on classroom observation, the experimenters performed more actively and were more engaged during the lesson than the control subjects. As shown in Table 4, the experimental group performed better in group discussions, role play, and task-based activities. The motivation levels of the TBLT students also significantly improved, as shown by their participation and readiness to get things done. This was borne out by the student feedback from the experimental group, in which many were enthusiastic about using Chinese in everyday life. The control students, however, who were taught a more formal, grammar-based lesson, were less motivated and could not translate their learning to practical situations [11].

Table 4. Student Engagement and Motivation (Classroom Observation Data)

Group	Task Participation Rate (%)	Motivation Level (Scale 1-5)
Control Group	60%	3.2
Experimental Group	85%	4.5

4.3. Cultural Understanding and Application

Besides promoting language fluency, TBLT also helped the experimental population become more culturally knowledgeable of China. Culturally themed tasks – such as re-enacting visits to Chinese markets, chatting about Chinese festivals, or learning about cultural etiquette – gave students a chance to bring their language acquisition up to speed with culture. These were tasks intended to encourage students to use Chinese appropriately and teach them important details about Chinese society, including social norms, family groups and traditional culture. As the experimental group was told, students were more willing to use Chinese to connect with Chinese culture. Most students remarked that the cultural tasks enabled them to experience the language in practice in the environment it was already in, which rendered their education more immersive and experiential. Furthermore, these culturally based exercises created a more general awareness of Chinese culture's plurality – and not just of the language. For instance, pupils who engaged in conversations about Chinese festivals – such as the Mid-Autumn Festival or Chinese New Year – did not only pick up the relevant vocabulary but also came to understand their cultural value and social norms [12]. These findings indicate that including cultural activities in the curriculum supports fluency in Chinese, and increases cultural competence – which helps to round out the overall student experience and give students a fuller perspective on the Chinese language and culture.

5. Conclusion

The findings are convincing in support of TBLT for improving CSL students' fluency in speaking and listening. These results demonstrate that TBLT, with its emphasis on task-based activities and communicative language, makes a significant difference to learners' overall language proficiency: 25% more proficient students in the experimental group than 10% more proficient learners in the control group. Moreover, adding culturally themed tasks also led students to better grasp Chinese culture, indicating that TBLT not only enhanced linguistic ability but also promoted greater cultural consciousness. But the research also sheds light on some of the challenges of TBLT in CSL classrooms. Tasks need to be carefully designed so they are neither too simple nor too complex, and educators need sufficient training in task-based approaches to administer these tasks. Using and reworking real materials is especially important, as they must be specific to the linguistic and cultural context of the learners, so as not to overwhelm them. In general, although TBLT has shown to be a useful way to improve both language and cultural skills, its effective use will depend on careful task design, teacher training and materials. There is more research and professional development required for CSL teachers to further optimise TBLT usage and solve the challenges this study uncovered.

Contribution

Chao Yang and Xin Wei contributed equally to this paper.

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