

Enhancing Chinese EFL Learners' Participation in Task-based Language Teaching: A Design-Based Research

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Abstract—This design-based research study implemented and revised TBLT practices to enhance Chinese EFL learners' task participation. One hundred and twenty two students at a Chinese university participated in this six-week study. Ten students were selected as the focus participants. Qualitative data collected from interviews, guided journals, class observation and students' sample work disclosed the mismatches between Chinese sociocultural context and TBLT rationales in terms of learners' participation. The Chinese teacher-centered and textbook-directed teaching style, the big class size of English classes in Chinese universities, and the traditional teaching method which integrated English and Chinese together, impeded students' task participation in TBLT. The TBLT practices were redesigned in which students were encouraged to provide corrective feedback to each other, to participate under the clear division of responsibilities and to actively employ LREs to avoid L1 usage, and the teacher participated in students' task performance as a facilitator by giving some useful feedback. The revised TBLT generated learners' active and efficient participation, attention to tasks and reduction of their L1 usage. The present study develops a practical guideline about how to apply a western-based teaching method in the Chinese context effectively. In terms of students, this study offers insight into what they can do to better perform learning tasks so as to improve their English competence.

Index Terms—TBLT, learners' task participation, Chinese sociocultural context, design-based research.

I. INTRODUCTION

The field of second language acquisition research has witnessed increasing interest in task-based language teaching (TBLT) [1]-[4]. TBLT appears to be an ideal pedagogical tool in language teaching and learning, in which students were asked to learn language by working on some communicative tasks [5]. TBLT thus refers to a type of language teaching approach which takes pedagogic tasks as the carrier, and emphasizes "purposeful and functional language use" [6]. Learners improve their language proficiency by participating in some "goal-oriented and meaning-centered" tasks [5].

Nunan claims learners will comprehend, manipulate, produce or interact in the target language [7]. Advocating this idea, Willis proposed a sequence of this teaching methodology, including pre-task, task cycle and language focus [8]. In the first pre-task stage, language learners should be explained and motivated to perform the task and then be exposed to comprehensible language input. Learners can comprehend the goals, the strategies and the procedures

of the task performance. When it comes to the second phase, task cycle, learners are asked to perform the task by individuals or in groups. Language learners can either utilize their own language strategies to handle the problems or depend on the interaction with their peers or teachers to complete the task. Learners can be expected to deliver their oral output in front of the class in a presentation as a demonstration of their task performance, which can be regarded as a credible and effective procedure to measure learners' improvement in their language proficiency. The final phase, namely the language focus, learners' performance can be assessed via teacher's feedback. Teachers' feedback to address learners' uncertainties and to help them correct certain errors in their language use can be typical and efficient ways in this phase.

In China's higher education, enthusiasm for TBLT in English teaching has also been flourishing, which is verified by a new English language curriculum popularizing the usage of TBLT at a higher vocational education level introduced by the Ministry of Education in People's Republic of China in 2000. In addition, more conferences and workshops on TBLT in the context of English learning have been offered.

When TBLT is applied in China, however, the local sociocultural context can influence the implementation of TBLT. EFL teaching in China is characterized as "teacher-centered, text-book directed and memorization-based" [9]. This teaching culture is incompatible with the western-based TBLT [10], which emphasizes the students' participation [2], the authentic language use [8] and the communicative interaction [7]. Therefore, there should not be an assumption that TBLT would work in the Chinese context as well as it does in western classrooms. Many previous studies have indeed investigated the mismatches between the sociocultural context in China and the rationales of TBLT [11]-[17], among which the problems arising in Chinese learners' participation was chosen as the theme of the present study.

Previous research have investigated some problems in Chinese learners' participation into TBLT. Initially, EFL teachers who apply TBLT are frequently challenged with a relatively noisy classroom situation [9]. Students tend to have off-task discussions or even quarrels in their classes, leaving teachers with the difficulty to keep the class disciplined [18]. Secondly, some EFL learners in China complain that their peer performers' poor pronunciation and limited content in their interaction demotivate their participation in the task performance [15], thus the majority of students just sit there, observing others and idling their time. Thirdly, even the students dedicated to the task did not actually attempt to exploit their full linguistic resources but complete the tasks by using their L1 [19].

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The existence of these problems potentially hinders the implementation of TBLT in Chinese classrooms. When a teaching method is adopted in other socio-cultural context, some aspects may be “culturally inappropriate” [20], the mismatches between the local context and the teaching method may consequently generated students’ failure in learning. Therefore, finding reasons and solutions to enable TBLT implementers to enhance Chinese learners’ active participation into TBLT is urgently needed. Given this need, the study presented in the paper aimed to research the following two questions:

(1) What sociocultural factors in Chinese universities impact Chinese EFL learners’ participation into TBLT?

(2) How can TBLT practices be adjusted to be culturally appropriate in English classes of Chinese universities to enhance Chinese EFL learners’ participation?

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Design-Based Research

To develop culturally appropriate practices of TBLT in Chinese classes to enhance Chinese learners’ participation, this study utilized design-based research as the main methodology. This methodology is designed by and for educators that seek to increase the impact, transfer and translation of education research into improved practice [21]. Štemberger and Cencič argue that design-based research can contribute to the improvement of practice through its numerous refinements of innovations in the educational field and with data on the efficiency of these introductions in various learning environments [22]. They also suggest the fundamental process of a design-based research, namely, analysis of problems from practice, development of innovation for solving problems in lessons, iterative cycles of testing and refining innovations in lessons and finally, reflections on a theoretical productions of innovations and its implementation into lessons [22].

The study aimed to explore how TBLT approach could be applied in English classes of Chinese universities in a culturally and institutionally appropriate manner to enhance Chinese learners’ participation. For this purpose, the research was driven by the cyclical process of design-based study including Cycle 1, Cycle 2 and Cycle 3, in which TBLT was introduced to EFL classes of Chinese universities and revised. In Cycle 1, the revised TBLT practices based on the literature review were first implemented in classes. Then, based on participants’ feedback about the problems of their participation, TBLT was further revised in Cycle 2 and Cycle 3 in which the mismatches between Chinese sociocultural context and TBLT rationales were resolved. The following Figure 1 illustrates the specific procedures in this design-based research.

From the perspective of design-based research, the more cycles researcher can implement, with more problems explored and addressed, the process would be more refined and the better pedagogical practices would be produced. It is thus difficult to know when (or if ever) the design-based research is perfectly completed. So researchers have discussed how many cycles are sufficient to produce valid and significant outcomes [21], [22]. Traditionally, literature

suggests that the research validity can only be guaranteed if numerous iterations are executed [22]-[25], but the design-based research should not be restrained into long-term projects [22]. Only if the three core stages, namely investigation, design and evaluation [26], are completed, a design-based research could generate valid outcomes. The three iterative cycles in this study demonstrated as above concur with these three core stages, thus guarantee the research validity.

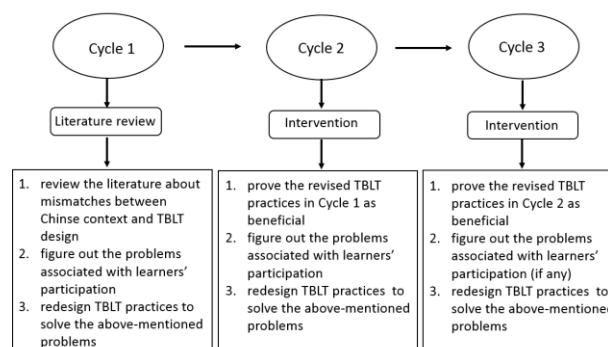


Fig. 1. Three cycles in this design-based research.

B. Participants

The research was conducted in EFL classes in one university located in the eastern part of China. The university was where the researcher had been working for several years, so its syllabus and teaching context were familiar to the researcher. A total of 122 undergraduate students from two classes (one class had 61) were chosen as the participants. They were from different regions of the country, and in their College Entrance Examination, they had different scores of English, showing that they were diverse in their social and cultural backgrounds and proficiency levels of English. In this six-week study, they were required to participate into TBLT practices to complete some pedagogic tasks. Ten students in total (five from each class) were invited from volunteers to be focused participants of the study. They were selected based on the recommendation of their teachers, the criterion to represent diversities (from different cultural backgrounds and of different language proficiency levels) and their consent to participate.

III. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The study employed a variety of qualitative data collection methods, including interviews, guided journal of students, class observation and students’ sample work. During the three iterative cycles, the researcher tried to capture the key results from the former cycle, by listening to interview audiotapes and reading through all journals and students’ work. These key results aimed to help the researcher determine how to design the intervention in the following cycle. Since the main aim of the study was to explore the Chinese sociocultural factors influencing Chinese learners’ participation into TBLT and to revise culturally appropriate TBLT practices to enhance their participation, students’ perceptions of their challenges and achievements in terms of their participation were transcribed

and coded. The data collection and analysis procedures are explained as follows.

A. Interview

Interviews were done with the ten focused students after each cycle was completed. This method was intended as a tool to explore students' perceived problems in their participation in TBLT. In this study, all interviews were audiotaped. Some sample interview questions are: "What do you think is the most difficult when you are required to participate into the tasks? Compared with being taught by the teacher, do you think you gain more English knowledge from participation in TBLT?" The following example exhibits how data were analyzed of the interview answers.

Example 1. Interview answer (after Cycle 1)

Researcher: What problems did you meet in your task performance?

Student: In the task performance stage, some group members always didn't engage much or contribute much. I think for them, participation into the task is *a waste of time*. I guess it's a common idea among most of us that *without the teacher's instruction, our participation into some English tasks cannot give us chances for development*.

From the transcripts of this student's answer, her preference to teacher's presentation and explanation was evidently shown. This could be observed as a problem of TBLT to enhance learners' participation in China, since the Chinese students were long used to the teacher-cantered teaching method, they felt "a waste of time" when participating into tasks.

B. Students' Guided Journal

In addition to interviews, the ten focus student participants in the two classes were also invited to write weekly guided journals throughout the three cycles based on the prompts. The prompts are intended to guide the student participants to reflect on their participation into TBLT. The scanned copies of the students' journals were collected at the end of each week. The questions in the guided journals required the students to provide detailed description on their participation into TBLT, such as "Give specific and detailed example for the greatest challenge you met in your participation in the task today." or "What types of help do you need the teacher to provide in the future to facilitate your task participation?"

Example 2. Guided journal answer (after Cycle 2)

Guided journal question: What types of help do you need the teacher to provide in the future to facilitate your task participation? Please illustrate detailed examples.

Student's answer: One problem for me is that I cannot choose the proper or correct words to express what I want to mean, so *I need to express in Chinese to proceed the communication between my partner and me*. So I hope you can give us more language input which will be used in the tasks.

In the students' guided journal answer above, one problem could be concluded that frequent L1 use could discourage learners' participation into tasks, teacher's

instruction thus was demanded to facilitate their participation.

C. Class Observation

The researcher simultaneously acted as the teacher in three cycles of this study. During students' task performance, the researcher observed their language use, their interaction with each other and their negotiation of meanings. Guided by the two proposed questions in this study, in the class observation during the three cycles, the researcher focused on the sociocultural factors impeding students' task participation and the effectiveness of the revised TBLT.

Example 3. Class observation (in Cycle 2)

When two students were performing the task in Cycle 2, a dialogue showing their interaction was observed by the researcher.

A: This park is located at the foot of a hill. With a hill is in front, the scenery here is quite beautiful.

B: *The sentence "with a hill is in front" is not right.*

A: "With a hill is in front"?

B: Yes, this one.

A: I mean, the park is at the foot of the hill, so the hill is in front of the park.

B: That's right, I understand your meaning. *I mean, the grammar is not right.*

A: Err, let me see... *Oh, "with a hill in front", no "is".*

B: Right, sounds great.

In the turns of interaction like this, student A effectively provided corrective feedback to student B in their task participation. With the meaningful communication, they both acquired the grammatical knowledge and were motivated to participate.

D. Sample Work

Students' sample work when participating into varied tasks were also gathered to tap into the students' practices and processes of improving their English learning in TBLT. The sample work were in the forms of translation, oral presentation or writing composition. All the sample work were collected according to the specific task performance, either after or before each class, either done by an individual student or a group of students.

Example 4. Sample work (after Cycle 3)

With a laptop or even a smart phone at your hand, you can be easily connected with the online shops to pick what you need.

Students were required to perform collaborative writing introducing advantages of online shopping. In their sample work, students successfully applied absolute construction which was previously emphasized and explained in the pre-task stage by the teacher.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Cycle 1: Sociocultural Factors Impeding Chinese Learners' Participation into TBLT

1) Traditional teaching method

In the first cycle of design-based research, the majority of

focused participants (eight in ten) showed lack of passion on participation into the tasks, shown in their interview answers and guided journals.

A: I think *it's a waste of time when we learn English with our classmates*. Compared with speaking English with my peers, *I prefer to read the textbook* explaining the grammatical structures, and the most useful method for me maybe *teacher's presentation and explanation*.

B: *Most of us cannot give each other beneficial help in learning English*, especially in some new and advanced expressions.

Chinese learners' perceived waste of time of participation into task performance can be attributed to their reliance to the traditional teaching method in China. They are familiar with teacher-centered and textbook-directed teaching style, and thus are unwilling to participate into the task performance. They prefer to read the textbook by themselves or to learn under teacher's instruction, whereas regard participation into tasks as a waste of time. They lack the experience of interaction between teacher and students, even among students. When asked to communicate with other peers, and to learn together with others, Chinese students can feel timid to express their ideas, or even find difficulties in promoting the interaction. This disjunction between Chinese traditional teaching and TBTL rationale thus demand intervention to revise TBLT practices to enhance Chinese learners' participation.

2) Big class size

Besides learners' insufficient participation, another major problem emerging in this cycle was their off-task discussion. The class observation revealed this problem, which was further proved by learners' interview answers as follows.

Some team members just chatted during our task performance. *In a class with so many students*, I think it's better to quit our participation to practice English, whereas just focus on the explanation and memorization.

It is a widespread problem around China, where the regular class size for the English classes in universities is over 50 students, even around 100. This institutional reality impedes the effective implementation of TBLT practices, which encourage and even require EFL learners' full participation to develop their communicative competence. Initially, not all learners in such a big-size class can gain opportunities to fully participate into the tasks. Besides, considering that there are many peers in one group, some learners would be demotivated to idle their time chatting or observing their peers' participation.

B. Cycle 1: Revised TBLT Practices to Enhance Chinese Learners' Participation into TBLT

1) Training of learners' corrective feedback

Considering that some students perceived there was a waste of time during their participation into TBLT, the researcher trained students how to contribute useful feedback to each other, by teaching them to provide correct feedback, which was defined as "indication to the student

that their use of the target structure is incorrect" [27]. After half of the task performance, the researcher suspended students' continuous discussion, and trained them how to provide corrective feedback. Students were then encouraged to give inductive feedback to each other. This could hopefully improve students' mutual help and contribution in their participation into the group-based task performance.

2) Clear division of responsibility

In addition, to make TBLT practices work in such a large-size class, some revisions of the original TBLT practices were made in terms of learners' group organization in their participation. Learners were assigned into groups in which everyone had a clear division of responsibility, such as team leader to dominate the group participation, the recorder to keep notes for the discussion outcome, and the "language supporter" to look up expressions in the dictionary, etc. This instruction was designed to motivate learners' participation and contribution, which could adapt the sociocultural context in Chinese universities.

C. Cycle 2: Benefits of Revised TBLT

After the adjustment of TBLT in Cycle 2, students' interview answers, guided journal answers, class observation of their task participation and their sample work disclosed evident improvement both in the quantity and quality of their task participation.

1) Learners' active and efficient participation

After training the students in giving and receiving corrective feedback, they were encouraged to participate in group work with more efficiency and motivation. According to the interview answers and guided journal answers, all the ten focused participants expressed their shift of attitudes toward participation into tasks.

A: I can learn more from my peer classmates in our task participation. Unlike the interaction between us and the teacher, *we were more active and brave when communicating with our peers*.

B: *My group members gave me many useful help*. Our teacher couldn't give feedback to every group, so my partners helped me more in today's task.

In addition, the class observation also provided hard evidence to confirm that learners' corrective feedback enhanced their participation into tasks. Example 3 illustrated in last section showed that Learner A was offering corrective feedback to Learner B, which enhanced both learners' participation as well as facilitated their acquisition of language knowledge.

2) Learners' attention to tasks

After demanding the clear division of responsibilities of learners in their task participation, learners were encouraged or even forced to undertake their respectively and clearly explicated responsibilities, which guaranteed their attention to tasks, and thus considerably reduced their off-task discussion and enhanced their task participation. The following interaction turns illustrated such an enhancement, where learner A participated as the leader who directed their interaction, whereas learner B and C provided meaningful

feedback respectively.

A: I guess **now we should pay attention to** demonstration for our second reason (why one city is more suitable to travel than another).

B: Yes, I think **the location and transportation can be another consideration**.

C: Well, since we've talked about the tourist attractions, I think **culture and cuisines should be another attractive point** as the second reason.

D. Cycle 2: Sociocultural Factors Impeding Chinese Learners' Participation into Revised TBLT

1) Traditional teaching method integrating English and L1

After implementing the revised TBLT practices in Cycle 2, the major disjunctions explored in Cycle 1 between the sociocultural context in Chinese EFL classes and the TBLT rationales have been solved, all the ten focused participants expressed their willingness and effectiveness of participation into the tasks. One remaining problem, however, still aroused the researcher's attention. In their participation, however, the frequent and unavoidable L1 use to promote their task performance demotivated their participation into tasks.

I think it's useful and helpful to use English to communicate with my partners in the task today, but sometimes I'm not sure about how to express in English what I want to express. In our previous classes, we're quite used to listening to **the teacher's explanation, which mix English and Chinese together. Most English expressions are translated into Chinese** to help us understand. So when using English to participate into tasks, **I find it difficult to avoid the influence of Chinese**.

Chinese learners' frequent usage of L1 in their participation into tasks can also be attributed to their reliance to the traditional teaching method in China. They are familiar with the integration of English and Chinese applied in their teacher's language instruction to facilitate their understanding of the target language. Gradually, some learners develop the cognitive procedures of communicating in English, in which their intended meaning is initially formed in Chinese, and then is translated into English. In their task participation, therefore, they tend to continue this traditional cognitive procedures of communication, which prevents them to produce English expressions without rethinking them in Chinese.

E. Cycle 2: Revised TBLT Practices to Enhance Chinese Learners' Participation into TBLT

The only problem remained in Cycle 2 was Chinese learners' unavoidable usage of L1 in their task participation, two interventions were thus conducted in Cycle 3 to address this mismatch.

1) Teacher's participation into tasks

Regarding students' uncertainty about some English expressions in their task participation, in Cycle 3, the researcher participated in students' task performance as a facilitator and a partner. Instead of directly guiding the

students' performance as in the traditional teaching method, teacher gave students feedbacks to stimulate their attention to English expressions. With the help of teacher's feedback, students could receive the information on the correctness of the target language instead of being directly instructed to how to express. This ensured the students' active analysis of the language knowledge, which would surely promote their language proficiency. One example is shown here.

Student: I guess our analysis on benefits of public transportation is useful, followed another resolution of, er, building of the roads.

Researcher: **You mean government's plan for the construction of roads?**

Student: **Yes, "plan", road planning.**

2) Training of employment of LREs

As termed by Swain and Lapkin, LREs refer to any part of a conversation where learners draw attention to L2 form-meaning connections by talking about, questioning, or correcting their language use [28]. A multitude of previous studies have confirmed the significance of LREs in language learning. Specifically, LREs indicate learners' language learning in process [29]-[32]. LREs were therefore chosen as the unit of training in the current Cycle 3 to enhance learners' participation by reducing their potential usage of L1.

In the process of training, the researcher instructed learners about both the lexical LRE and grammatical LRE by providing them some examples, learners were taught to talk about their own language usage in terms of lexical and grammatical accuracy in their task participation.

Lexical LRE

Learner A: The price for private cars is expensive.

Learner B: **You mean the price is high?**

Learner A: Yes, high, not everyone can afford one.

Grammatical LRE

Learner A: I was once hate the crowed buses like that.

Learner B: Eh, **you should say, I once hated, no was in the sentence.**

Learner A: Yes, I once joined this type of public transport.

F. Cycle 3: Benefits of Revised TBLT Reduction of L1 Usage

After reinforcing teacher's feedback and learners' employment of LREs, learners were encouraged or even forced to express in English in their task participation. They could initiatively avoided the influence of traditional teaching method, not translating English into Chinese, or vice versa, when expressing their intended meanings. This effectively reduced their L1 usage and guaranteed their attention to the target language. The following interaction turns illustrated such an enhancement, where learner A avoided L1 usage with the help of both teacher's feedback and her partner's employment of lexical LRE.

A: I think reduce private cars can be useful.

Researcher: **Reduce?**

A: Well, reducing.

Researcher: Yes, you must pay attention to the verbs in your sentence.

B: So you mean **reducing the amount of private cars** can

help us solve the transportation problems?

A: Yes, correct.

V. CONCLUSION

This design-based research designed and implemented a revised TBLT to resolve the problems in students' task participation in English Classes of Chinese Universities. Findings of the present study disclosed the mismatches between Chinese sociocultural context and TBLT rationales in terms of impeding Chinese learners' participation. Chinese learners are used to the teacher-centered and textbook-directed teaching style, and thus are unwilling to participate into the task performance. When engaged in the tasks, they would find it difficult and even a waste of time. Due to the big class size of English classes in Chinese universities, they also tended to have off-task discussions, which considerably demotivated them and affected the efficiency of their task participation. Furthermore, the traditional teaching method which integrated English and Chinese together developed Chinese learners' cognitive procedures of English expression, which gave rise to their unavoidable L1 usage in their participation into TBLT.

The revised Cycle 2 and Cycle 3 developed some practical strategies in TBLT to design more culturally appropriate TBLT practices in China to enhance learners' task participation. The TBLT implementation was redesigned in which students were encouraged to provide corrective feedback to each other, to participate under the clear division of responsibilities and to actively employ LREs to avoid L1 usage, and the teacher participated in students' task performance as a facilitator by giving some useful feedback.

The qualitative data collected from interviews, guided journal answers, class observation and students' sample work showed learners' active and efficient participation, attention to tasks and reduction of their L1 usage.

The present study develops a practical guideline about how to apply a western-based teaching method in the Chinese context effectively. When a teaching method is adopted in another socio-cultural context, some aspects may be "culturally inappropriate" [20], the mismatch between the local context and the teaching method may consequently generated students' failure in learning. English teachers in Chinese universities should further investigate the mismatches between the Chinese context and TBLT, or even any other teaching method not originated from China. In terms of EFL learners in China, this study offers insights into what they can do to better perform learning tasks so as to improve their English competence, especially their communicative competence. Some authentic strategies about corrective feedback and group cooperation between students can help them better participate into task performance.

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