

# Perceptions towards Two Task Types Applied in English Teaching of China

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**Abstract:** As no universal principles can be applied to language learning and teaching, it's of great importance for language teachers to capitalize all the teaching theories for teaching purpose. This paper extends further discussion to the two most-practiced teaching methods, TBLT (Task-based Language Teaching) and CLT (Communicative Language Teaching). Firstly, the paper attempted to define these two task types and discuss the importance of them. Secondly, it pointed out the similarities of the two tasks, Thirdly, The paper analyzed the differences of the two task types, which specially concerns the conceptual meaning, the adoption of syllabus, the process of teaching, the evaluation, the order of tasks, the students' attention duration and the students' learning motivation. At last, the significance of the comparison was pointed out in the paper. The comparison between TBLT and CLT not only brought to a new understanding of the two task types, but also informs readers its great significance, thus providing some beneficial inspirations and assistance to the teachers and learners for their future English learning teaching.

**Key words:** TBLT; CLT; comparison; significance; English teaching

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background information

It is true that nearly all the theories of teaching originated from West. The Reform and Open policy has made China closer access to the western countries; the exotic English teaching methods and theories have already been brought in to China. At first, it was the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) developing the learners' communication ability is the prior aim of CLT. In those years, communicative ability was badly needed for Chinese to communicate with people from other countries, which became popular in China. Later in 2001, the Ministry of Education revised a new standard for English curriculum, in which TBLT was attached great importance. It was from that time that teachers and linguists began to pay their attention to the communicative language teaching method. With years' development, the TBLT has been favored by many English teachers. Both the two teaching methods have many advantages.

As for the CLT, firstly, it allows learners to use the target language in meaningful contexts, thus bringing the real world into the classroom. Such as they would like to be able to make an appointment with their GP face to face or on the phone, give reasons for ailments, speak to their children's teachers, ask for information or advice and to be able to speak with people in the community. Secondly, the advantage is that this approach can be adapted to any level ranging from Pre-Beginner to Advanced and is suitable for classes comprising students with different linguistic backgrounds and different levels of communicative competence, thus allowing learners to interact with each other according to their level of proficiency. Thirdly, the advantage is that the CLT approach enables the teacher to step back and take on the role of 'facilitator'. The teacher is able to observe individual's learning through various tasks and is able to determine and respond to student's need. Fourthly, Communicative Language Teaching offers many areas and resources for the students, which the more outdated methods fail to offer. By using Communicative Language Teaching in the classroom, students will feel more involved in the learning process. They will be more motivated, and will potentially learn more of the language as opposed to using a more outdated method.

When it comes to TBLT, firstly, it can boost student's motivation to learn English. Students are more willing to learn practical English relevant with their daily life instead of boring and rigid grammatical rules for they think grammar has no practical effect to them. Secondly, with their different life experiences, students can benefit each other in language acquisition by adopting TBLT. In accordance with the students' own ways of thinking, they complete their tasks with the influence of their backgrounds and individual experience. Moreover, If the students communicate something irrelevant with their parents experience, the ideas they created and the topics they shared are more and varied. Thirdly, TBLT gives students advantages in examinations. There is doubt that TBLT can help the students since it focuses on students' communication abilities instead of grammar, which is often tested in Chinese exams. However, the improvement of communication skills would often improve the students' other abilities such as listening, writing.

In fact, TBLT is the further development and extension of CLT; they are very similar to each other in essence. However, differences are still can be found. Today, the two concepts are still being profoundly studied, but few studies are being made to understand their internal relationships. Due to the fact that the two methods are so popular and wildly used by Chinese English teachers and many of them including us (the possible English Teachers) can not fully distinguish the two teaching methods. It's necessary and of great importance to thoroughly tell the differences and similarities existing between them.

## **1.2 Definition of the Two Teaching Methods**

On the Basis of Structuralism, the TBLT and CLT are put forward. Task-based Language Teaching is, in fact, a further development of CLT, similar beliefs are shared. Both two concepts hold that a language should be learned to how to use it in real life as close as possible. However, it attaches more importance on mixing the form-focused teaching and communication-focused. In the planning and teaching process, the "task" is always the priority. But what a "task" is? We may get some inspiration from the following statements

(Wang Qiang 2006) :“A task is 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, making an airline reservation, borrowing a library book, taking a driving test, typing a letter, weighing a patient, sorting letters, taking a hotel reservation, writing a check, finding a street destination and helping someone across a road. In other words, by “task” it means the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in between (Long 1985:89); Any structured language learning endeavor which has a particular objective, appropriate content, a specified working procedure, and arrange of outcomes for those who undertake the task. “Task” is therefore assumed to refer to a range of work plans which have the overall purpose of facilitating language learning—from the simple and brief exercise type, to more complex and lengthy activities such as group problem-solving or simulations and decision making; Tasks are activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose in order to achieve an outcome”.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), or the communicative approach, is an approach to language teaching that emphasizes interaction as both the means and the ultimate goal of study, namely, its focus is on communicative competence. Based on the discussion of (Hedge 2000:46-55), Wang Qiang (2006) made classification of Communicative competence in his book, *A Course in English Language Teaching*, which listed five main components of communicative competence: Linguistic competence (concerning with knowledge of the language itself, its form and meaning); Pragmatic competence (concerning with the appropriate use of language in the context); Discourse competence (referring to one’s ability to create coherent written text or conversation and the ability to understand them); Strategic competence (referring to strategies one employs when there is communication breakdown due to lack of resources); Fluency(meaning one’s ability to link units of speech together with facility and without strain or inappropriate slowness or undue hesitation)”.

## **2. Similarities between the Two Teaching Method**

### **2.1 The Roles Played by the Teachers and Students**

Both in the TBLT and CLT classes, students are the center. In the old style classes, teachers determined nearly everything and are the absolute authority and the students are merely passive receivers. Barely had the students the chance to express their own thinking. But in the new TBLT and CLT classes, the students become more dominant. The learners have more say in the class about the learning process and the object of learning. In fact, both TBLT and CLT are learner-centered. Everything about the learners is the focus of the TBLT and CLT classes. Moreover, the students can be the cooperators of their teachers and partners, for in group work they can both cooperate with the other students and their teachers.

Aspect of the two teaching methods, the teacher is a helper (helping the students with the

study), a designer (designing activities and tasks), an organizer (planning classroom activities), an advisor (supervising the student's performance) and also a participant (taking part in the communicative tasks and activities with the students). All these roles a teacher needs to play require him with a good master of the target language. Moreover, the teacher is the main source of input at the beginning stage. Besides, a lot of linguistic "emergencies" would occur in the class, the teacher must be well-prepared for these situations.

## **2.2 The Choosing of Authentic Teaching Materials**

In the TBLT and CLT classes, authentic material and contexts are being adopted. The involvement of real communication is essential for the students' language learning.

Authentic material and language context are being used in CLT, thus the learners' language picking up would be more natural and easier. In CLT, the most prominent characteristic is that everything that is done in the class is intended to communication. Much of the language use by the students is gone through the role-playing and problem-solving tasks, for the proponents of CLT hold the view that only by natural and real language communication practice can the learners achieve their communicative competence. The linguistic competence rather than communicative competence can be gained with the real language communication practice.

For TBLT, the emphasis is on the process of learning and real communication. During the process of teaching, the teachers would consciously foster the students' "grammar acquisition". The language teaching is not the only aim of TBLT, but also the language skills and pragmatic function. All the designed tasks are intended to make the real usage of language in daily life, shopping in the mall, making a telephone call, asking for help and reading a map are some the typical examples.

## **2.3 The Promotional Function of the Activities and Tasks**

It is believed by the proponents of the TBLT and CLT that the meaningful activities and tasks conducted in language teaching promotes learning. The meaningfulness of the language maintains the learners' learning process. The activities in CLT classes offer the students the opportunity to perform. The competitive atmosphere provides the opportunity and possibility to the learners to correct their mistakes, promote their strategies of communication, and be better in next activity or task. So it is no doubt that this competitive sense is a strong motivation to the students. In the class of TBLT, all the tasks should be finished by the students in different and diversified ways, so this would make the students feel interesting all the time. It is sure that the achievements of tasks and activities are motivational. Necessary input and output processing are both involved in the tasks. For this reason, tasks are a bridge between the learners' native and target language, giving the chance to the learner to interact and exploit further the learner's dormant potential language ability.

## **2.4 The “Polarization” Effect**

The phenomena of “polarization” is very common in the application of TBLT and CLT, the students who take an active part in the activities and tasks, they effectively develop their communicative competence, but for the students who are not willing to be engaged in the activities and tasks, their ability can not be developed effectively. And the consequence of the situation is that benefits the students with a good listening and speaking competence while worsen those with a weak one. Moreover, the fluency of the activities are often influenced by the students’ personalities. If the student is outgoing one, they may take part in the TBLT and CLT activities actively; which offers a good chance for the class to be a successful one. But if the students are introvert, they may be less inclined to speak a word in the class, which results the failure of the class.

## **2.5 The Sharing of Some Teaching Principles**

Similarities surely exist in these two teaching methods in their teaching principles. The author will give a short elaboration. During the TBLT and CLT teaching process, the mistakes made by the students are tolerated by the teachers, for the teachers would hold the ideas that the correction interruption will disturb the student’s continence of communication, thus the students may have a problem of forming a bad habit: the students may use their native language instead of the authentic one to realize their aim of expression. As for the degree of using it, TBLT is more tolerant than CLT. Furthermore, student may develop their communicative competence successfully and effectively foster the intercultural communication abilities and strengthen what they have already learned, but compared with the systemic teaching of new language, both TBLT and CLT are considerably less effective. In addition, a lot emphasis is put on speaking and listening while little attention is paid to the vocabulary and grammar are often regarded as the weakness of CLT. Lastly, both CLT and TBLT ask for a small number of students in the class and demand the teachers possess a relatively prominent proficiency to run the whole class. And this helps to explain why communicative approach does not work very well in China. The class is just not small enough, sometimes very big and the teachers’ quality is not high enough to apply these communicative approaches effectively.

## **3. Differences between the Two Task Types**

In the first part, the paper has discussed the similarities between the two teaching methods. Though in many aspects there are similar even the same, but there are still many differences between them. The following are the differences between them.

### **3.1 Conceptual meaning**

Actually, CLT is not a concrete concept, it is a conceptual approach. To the different level of designing syllabus, it has varied methods. There are two versions about the CLT: one is the

strong version and the other is the weak version. It is generally believed that TBLT is a development of CLT and falls in the strong version when concerning teaching.

### **3.2 The Adoption of Syllabus**

The syllabus of CLT is notion-functional and the TBLT is task-based. Due to the different syllabuses, the teacher would organize the class in different ways. On the one hand, when the class is TBLT type, the center of the class is task. A main task would always be made; other activities and tasks are made to help the accomplishment of the main task. Sometimes, the main task would be parted into small ones, but there is still a strict order to finish these tasks. The former task is the preparation of the latter one or vice versa. On the other hand, when the class is CLT organized, the teaching goal is to let the students acquire and practice the language they are learning. The activities loosely go around the goal; therefore sometimes some activities seem being isolated. In one word, the activities are just served as a tool for the learners.

### **3.3 The Process of Teaching**

Generally speaking, CLT contains two main procedures, lead-in is the first one. Interesting materials are mostly like to be chosen by the teachers to stimulate and motivate the students, in the hope that there would be a good input and out put. Moreover, the real life examples is daily life such as current issues are also would be favored by the teachers. Activities are the second, beneficial activities would be designed by the teachers, sometimes students can practice what they have learned in the module communicative conversation.

On the contrary, TBLT usually consists of three procedures: the pre-task period, the while-task period and the post-task period. In the first phrase, topic and tasks of this lesson would be introduced by the teacher firstly. The some background information of great use such as the new words and expressions and grammar tips would be imparted to the students to let them know better what' going to be learnt. The while-task period includes tasks, discussion and presentation. During this period, students are required to finish a series of tasks and present it in front of the class. After that, the teachers would give their assessment to the performance of the students and explain the difficulties in language.

### **3.4 Evaluation**

When the class is conducted in CLT, the student's main task is practicing listening and speaking to develop their communicative competence. Authentic material is usually being adopted to practice. For this reason, it is not difficult to evaluate the material's availability and the student's achievement. Concerning TBLT, there is in fact no a text-book that is really task-based; teachers have to redesign the textbook if they want to use this approach. Thus, it is much more difficult to evaluate the tasks designed by the teachers.

### **3.5 The Order of Tasks**

For different topics, specific activities are designed in accordance in CLT-type class. These activities are isolated without connection to each other. For instance, role-playing and game-playing are applied to practicing asking the direction or shopping in a mall. The difference is that the content of the game playing and role-playing has changed according to the topic. While in TBLT, all the tasks must follow a strict order, most the time from simple to complex. The order of tasks matches with the students' cognitive sequence; it will be much easier for the students to fulfill the tasks.

### **3.6 Students' Duration of Attention**

When CLT is adopted, the students may find it very interesting at the beginning of the class for the activities. But throughout the class, the content is barely changed; role-playing and game-playing are always the case. With the time goes on, the feeling of freshness and interest fade away gradually and the students may not want to take part in the activities any more. But on the contrary, in the class of TBLT type, in spite the fact that the center is task, the students would not get bored because the tasks are changed. The students must take part in actively to complete all the tasks successfully. The sense of achievement and satisfaction they get from the fulfillments of tasks would make them enjoy it.

### **3.7 Students' Learning Motivation**

Whether in the TBLT or CLT type, students are always the center of the class. However, in the aspect of motivating students, TBLT is better than CLT. Some isolated activities are designed by teacher in CLT, the students may passively follow the teachers' instructions to some extent. But it is not the same with TBLT, for the students can apply their real-life experiences into the fulfilling of the tasks. To finish the tasks their teachers give, they maybe spontaneously turn to the Internet or get the answer through a survey. Thus the students' passion and initiatives are encouraged to a greater degree.

## **4. The Significance of Comparison between TBLT and CL**

TBLT is derivation of CLT, but it is not intended to replace CLT. Both the two principles are emphasizing greatly the nurturing of communicative competence, representing the relatively advanced teaching concepts. At present, both of the two teaching methods are being widely adopted in English teaching. Hence it is very important for the teachers to know thoroughly not only the definition of the two concepts but also the differences and similarities between them so as to build a full comprehension system of TBLT and CLT. Moreover, we should consider applying different teaching methods to avoid the mechanic imitation and to be flexible in English teaching.

Today, in many parts of China, English classes are still being conducted under the traditional teaching pedagogy, which is greatly different from the English language used in daily life. Here



on a few major points will be focused to explain the necessity and significance of the comparison between TBLT and CLT.

Firstly, in everyday life, we use language to accomplish certain communicative purposes, e.g. to give directions, to exchange information, or to make a complaint, etc; traditionally, teachers usually focus on forms rather than functions. As a result, a lot of structures or patterns have been learned by the students, without knowing how they should function in social contexts. Consequently, they cannot put them into practice in real situations.

Secondly, somehow, traditional teaching principles are inclined to stress one or two language skills and neglect the others. For instance, reading and writing skills are the focus of the grammar-translation method while listening and speaking skills are ignored.

Thirdly, in real life, people always communicate in a specified context while the traditional pedagogy is inclined to depart language from its context. For instance, when passive voice is first introduced to students, teachers always are trying to explain to the students how the object should be moved to the beginning of a newly-formed passive sentence and how to change the verb accordingly by adding a suffix *-ed*. After that, questions like when and why the passive voice should be used may be raised by the students. The teachers may explain like this: the passive voice is used when it is not needed to tell who has done the action. It may cause further inquiry like “Why the person who has done the action is necessary to be known?” from the students. Due to the fact that the grammar rule is separated from real life experiences, the students will keep raising questions. Fewer questions will be asked by the students if at beginning the teachers use examples from real life to teach passive voice.

One possible answer to the problem of separation of language teaching and practical language application is to adopt communicative language. This method has become more and more popular in recent years to develop syllabus design and foreign language teaching. TBLT and CLT share the same goal to develop students’ communication skills, in which the knowledge about the language and how to use it appropriately in real-life communication is included. This is reason why the adoption of TBLT and CLT is of great significance.

But the old style English teaching greatly exists in China, which has impeded the further development of China’s English teaching, comparing these two teaching methods may provide some useful inspiration both for the imparting-knowledge teachers as well as the knowledge-receiving students. So this thesis deserves our present and further attention, and it is believable that more new ideas will spring out in future.

## **5. Conclusion**

This paper has comprehensively explored the definition of TBLT and CLT and the similarities and differences between them as well as the significance of comparing them. As presented in the paper, there are many similarities existing between them, such as the roles played by the teachers and students, the choosing of authentic materials, the promotional function of the activities and tasks, the “polarization” effect and the sharing of some teaching principles, and their differences can be seen in conceptual meaning, the adoption of syllabus, process of teaching, evaluation, the order of tasks, student’s attention duration as well as student’s



learning motivation. The significance of comparing them is to provide some inspiration and help to innovate and develop English teaching.

Plenty of examples and explanation are employed in this paper to reach this conclusion. Firstly, the exact explanation of the two concepts was given. Secondly, through the detailed comparison between TBLT and CLT, the similarities and differences between them is clear and understandable. At last, the significance of comparison between TBLT and CLT was presented: it will be beneficial for the development of the whole development of English teaching including the growth of English teachers and the students.

Though this paper demonstrates a relatively comprehensive study and analysis on the similarities and differences between TBLT and CLT as well as the significance of this comparison, there are also some obvious limitations. First, teaching methodology is just teaching methodology, restricted by the fact that the author need more relevant teaching experiments, and the analysis of the similarities and differences may be incomplete and a little shallow. Second, they are still many teaching principles out there, but in this paper the author has discussed only two of them, which is not enough to know the whole picture of English teaching.

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