

Development of Communicative Chinese Learning Through Task-Based Learning of Thai Students Studying in Chengdu University, PR China

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Abstract

The purposes of this research were to compare the students' learning achievement after studying Chinese through task-based learning (TBL) with the set criterion indicated in the course description of "Chinese Culture", one of the compulsory courses of the UBRU's curriculum, and to investigate their attitude towards studying Chinese using task – based learning. The purposive samples consisted of 18 Thai students majoring in Chinese who have taken Chinese courses for four months at Chengdu University, PR China in the 2nd semester of the academic year 2016. The design of this research was a one-group pretest-posttest. The instruments used in this study were six lesson plans using task – based learning, the Chinese achievement test, and the attitude-evaluation form. The study took 18 hours. The statistics used for data analysis were percentage, mean, standard deviation, and One sample t-test. The research findings were: 1) After the students were taught through activities of task – based learning, the posttest score was significantly higher than pretest score at the critical level .05; 2) After the students were taught by the task – based learning, the posttest score was not significantly higher than the set criterion; and 3) The students had positive attitude towards studying Chinese at a high level.

Keywords: Task-Based Learning (TBL), Chinese Learning, Thai Student

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Introduction

Significance of the Study

Language is established as a means of communication. Currently, being able to communicate in multiple languages has become an asset that many individuals would like to possess. Among a large number of languages in the world, Chinese is the biggest native language in terms of the number of native speakers, and it is becoming more prominent for a number of reasons (Nuffield Foundation, 2000: 14). Economically, thanks to economic globalization, China has played a prominent role as one of the leading countries in economics, not only in Asia but also in the world. As a result, knowledge of the Chinese language is crucial for economic growth. In other words, Chinese has become as important as the English language. At present, there are hundreds of millions of Chinese-speaking people. This reveals clearly why the study of the Chinese language is seen as more and more important today.

In the context of Ubon Ratchathani Rajabhat University (UBRU), Thailand, teaching Chinese for undergraduate Chinese major students has been conducted for more than a decade. The Chinese program has been opened for serving those who wish to learn Chinese as major subject since 2004. Most Thai students majoring in Chinese are from rural areas and have no background in Chinese. One of the challenges of UBRU lecturers of Chinese is how to improve their Chinese major students to compete with others in the real world after their graduation. Thus, UBRU Chinese Program seriously seeks for the ways to help their students to succeed in their Chinese study by collaborating with the university partners in China to receive the native Chinese lecturers coming to teach their students, sending the Chinese major students to gain more knowledge and experiences in the university partners, selecting the effective teaching materials and updated Chinese textbooks to teach their students, etc.

In this research study, the researchers, as the Thai teachers teaching Chinese, have faced the state of problems in Chinese language teaching in classrooms, such as students' weakness on four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills), students' passive learning behavior, and so on. Because of these problems, the researchers attempted to find out the way to develop learning Chinese of the Thai UBRU Chinese major students who have taken Chinese courses for four months at Chengdu University, PR China in the 2nd semester of the academic year 2016 by choosing Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) method as the instrument for the study.

Objectives of the Study

1. To compare the students' learning achievement after studying Chinese through task-based learning.
2. To investigate the students' attitudes toward their studying Chinese by using task – based learning.

Scope of the Study

In this research study, the researcher focused only on the 18 Thai UBRU Chinese major students who have taken Chinese courses for four months at Chengdu University, PR China in the 2nd semester of the academic year 2016.

Research Question

The research question was how does TBL help students improve on their Chinese competence?

Literature Review and Related Studies

According to Task-based language teaching (TBLT), it has become a significant topic in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The definition of task has been very various in the literature (e.g., Prabu, 1987; Bygate, 2001; Ellis, 2000, 2003; Lee, 2000; Long, 1985, 1991, 1997, 2005; Hung, 2014; Nunan, 2004; Richards and Rodgers, 2001; Salaberry, 2001; Skehan, 1998a, 1998b, 2003; Willis, 1996a, 1996b, 1998). Prabhu (1987), one of the first methodologists raising interest and support for TBL, considers a task is “an activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process”. Further, Ellis (2003: 244-262); Willis (1996: 38-64); and Skehan (1996) indicated that the ‘task based framework’ differs from the ‘Presentation-Practice-Production’ model (PPP model), which focused on accurate use of the grammatical forms taught at the Presentation stage, whereas ‘task’ concerns about a goal-oriented activity in which learners use language to achieve a real outcome.

To be concluded, the researcher adopted the concept of TBLT proposed by Willis (1996) that summarized and defied eight purposes of task-based language teaching as follows: 1) to give learners confidence in trying out whatever language they know; 2) to give learners experience of spontaneous interaction; 3) to give learners the chance to benefit from noticing how others express similar meanings; 4) to give learners chances for negotiating turns to speak; 5) to engage learners in using language purposefully and cooperatively; 6) to make learners participate in a complete interaction, not just one-off sentences; 7) to give learners chances to try out communication strategies; and 8) to develop learners' confidence that they can achieve communicative goals. Many scholars have already embedded the task-based approach in their teaching and the results, in most of the cases, were positive.

Moreover, Willis (ibid.) has categorized TBLT into six types as follows: 1.LISTENING: brainstorming, fact-finding; 2.ORDERING AND SORTING: sequencing, ranking, categorizing, classifying; 3.COMPARING: matching, finding similarities and differences; 4.PROBLEM SOLVING: analyzing real or hypothetical situations; 5.SHARING PERSONAL EXPERIENCES: narrating, describing, exploring and explaining opinions, reactions; and 6.CREATIVE TASKS: brainstorming, fact-finding, ordering and sorting, comparing problem solving etc.

Framework for TBLT

As Ellis (2009: 224) noted, ‘there is no single way of doing TBLT’. However, for the benefit of this research study, the researcher adopted the model of Willis’ (1996a, 1996b, 1998), which has been advocated by many researchers, methodologists and university teachers. The framework of Willis is modeled as below:

Figure 1: Willis’ framework of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)



Figure 1: Willis’ framework of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)

The figure 1 presented above indicated that there are three components of the task-based teaching Framework as below.

1. Pre-task (including topic and task) prepares learners to perform tasks in ways that promote acquisition

2. Task cycle: offers learners the chance to use whatever language they already know in order to carry out the task and then to improve their language under the teacher’s guidance while planning their reports on the task.

There are three components of a task cycle: **1.2.1) Task:** Learners use whatever language they can master, working simultaneously, in pairs or small groups to achieve goals of the task; **1.2.2 Planning:** Learners plan their reports effectively and maximize their learning opportunities; and **1.2.3 Report:** is the natural condition of the task cycle. In this stage learners tell the class about their findings.

3. Post-task stage: provides an opportunity for students to reflect on their task and encourages attention to form, in particular to problematic forms which demonstrate when learners have accomplished the task. Before implementing this approach, teachers should be acquainted with the types of task to be presented to the students (Willis, 1996).

Related Studies

Nunan (1998) pointed out that an important task confronting applied linguists and teachers concerned with second and foreign language learning is to overcome the pendulum effect in language teaching. The way to overcome this pendulum effect is to derive appropriate classroom practices from empirical evidence on the nature of language learning and use and from insights into what makes learners tick. How to create appropriate task-based language instructions for improving students' competence has been considered by the linguists and scholars for many decades.

However, Jean and Simard (2011) indicated that one of the failures on teaching and learning second/foreign language is misunderstandings between students and teachers. These misunderstandings (beliefs and perceptions are also included) may arise about the true value of certain teaching practices if the two parties hold divergent views about the specific goals of the language class, such as the need for accuracy. Mismatched objectives may lead students to perceive the teaching as deficient, and teachers to perceive their students as unmotivated or uninterested. Following this reasoning, one may expect that difficulties will arise in the teaching-learning process if there is a clash between the teachers' and the students' beliefs and perceptions. In other respects, Kalaja and Ferreira Barcelos (2003) argued that "beliefs are considered one area of individual learner differences that may influence the processes and outcomes of second/foreign language learning/acquisition (SLA)" (p. 1). Because the context or environment plays a crucial role in influencing how all the poles of the triangle (the student, the teacher, and the subject matter) interact with each other, it is important to study these interactions in different contexts (Astolfi, Davot, Ginsburger-Vogel, & Toussaint, 1997; Houssaye, 1988; Künzli, 1998). Further, Basturkmen, Loewen, and Ellis (2004) defined beliefs as "statements teachers made about their ideas, thoughts, and knowledge that are expressed as evaluations of what 'should be done,' 'should be the case,' and 'is preferable'" (p. 244).

According to related studies, Kridtapong, Nareenard, and Narueporn (2017) used Task-Based Learning (TBL) method for developing Chinese speaking skill of 43 students studying at grade 11 of Nakorn Khon Kaen School, Thailand. Quasi - experimental design focusing on one group pretest - posttest design, 8 TBL lesson plans for 8 sessions of teaching, and a set of Chinese speaking proficiency test were selected for this study. Data was analyzed by figuring out mean, percentage, highest and lowest scores, and standard deviation. The findings showed that, based on the

total score of 20, mean scores of speaking skills of students from pre-test and post-test were 8.37 and 15.22 respectively. This can be concluded that students' post-test score was higher than pre-test. Moreover, the study of Duangkamon and Ra-shane (2015) entitled: "Effects of Task-Based Instruction and Noticing the Gap on English Speaking Ability of Undergraduate Students", which used the samples from 18 first-year students in semester 1, academic year 2014 at Bangkok Institute of Theology, Christian University of Thailand for quantitative research; and 6 out of the 18 students for qualitative research. The instruments to collect data were English speaking pre-/posttests, stimulated recall, transcriptions, and interview questions. Data were analyzed quantitatively using Wilcoxon signed rank test, and qualitatively using content analysis. The results revealed that (1) the students' English speaking ability posttest scores were higher than pretest at a significant level ($p < 0.05$). Fluency scores were higher than accuracy. (2) Beginners noticed single items and whole sentences. Most errors the students made were interlingual errors. Regarding the focused grammar, beginners could be trained to notice it by themselves but they noticed more from class. Yet, grammar for combining sentences and grammar clusters still caused troubles for them. (3) The students felt positive toward the instruction e.g. they experienced new way of learning, they became confident in speaking English. However, problems regarding noticing among beginners arose i.e. the feeling of incapability to notice alone, and the lack of ability to fix their language.

In addition, the study of Jiraporn, Saphonnaphat, and Monthien (2013) for developing of communicative English learning through Task-Based Learning of Prathomsuksa 3 students of Watthasalararn school, Phetchaburi, Thailand by using learning activities of task – based learning lesson plans (12 hours), the English achievement test and the attitude-evaluation form with 23 purposive sampled students from one classroom. The findings revealed that 1) the posttest score was found statistically significant higher than that of the pretest at the .05 level, 2) the posttest score was not found statistically significant higher than that of the given criterion, and 3) the students taught by the utilizing learning activities of task – based learning felt highly positive attitude towards English studying.

The concepts, suggestions, and results of studies made by various linguists, scholars, and researchers above were related to this research study in term of creating appropriate task-based learning for improving all four language skills of UBRU Chinese major students. The research methodology and outcomes of this study were shown in the next session.

Research Methodology

1. Sample groups

The 18 Thai UBRU Chinese major students who have taken Chinese courses for four months at Chengdu University, PR China in the 2nd semester of the academic year 2016 were selected for this research study.

2. Research Variables

2.1 Independent variable:

2.1.1 Activities of task – based learning

2.2 Dependent variables:

2.2.1 The posttest score of Chinese

3. Research Instrument and Data Analysis

The instruments used in this study were six lesson plans using task – based learning (3 hours per each lesson plan: total 18 hours), the Chinese achievement test, and the attitude-evaluation form. The design of this research was a one-group pretest-posttest. The statistics used for data analysis were percentage, mean, standard deviation, and One sample t-test.

3.1 Example of Task-Based Language Lesson Plan

Table 1: Example of Task-Based Language Lesson Plan used in this research study

Lesson 1 (3 hrs.)	Goal of the lesson	Pre-task	Task cycle	Post-task
Topic: Traditional Festivals and Cerebrations of China	To better motivate learners and engage their interest in Chinese cultures through the provided topic	The students are asked to repeat words, phrases/ expressions related to Chinese festivals and cerebrations. <i>(20 minutes)</i>	Starting task/teacher-led task (recording and text- based task) *Students are divided in groups; <i>(5 minutes)</i>	Viewing of a video recording *The teacher shows a 15- minute video of one of the above festivals. The video contains all the relevant words and phrases that were introduced to the students at the beginning of the lesson. <i>(10 minutes)</i>
			Problem-solving task *The teacher dictates (or – alternatively – asks the students to listen to a recording of) familiar words and phrases from a short passage (a new passage, not something from a textbook) – that the students will have to write down. <i>(15 minutes)</i> *Each group is asked to discuss the dictated words and phrases and predict and “assemble” a possible story by creating sentences with the given materials. <i>(30 minutes)</i>	Analyzing and Discussing the video materials The students compare the video materials to the stories they have created. They are then asked to identify the familiar words and expressions in the video materials they have just viewed. <i>(20 minutes)</i>
			*One student in the group is assigned to look for the appropriate verbs in the dictionary; another student is designated as an “ambassador” while the others are creating sentences and working on creating the story. *The students are allowed to use additional words and phrases of their choice. <i>(10 minutes)</i>	Quiz: Up to 10 true/false questions regarding the video materials. <i>(10 minutes)</i>
			Discussion and Comparison task *Once each group has come up with the story/ description, they summarize it and share and discuss their story with the other groups. Alternatively, the “spokesperson” of the group presents the story before the other groups. *The groups compare their stories. <i>(30 minutes)</i>	Sharing personal experiences about a favorite holiday The students are asked to think about their favorite holidays/ celebrations and are asked to prepare for the next class by producing a brief story of their favorite holiday to share and discuss it with other students for the next lesson. <i>(30 minutes)</i>

3.2 Questionnaire on Students' Attitude Evaluation

Table 2: Example of the questionnaire used in this research study (Adapted from: Merita Ismaili, 2013)

No.	Question	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
1	Task-based learning helps learners enjoy learning Chinese.					
2	I believe that I can learn Chinese faster when I use it more often.					
3	Task activities give me more chances to practice Chinese.					
4	I am more motivated by the task which connects to real life situation than the activities in the book.					
5	A task involves a primary focus on meaning.					
6	Task -based learning advanced my critical thinking.					
7	Using tasks activities is a good way to improve Chinese vocabulary.					
8	I enjoy group work.					
9	Task activities enhance students' autonomy.					
10	Task-based learning activates learners' needs and interests.					
11	I improved my four language skills using task-based activities.					
12	Task-based learning provides a relaxed atmosphere to promote target language use.					

Research Outcomes and Discussion

After their pre-test and post-test (80 items within 2 hours) for four language skills were used for comparison, the findings of the students' learning achievement after studying Chinese through TBL and the attitude towards studying Chinese by using TBL were as follows.

1. After the students were taught through activities of task – based learning, the posttest score was significantly higher than pretest score at the critical level .05;
2. After the students were taught by the task – based learning, the posttest score was not significantly higher than the set criterion indicated in the course description of “Chinese Culture”, one of the compulsory courses of the UBRU’s curriculum; and
3. After distributing the questionnaires, which were designed in the form of a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree” with values 1-5 assigned to each alternative, the results revealed that the students had positive attitude towards studying Chinese at a high level.

The findings presented above indicated that Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) encouraged UBRU Chinese major students to become more independent and addressed their real world academic needs. They were more motivated by the tasks which connected to real life situation than the activities in the books, and they seemed to be happy with using tasks activities, especially working in group, to improve their Chinese competence. After Post-task, these students reflected that this approach provided them with a natural context for language use. The accuracy and fluency in Chinese for communication of these students after using task activities were found. In other words, task-based learning provided a relaxed atmosphere to promote target language use. The results of this research study supported the concept of Nunan (2004): “Task-based learning encourages student-centered learning, helps learners develop individual differences and supports learning autonomy”. In other words, task-based activities offer the students an opportunity to develop their cognitive processes.

In conclusion, this study revealed that the students can learn more effectively when their attention was focused on the task; therefore they were focused more on the language they used than on the grammatical form. The classroom atmosphere was comfortable, cooperative and there was a lot of interaction among students. TBLT improved their learning since encourages students in completing task activities which led to development regarding their performance. Students’ impressions toward this approach were positive as they did not support teacher-centered lessons where they could not find enough opportunities to express themselves in Chinese. In addition, Participating in tasks influenced these student progress and attitudes toward the lesson. Rather than being a passive listeners, these students preferred to be active receivers. (Nunan, 2004; Ruso and Nazenin, 2007; Merita Ismaili. (2013).

Task-based learning enables students to be actively engaged with language in an authentic context and challenges them to build meanings and patterns which make them develop into autonomous learners. Finally, TBL not only motivates students but also promotes students' centered approach, which is one of the principles of the language teaching. It helps students are more eager to learn, and often excited, in contrast to the following book activities only. It can be said that TBL approach is especially very beneficial in mixed ability classrooms as it supports cooperative learning, where students working together can help each other.

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