

Situated Task-based Language Teaching in Chinese Colleges: Teacher Education

Yuying Liu^{1,2} & Tao Xiong^{1,3}

¹ School of English and Education, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, P.R. China

² School of Modern Languages and Applied Linguistics, University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland

³ National Key Research Center for Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, P.R. China

Correspondence: Tao Xiong, School of English and Education, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, 178, Waihuan Donglu, Guangzhou Higher Education Mega Center, Guangzhou 510630, P.R. China. Tel: 86-203-932-8841. E-mail: txiong@gdufs.edu.cn

Received: February 25, 2016 Accepted: April 2, 2016 Online Published: April 5, 2016

doi: 10.5539/elt.v9n5p22

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v9n5p22>

Abstract

This study investigated college EFL teachers' attitudes toward task-based language teaching (TBLT), regarding their familiarity with the idea of TBLT, their actual use of TBLT, and contextual factors that impede the implementation of TBLT in the higher education context in China. The study described here is a questionnaire survey with 26 valid responses. Results of this study are derived from discussion concerned with qualitative and quantitative data. The findings in the study show that though there are constraints from various aspects (including, the teaching materials, large class size etc.) for the successful implementation of TBLT, TBLT as a communicative teaching approach received very positive feedback from teachers. The majority of the teachers in this study hold positive views towards TBLT even though they have a low-level understanding of principles and practices of TBLT. The results addressed the issues existed in the pre-service and in-service training of Chinese EFL teachers. This study also highlighted the need for the Chinese ELT teachers to further develop their professional skills in terms of their competence to deal with large class size teaching, material development and English proficiency. Based on the findings, suggestions for teacher education and further development were made. This research is intended to yield informative insights regarding sustainable curriculum change management, policy implementation and professional development of English teachers in the Chinese EFL context.

Keywords: task-based language teaching, teachers' attitudes, teacher education, curriculum change management

1. Introduction

Since the early 20th century when English Language Teaching (ELT) in China entered into the formal educational system, Chinese ELT practitioners and researchers have been seeking the best method for English language teaching. Like many other language teaching innovations, TBLT has been applied to the English language curricula in many countries across Asia (Butler, 2011; Littlewood, 2007).

Many research studies (Jeon & Hahn, 2006; Cao, 2012; Lowe, 2012) have been carried out on TBLT in Asia-Pacific countries. Lowe (2012) proposes that there are two classroom phenomena in Japan which may act against the successful application of TBLT, namely classroom silence and excessive L1 use. To avoid excessive L1 use, Lowe (2012) carried out a research study with pre-intermediate level students to demonstrate that through the example of peer monitoring, small classroom interventions can function as extrinsic motivating factors, encouraging and promoting L2 use, and thus facilitating TBLT approaches. Jeon & Hahn (2006) carried out a survey by questionnaire to explore EFL teachers' perceptions of task-based language teaching in a Korean Secondary school context. The findings of the survey show that despite the majority of respondents having higher levels of understanding about TBLT concepts, many Korean teachers retain some fear of adopting TBLT as an instruction method, because of perceived disciplinary problems related to classroom practice. However, few studies have investigated in-service teachers' response to this proposed language teaching method in the Chinese college English context. Some case studies have investigated the implementation of TBLT in the

classroom, with a particular focus on the context of primary and secondary English education in China (e.g. Zheng & Borg, 2014; Zheng & Adamson, 2003). In addition, many studies focus on the application of TBLT in writing courses at tertiary level (e.g. Miao, 2014; Cao, 2012).

Furthermore, findings from relevant literature show that the traditional teacher-centered teaching methods still play a predominant role in many Chinese college English classes (Meng, 2009; Du, 2012). There seem to be some inevitable gaps between the research and practice in the Chinese college EFL context. Thus, more observations and studies of college English teaching need to be done, especially concerning teachers' current perception and application of TBLT in pedagogic practices. To bridge the gap between the literature and practice, specific research objectives in this study are presented as follows:

- 1) What are Chinese college EFL teachers' attitudes toward task-based language teaching?
- 2) For what practical reasons do teachers avoid implementing TBLT?
- 3) How can successful implementation of TBLT be encouraged?

The study described here is a questionnaire survey, including data collected from teachers in different parts of China, including Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Chongqing and Shandong, 26 in all.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Change Management Strategies

As mentioned in Section 1, this 'TBLT innovation' calls for Chinese English teachers to move from traditional teaching methods to the proposed language teaching method (Hu, 2013). It is clear that educational innovation is a process which needs to be managed actively throughout its formulation, adoption, and evaluation. Therefore, the effective change management of curriculum innovation is of great importance to its success.

Educational change involves different parties in an education system (such as teachers, teacher trainers, material designers, etc.), thus educational change management needs to be aware of the consequences affecting all parties within an education system. According to Walters and Vilches (2013), 'the project change management strategy needs to be sufficiently thought through so that the wider "ripple" effects of the primary innovation are also taken properly into account, including, as necessary, via the creation of additional, secondary innovations' (p.62). It is clear that the introduction of TBLT as an innovative pedagogy in EFL teaching in Chinese higher education will have implications for coursebook design, teacher training, examination system and so on. In order to promote this pedagogical change in the Chinese context, additional innovations in terms of teacher training, the examination system, and materials design should be created.

2.2 Teacher Cognition and Classroom Practice

The literature on curriculum innovation and implementation suggests that 'one of the causes of the discrepancy between prescribed theory and classroom practice may be teachers' attitudes' (Evdokia, 1996, p. 187). According to Graves and Shoen (2006, p. 2), 'teachers' perspectives are widely recognized as the most critical in the realization of any curricular innovation'.

According to Richards (1998), a primary source of teachers' classroom practices is what Borg (2006, p. 49) calls teacher cognition, that is, 'the beliefs, knowledge, theories, assumptions and attitudes that teachers hold all aspects of their work'. It is argued that the change of teacher's mental activity or thinking needs to be taken into account in making educational change, such as implementing a new curriculum or a new pedagogy, adopting new assessments or introducing new technological resources (Freeman, 2013, p. 127; Borg, 2006). Teachers are inclined to interpret new ideas in the light of their own style of teaching, and will tend to translate innovative ideas to conform with this (Wagner, 1991). They can accept, reject, or adapt the newly-proposed curricular innovation. This has been made apparent in various retrospective accounts of TBLT innovation (Carless, 1997; 2003; 2004; 2005; Markee, 1997). Carless (2004) carried out a qualitative case study to explore how task-based innovation was implemented in three primary school classrooms in Hong Kong. His analysis of classroom observation and interview data shows how the case study teachers reinterpreted a new curriculum in line with their own beliefs and the practical challenges occurring in their school contexts. Carless (2004, p. 659) maintains that teachers' knowledge and experiences are central to the change process, but are often neglected; teachers mold innovations to their own abilities, beliefs, and experience, the immediate school context, and the wider sociocultural environment.

Thus, educational innovation strategies need to address the practical and theoretical concerns that teachers have while adapting their classroom practice, preferably in an integrated way (Van den Branden, 2006, p. 234; Richards & Lockhart, 1994). Given the teacher's central role in how curricular elements are put into practice,

this study focuses on the investigation of teachers' perceptions of TBLT and how can change management strategies help the implementation of TBLT.

2.3 Teacher Education

The National English Curriculum Reform in the twenty-first century in China brings immense educational changes for Chinese EFL teachers in higher education. This proposed teaching approach, TBLT, advocates student-centered, communicative, and experimental learning, which poses challenges for Chinese EFL teachers to reconstruct their knowledge and skills and re-conceptualize their professional identity. Various studies (Freeman, 1993; Slaouti & Motteram, 2006) show the important role of teacher education in shaping teacher cognition. Ellis (2006) also argues that the knowledge and beliefs gained in formal teacher education and teachers' experiences of learning a second language help to formulate language teachers' professional knowledge and belief system.

The importance of in-service professional development in the improvement of EFL teachers' professionalism level is also stressed by many researchers (Freeman, 1993; Day, 1999). Day (1999) claims that without a focus on lifelong learning and in-service professional development, teachers cannot provide effective teaching as the nature of teaching demands teachers to engage in utilizing knowledge and information in a changing context. Therefore, it seems that Chinese EFL teacher education and professional development are crucial for the successful implementation of this curriculum change, in order to meet with the new requirements and demands.

3. Method

3.1 The Participants

The questionnaire was designed to investigate Chinese EFL teachers' attitudes toward TBLT and factors that impede the implementation of TBLT. The participants of this study are the EFL teachers for non-English majors in Chinese colleges and universities. Random sampling was employed and the questionnaire was emailed to at least 200 Chinese EFL teachers in various parts of China in the form of an online questionnaire survey. The goal of the study and the procedures related to the study were included in the email, and a consent form approved by the Research Ethics Committees (RECs) of the first author's university was provided for the participants. Ultimately, 28 responses were received, but two of the received responses were invalid. In addition, due to the unbalanced regional development in China, the responses in this study mainly came from provinces distributed in the north east, east and south parts of China. In other words, the participants in this study are EFL teachers from different universities in five provinces including Hebei, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Chongqing and Shandong.

3.2 Research Instrument and Design

The design of the questionnaire for this study was developed based on practical suggestions illustrated by Dörnyei (2007, pp.102-114), in terms of writing the questionnaire items, the format of the questionnaire and developing and administrating the questionnaire. In addition, some items in this questionnaire are adapted from the questionnaire designed by Jeon and Hahn (2006) (see Section 1) as these two research studies both focus on investigating teachers' perceptions of TBLT. The questionnaire in this study includes closed-ended items and open-ended items, to enable the participants to express their ideas freely. The questionnaire contains 13 items mainly focusing on four different areas:

- 1) class size;
- 2) the teachers' overall familiarity with TBLT and whether they have implemented it;
- 3) to investigate if teachers have had training in TBLT;
- 4) to address the practical reasons that lead teachers to choose, or avoid, implementing TBLT (including two closed-ended multiple choice questions and four open-ended questions);

Teachers' perceptions of TBLT were assessed and analyzed by using the answers they provided for the questionnaire. Mixed methods are employed in this research. Data collected from the questionnaire are quantified and the qualitative data are coded and analyzed by using thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006; 2013). Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 35). Guest, Macqueen and Namey (2012, p. 15) describe it as 'a rigorous, yet inductive set of procedures designed to identify and examine themes from textual data in a way that is transparent and credible'. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 35) summarize the six phases of thematic analysis as follows:

- 1) familiarizing yourself with your data;

- 2) generating initial codes;
- 3) Searching for themes;
- 4) Reviewing themes;
- 5) Defining and naming themes;
- 6) Producing the report. (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 35).

4. Results

4.1 Class Size

Figure 1 presents the number of students in the EFL classes taught by the participants. These results show that around 40% of the participants' classes have more than 50 students and around 11% have more than 100. It is widely accepted that a language class with 50-60 or more is 'large', even though there is no quantitative definition of what constitute a 'large class'. Therefore, we can see that nearly half of the participants in this study have to deal with large class size in teaching.

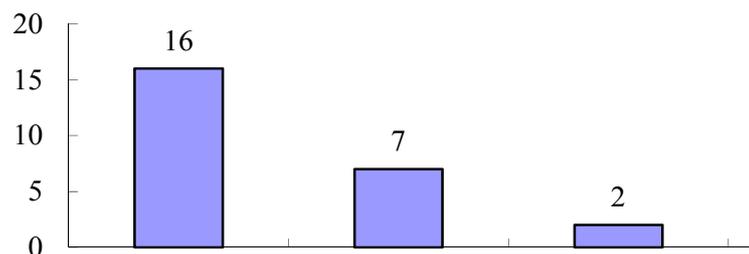


Figure 1. Class size

4.2 Familiarity with TBLT

Figure 2 illustrates the results related to one of the research aims in this study which investigates 'how well Chinese college English teachers understand the concept of TBLT?'

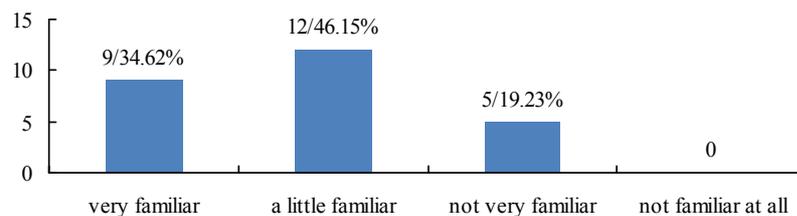


Figure 2. Teachers' familiarity with TBLT

In response to the Likert scale question on whether they are familiar with TBLT, Figure 2 reveals that only 34.62% of participants are very familiar with TBLT. Over 65% are a little familiar or not very familiar. The findings show that most teachers (around 65%) in this study perceive themselves as having a low level of understanding of TBLT.

4.3 Use of TBLT and Frequency of Use

In respond to Q3 (have you ever used TBLT in your teaching?), 17 participants (65.38%) have used TBLT in their teaching and 15 out of them are still using TBLT (Q4). The remaining nine participants have never used it. The frequency of use of the 15 participants is shown in Figure 3. This will be examined in the discussion section (see Section 5.1).

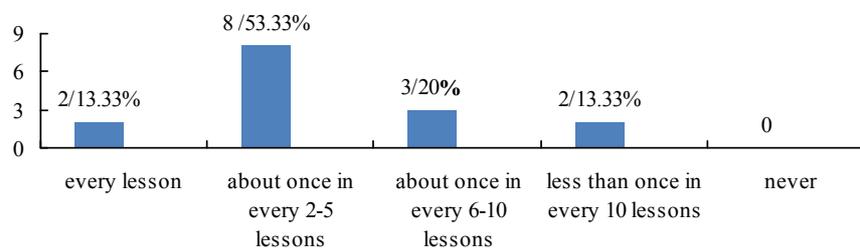


Figure 3. Responses to Q5 “Approximately how often do you use TBLT?”

4.4 Training in TBLT

In response to Q6 “Have you had any training in TBLT?” none of the participants answered in a positive way. This issue is also highlighted by the participants for the open-ended items (Qs 10 and 11). Moreover, as described by one participant: ‘There is no training for TBLT in my university. TBLT was really popular for a period of time and I learnt it by reading articles and books’. Some teachers in this study suggest “teachers should be given some training of TBLT”.

There is limited opportunity for teachers to develop their teaching skills; it seems that the only accessible way for teachers to develop this is by self-learning. Teachers are left with instructions to use methods they are not familiar with without any institutional support. It is not surprising to see that around 65% in this study have a low level of understanding of TBLT (see Figure 2). About 20% of the questionnaire participants think that their limited understanding of task-based instruction led them to avoid using TBLT (see Table 1). This finding provides further support for Nunan’s (2003, p.606) statement that a major problem in Chinese teacher education is the lack of adequate and appropriate teaching training. This specific factor will be given more details in Section 5.

4.5 Factors Impeding the Implementation of TBLT

Concerning for what main reasons teachers avoid TBLT implementation, three items, including one closed-ended question (Q9) and two open-ended items (Qs 10 and 11), were presented and analyzed. The quantitative and qualitative data will be illustrated in turn here. The answers reveal considerable variation in teachers’ reasons for reluctance to use TBLT application.

4.5.1 Quantitative Results

Table 1 presents the responses to Q9 a multiple-choice question investigating the factors that impede the implementation of TBLT. Multiple responses are possible here, so the total exceeds 26.

Table 1. Factors that impede the implementation of TBLT

Options	Total responses	Proportion
Materials in textbooks are not suitable for using TBLT.	14	53.85%
Large class size is an obstacle to use task-based methods.	13	50%
TBLT requires much preparation time compared to other approaches.	9	34.62%
Students are not used to task-based learning.	7	26.92%
I have very little knowledge of task-based instruction.	5	19.23%
I have difficulty in assessing learners’ task-based performance.	5	19.23%
I have limited target language proficiency.	1	3.85%
Total	54	

As shown in Table 1, 53.85% choose ‘Materials in textbooks are not suitable for using TBLT as the main reason. Half of the participants (50%) believe that large class size is an obstacle to use task-based methods. 34.62% hold the view that ‘TBLT requires much preparation time compared to other approaches’. In addition, around 20% of

the participants found that their limited knowledge of TBLT and the difficulty of task design and assessment are the factors that impeding the implementation of TBLT.

To get further information about the feasibility of TBLT implementation, two open-ended questions (Qs 10 and 11) were explored. Ten people answered these questions in total with 17 separate answers. Though four out of ten participants held very positive attitude toward TBLT implementation, others thought that TBLT could not be easily adopted in the Chinese context due to various factors. Unsurprisingly, there is a significant overlap between data collected from the open-ended questions and that of the closed-ended question. Details will be discussed in the following section.

4.5.2 Qualitative Results

The answers resulted from the open-ended items (Qs 10 and 11) were coded into themes by using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes and codes generated from the data are listed as follows:

- 1). shortage of appropriate teaching Materials;
- 2). classroom management in large classes;
- 3). high requirements for teachers:
 - a. the difficulty of task design and task assessment;
 - b. the complexity of TBLT to be carried out;

The lack of suitable materials for using TBLT is one of the most serious constraints in implementing TBLT in this study. Though many research studies stress the importance of TBLT, there are few genuinely task-based textbooks available (Rooney, 2000; Willis & Willis, 2007, p. 201); ‘this popular and strongly SLA-based methodology has been eschewed by course books’ (Mishan, 2013, p. 273). The findings in this study provide further support for this claim as more than half of the participants believe that ‘Materials in textbooks are not suitable for using TBLT’ (see Table 1). In the open-ended questions, teachers address this issue in the following aspects. First, there lacks textbook that is relevant to TBLT, as they wrote ‘I find myself short of appropriate materials when I want to use TBLT’ and ‘textbook compiling need to be initiated and designed in line with the TBLT so as to make it workable’. Secondly, teachers are not satisfied with the quality of tasks in TBLT-oriented textbook as they think ‘TBLT designed in textbooks does not quite fit the physical world’. In other words, tasks designed in the textbooks are not authentic. However, according to Ellis (2003, p. 6), one of the most important characteristic of a task is authenticity, which means ‘task needs to correspond to some real-world activity’. Moreover, teachers found the management in large classes can be a problem. Students have different levels of English competence which is challenging for teachers to implement TBLT. One participant perceived that ‘the English competence of EFL learners play sorts of decisive role in the applicability of TBLT in the English language class’.

As discussed earlier in this section, there is limited availability of ready-made task-based materials and textbooks designed to fit TBLT, leading teachers to believe that the only way to implement TBLT is to create their own complete set of teaching materials (Hobbs, 2011). However, task design for EFL teachers can be quite challenging, when they, as individual practitioners, have to consider various questions, like how to make the tasks interesting, how to group students and the appropriate amount of input in the pre-task cycle at the same time. For example, one comments in the questionnaire that ‘It is very difficult to design interesting and appropriate tasks. If the task is time-consuming and difficult to do, EFL learners might lose enthusiasm to finish it’. Apart from task design, task assessment is another challenge for Chinese EFL teachers. For example, the participants maintain ‘How to design good tasks and how to assess the effectiveness of the tasks are worth of much attention’ and ‘It is not hard to implement the tasks but it is not easy to assess how far the tasks work effectively on the learners’. This echoes the findings in Table 1, where around 20% of the teachers state that they have very little knowledge of TBLT and they find it very difficult to assess learners’ task-based performance.

Furthermore, the participants in this study also found it is very challenging to implement TBLT. For example, one participant described, “The idea of TBLT is wonderful, but it’s difficult to implement for teaching practitioners. That’s why so many English teaching methods are coming and going quickly”. Implementing TBLT has high requirements for teachers in refer to understanding of concept of task, the implication of the task-based instruction and also evaluation of the task performance. This can be revealed in the words of one participant: ‘Assessing the students’ performance appropriately requires a lot from the teachers’ side, like rich knowledge on the task, quick mind, target language fluency and so on’. The findings in this study provide further evidence for the statement made by Butler (2011). According to Butler (2011, p. 41), non-native English-speaking ELT teachers often do not feel confident of their sociocultural and strategic competence when

introducing communicative activities in class, or when assessing student' communicative competence. It is clear that some Chinese ELT teachers in this study feel intimidated by TBLT implementation due to the requirement for a high level of language proficiency and communicative and pragmatic competence.

5. Discussion

In this section, the participants' attitudes toward TBLT regarding their familiarity with TBLT and the use of TBLT are discussed (see Section 5.1). Since the focus of this study is to investigate factors that impede the implementation of TBLT, details on this will be illustrated. In order to improve the situation and encourage the successful implementation of TBLT, suggestions for best practice are illustrated in Section 5.2. Suggestions are mainly focused on the following aspects, namely the pre-service and in-service teacher training and teachers' further development.

5.1 Teachers' Attitude toward TBLT

As discussed in Section 4.3, around 65% of the participants have used TBLT in their teaching and among these, 88.24%, which is 15 out of 17 people are still using TBLT. In addition, Figure 3 shows that more than half the questionnaire participants (53.33%) use TBLT at least once every 2-5 lessons. This shows that the frequency of use is high. The results indicate that Chinese EFL teachers held positive attitudes toward the practice of TBLT in their classroom though the comparatively lower-level understanding of TBLT (see Figure 2). In other words, this finding suggests that these teachers are willing to try out TBLT in their teaching.

However, the existence of situational constraints (including contextual and cultural constraints) may lead to the failure of implementation despite favorable attitudes (Oskamp, 1991; Cheng & Moses, 2011). In this research, though most of the Chinese ELT teachers may prefer the innovative task-based approach, due to constraints from the local context, (for example, large class size and the form-focused examination system), teachers may adopt the language-focused traditional teaching approach in their teaching. Therefore, the factors that hinder the implementation of TBLT will be addressed in the following discussion.

5.2 The Difficulties

As discussed in Section 2.1, educational innovation is a process, which needs to be managed actively throughout its formulation, adoption, and evaluation. Therefore, effective change management of any curriculum innovation is of great importance to its success. Educational change involves different parties in an education system (such as teachers, teacher trainers, material designers, etc.). Thus educational change management needs to be aware of the consequences for all parties within an education system. It is clear that introduction of TBLT as an innovative pedagogy in EFL teaching in Chinese higher education will have implications for course book design, teacher training, examination systems. Section 4.5 presents constraints that made the participants avoid using TBLT in a variety of areas within the education system, including the lack of task-based coursebook, the large class size and teachers' ability to use TBLT. It seems that policy makers for the Chinese EFL curriculum innovation did not adopt effective management strategies in order to facilitate the sustainable and successful implementation of TBLT.

Findings in Section 4.5 illustrate that the large class size is an obstacle for teachers to implement TBLT. Around 40% of the participants' classes have more than 50 students and around 11% have more than 100 (see Figure 1). It is widely accepted that a language class with 50-60 or more is 'large', even though there is no quantitative definition of what constitute a 'large class'. While it is not possible to generalize on the basis of a very limited amount of data, it is interesting to note that these results corroborate the findings of the survey conducted by the National College English Committee, which revealed that the average number of students in college English classes surpassed 80 in 2005 (Meng, 2009). English as an international language is playing an ever-increasingly important role in the world. Due to China's large population and the larger number of college students since 1999, the large size of classes, at all levels of education, seems to be a challenge for teachers. The ratio of College English teachers versus students is around 1:100 according to a survey carried out by Shu (2004, p. 190). However, this phenomenon will not disappear in the near future as the number of English learners in China has increased with surprising speed. It is clear from the above that the English teaching environment in Chinese colleges seems to be a big challenge for any pedagogy, but particularly for TBLT, since task-based teaching encourages interaction in the classroom and many tasks are carried out in groups. Therefore, Chinese EFL teachers have to develop the skills and competences to deal with implementing TBLT in large class sizes.

Moreover, as mentioned in Section 4.5, there are few genuinely task-based textbooks available (Rooney, 2000; Willis & Willis 2007, p. 201). In China, a variety of course books have been compiled and published since the nationwide reform of college English language teaching in 2004; however, among the various versions of course

books, few perfectly fit the particular requirements of the TBLT approach (Huang & Zhao, 2013). Therefore, it seems that teachers have to adapt the course book to fit the principles of TBLT if they wish to carry out tasks in class (Rooney, 2000). Willis and Willis (2007, pp. 201-212) offer a range of solutions for teachers to integrate tasks into their course book even if the course book is not designed for task-based teaching. It is possible to carry out TBLT in the classroom even without the genuinely task-based textbooks. However, it poses challenges for Chinese EFL teachers to be able to adapt the teaching material.

Furthermore, the data in this present study shows that most of the teachers are not confident in understanding the principles and practices of TBLT. The participants in this study also found it is very challenging to implement TBLT. This exposed a major problem in Chinese teacher education; the lack of adequate and appropriate teaching training (Nunan, 2003, p. 606). As discussed in Section 4.4, there is limited opportunity for teachers to develop their teaching skills; it seems that the only accessible way for teachers to develop this is by self-learning. However, educational change requires changes in teacher cognition and identities in the classroom as the process of becoming a teacher involves formation and transformation of teacher identity (Flores & Day, 2006). Pre-service and in-service training play crucial roles in shaping and mediating teacher cognition and identity (see Sections 2.2 and 2.3). Teacher education should provide support for Chinese EFL teachers to reconstruct their knowledge and skills and re-conceptualize their professional identity when faced with the National English Curriculum Reform.

5.3 Implications for Practice

As discussed in Section 5.2, there is a need for most of the Chinese ELT teachers to further develop their professional skills, in terms of teaching in large class sizes, material development skills, English proficiency, sociocultural and strategic competence. It seems that a more practical and efficient teacher training program should be developed to deal with problems in the Chinese context. However, the current MA TEFL programs in China are being criticized in terms of overemphasizing the development of teachers' subject matter knowledge (Zhang, 2008; Liu & Zhang, 2014). This training leads to 'a teacher education program aimed at memorializing knowledge, never at nurturing and enhancing teachers' professional practical ability' (Jiang, 2012, p. 14). In addition, the EFL teaching methodology course in the MA programs only briefly introduces various language teaching approaches (e.g., communicative language teaching, the audiolingual method, TBLT, Grammar Translation method) without integrating with any teaching practice. TBLT is only introduced as one of the various language teaching approaches and no special attention or focus has been given to such task-based learning and teaching (Liu & Zhang, 2014). It seems that there is a gap between the curricula of EFL and teacher education in Chinese higher education. In order to maintain a sustainable curriculum change, there is a strong need for the adjustment of Chinese EFL teacher education in terms of the curriculum design, training focus, and training model. Moreover, the Chinese EFL teacher education should 'empower teachers in constructing their personal theory when confronting educational changes' (Zheng, 2015, p. 53).

Furthermore, findings in this study show that there are limited chances for EFL teacher to attend in-service training in TBLT. From the questionnaires which support this study it is evident that none of the participants had some training in TBLT. According to Meng and Tajaroensuk (2013), the shortage of good and practical in-service professional program in Chinese higher education affects EFL teachers' professional development. The findings in this study further support this statement. Teachers are left with instructions to use methods they are not familiar with without any institutional support. Therefore, it seems that developing a support system for the professional development of Chinese EFL teachers in order to respond to the on-going reforms of ELT is both necessary and crucial.

In terms of teacher training and further development, teachers' ability to adapt or develop teaching material should be highlighted. Teachers in China are frequently required to use a coursebook mandated by the institution. Thus teachers need to be capable of evaluating, adapting and producing materials, to ensure the teaching material matches the learners and suit their individual teaching contexts, that is, as Tomlinson (2003, p. 1) suggests 'every teacher needs to be a material developer'. Therefore, teacher trainers should bear in mind teachers' ability to evaluate, adapt and produce materials. In addition, as illustrated in this section, teachers' ability to deal with large class size and their language proficiency and sociocultural and strategic competence should be addressed in teacher training. In order to facilitate teacher teaching, it may be that a national sharing online platform should be created for teachers to exchange ideas on teaching or task design in the Chinese context. This could provide more useful resources in the areas of further study and self-development for teachers. By sharing the design of task-based teaching, teachers can save a lot of time and energy preparing their lessons while a more contextualized task-based teaching model can be created.

6. Conclusion and Outlook

This study investigated teachers' views and understanding of TBLT and its implementation in the Chinese context. The results in the study show that though there are constraints from various aspects (including, the teaching materials, large class size etc.) for the successful implementation of TBLT, TBLT as a communicative teaching approach received very positive feedback from teachers. The majority of the teachers in this study hold positive views towards TBLT even though they have a low-level understanding of principles and practices of TBLT. This study also highlighted the need for the Chinese ELT teachers to further develop their professional skills and suggestions for teacher education and further development were made. In addition, the empirical research contributes to enriching the data on the TBLT practices in the EFL context. It contributes to a better understanding of curriculum innovation and the English teachers' professional development in the Chinese context, all of which have implications for the implementation of other innovative teaching methods in China. This research also yields informative insights regarding sustainable curriculum change management, policy implementation and professional development of English teachers in the EFL context.

Acknowledgments

Supported by the Chinese MOE Key Research Project of Philosophy and Social Science (15JZD048), and the MOE Project of Key Research Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences (15JJD740007), this study is part of the doctoral research of the first-named author. In addition, the author would like to acknowledge the help and support from Prof. Angela Chambers and Dr Freda Mishan.

References

- Barnard, R., & Viet, N.G. (2010). Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT): A Vietnamese case study using narrative frames to elicit teachers' beliefs. *Language Education in Asia*, 1, 77-86. http://dx.doi.org/10.5746/LEiA/10/V1/A07/Barnard_Nguyen
- Borg, S. (2006). *Teacher cognition and language education*. London: Continuum.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper (Ed.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology* (pp. 57-70). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Butler, Y. (2011). The implementation of communicative and task-based language teaching in the Asia-Pacific region. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 31, 36-57. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0267190511000122>
- Cao, L. (2012). A feasibility study of task-based teaching of college English writing in Chinese EFL context. *English Language Teaching*, 5(10), 80-91. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v5n10p80>
- Carless, D. (1997). Managing systematic curriculum change: A critical analysis of Hong Kong's target-oriented curriculum. *International Review of Language Education*, 43(4), 349-366. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1023/A:1003027923361>
- Carless, D. (2003). Factors in the implementation of task-based teaching in primary schools. *System*, 31(4), 485-500. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2003.03.002>
- Carless, D. (2004). 'Issues in teachers' re-interpretation of a task-based innovation in primary schools. *TESOL Quarterly*, 38(4), 639-662. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3588283>
- Carless, D. (2005). Prospects for the implementation of assessment for learning. *Assessment in Education*, 12, 39-54. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0969594042000333904>
- Carless, D. (2007). The suitability of task-based approaches for secondary schools: Perspectives from Hong Kong. *System*, 35(4), 595-608. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2007.09.003>
- Carless, D. (2009). Revisiting the TBLT versus P-P-P debate: Voices from Hong Kong. *Asian Journal of English Language Teaching*, 19, 49-66.
- Carless, D. (2012). Task-based language teaching in Confucian-heritage setting: Prospects and challenges. *On Task*, 2(1), 4-8.
- Cheng, X.Y. and Moses, S. (2011). Perceptions and implementation of task-based language teaching among secondary school EFL teachers in China. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 2(24).
- Day, C. (1999). *Developing teachers: The challenge of life-long learning*. London: Routledge.
- Day, C., & Gu, Q (2010). *The new lives of teachers*. London: Routledge.

- Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics: Quantitative, qualitative and mixed methodologies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Du, Y. (2012). Cooperative learning in college English class in Chinese context. *Contemporary English Teaching and Learning in Non-English Speaking Countries*, 1(1), 78-94.
- Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, R. (2006) Current issues in the teaching of grammar: An SLA perspective. *TESOL Quarterly*, 40(1), 83-107. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/40264512>
- Evdokia, K. (1996). Using attitude scales to investigate teachers' attitudes to the communicative approach. *ELT Journal*, 50(3), 187-198. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/elt/50.3.187>
- Flores, M., & Day, C. (2006). Contexts which shape and reshape new teachers' identities: A multi-perspective study. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 22(2), 219-232. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2005.09.002>
- Freeman, D. (1993). Renaming experience/reconstructing practice: Developing new understanding of teaching. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 9(5-6), 485-497. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0742-051X\(93\)90032-C](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0742-051X(93)90032-C)
- Freeman, D. (2013). Teacher thinking, learning, and identity. In K. Hyland, & L. Wong (Eds.), *Innovation and change in English language education* (pp. 123-136). Routledge.
- Gardner, R. C. (2000). Correlation, causation, motivation and second language acquisition. *Canadian Psychology*, 41, 1-24. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/h0086854>
- Graves, V., & Shoen, B. (2006). 'Innovability' analysis: Teachers in task-based language education. Retrieved from: <http://www.hawaii.edu/eli/research/research-papers/papers-research/Graves-and-Shoen-2006.pdf>
- Hobbs, J. (2011). *Practical steps towards task-based teaching*. Tokyo, JALT.
- Hu, R. (2013). Task-based language teaching: Responses from Chinese teachers of English. *TESL-EJ*, 16(4). Retrieved from <http://tesl-ej.org/pdf/ej64/a1.pdf>
- Huang, J. B., & Zhao, Y. (2013). The design of task-based college English coursebooks: A study from the perspective of task-based language teaching. *Polyglossia*, 24.
- Jeon, I., & Hahn, J. (2006). Exploring EFL teachers' perceptions of task-based language teaching: A case study of Korean secondary school classroom practice. *Asian EFL Journal*, 8(1), 123-143.
- Littlewood, W. (2007). Communicative and task-based language teaching in East-Asian classroom. *Language Teaching*, 40(3), 243-249. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0261444807004363>
- Liu, Y. Y. (2015). *Task-based language teaching (TBLT) in Chinese higher education: EFL teachers' perceptions* (unpublished Doctoral dissertation). University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland.
- Liu, Y., & Zhang, Y. (2014). Investigations on status of English major postgraduates' academic research ability cultivation. *Journal of Higher Education Finance*, 17(2), 52-58.
- Lowe, R. (2012). Promoting L2 use as a means of facilitating TBLT in Japanese classrooms. *The Language Teacher*, 36(6), 21-26.
- Meng, F. (2009). Encourage learners in the large class to speak English in group work. *English Language Teaching*, 2(3). <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v2n3p219>
- Meng, J., & Tajarosensuk, S. (2013). An investigation of tertiary EFL teachers' problems in their in-service professional development. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 4(6), 1356-1364. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4304/jltr.4.6.1356-1364>
- Miao, H. (2014). The task-based teaching of writing to big classes in Chinese EFL setting. *English Language Teaching*, 7(3), 63-70. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v7n3p63>
- Mishan, F. (2013). Studies of pedagogy. In B. Tomlinson (Ed.), *Applied linguistics and materials development* (pp. 269-287), London: Continuum.
- MOE (Ministry of Education). (2001). *National English curriculum standards for nine-year compulsory education and senior higher school education*. Beijing: People's Education Press.
- Nunan, D. (2003). The impact of English as a global language on educational policies and practices in the Asia-Pacific region. *TESOL Quarterly*, 37(4), 589-613. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3588214>
- Oskamp, S. (1991). *Attitudes and opinions* (2nd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

- Rooney, K. (2000). Redesigning Non-task-based materials to fit a task-based framework. *The Internet TESL Journal*, VI(12). Retrieved from <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Rooney-Task-Based.html>
- Richards, J. (1998). *Beyond training: Perspectives on language teacher education*. Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, J., & Lockhart, C. (1994). *Reflective teaching in second language teaching classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511667169>
- Shu, D. (2004). *EFL in China: Problems and suggested solutions*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0305741004000542>
- Skehan, P. (1998). *A cognitive approach to language learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Slaouti, D., & Motteram, G. (2006). Reconstructing practice: Language teacher education and ICT. In P. Hubbard, & M. Levy (Eds.), *Teacher education in CALL*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1075/llt.14.09sla>
- Tomlinson, B. (2003). Introduction in B. Tomlinson (ed.), *Developing materials for language teaching* (pp. 1-14), London: Continuum.
- Van den Branden, K. (2006). Training teachers: Task-based as well? In Van den Branden, K., (Ed.), *Task-based language teaching: From theory to practice* (pp. 217-248), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511667282>
- Wagner, J. (1991). Innovations in foreign language teaching. In Phillipson, R. et al. (Eds.), *Foreign language pedagogy research: A commemorative volume for claus færch*, Clevedon : Multilingual Matters.
- Walters, A., & Vilches, M. (2013). The management of change. In K. Hyland, & L. Wong (Eds.), *Innovation and change in English language education*, Routledge.
- Willis, D., & Willis. J. (2007). *Doing task-based teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Zhang, W.M. (2008). *In search of English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' knowledge of vocabulary instruction* (unpublished Doctoral dissertation). Georgia State University, USA.
- Zheng, H. (2015). *Teacher beliefs as a complex system: English language teachers in China*. Springer International Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-23009-2>
- Zheng, X. M., & Adamson, B. (2003). The pedagogy of a secondary school teacher of English in the People's Republic of China: Changing the stereotypes. *RELC Journal*, 34(3), 323-337. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/003368820303400304>
- Zheng, X. M., & Borg, S. (2014). Task-based learning and teaching in China: Secondary school teachers' beliefs and practices. *Language Teaching Research*, 18(2), 205-221. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1362168813505941>

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>).