

The Localization Dilemmas and Solutions of Task-Based Language Teaching in China

Mingxuan Wang

Harbin Normal University, Harbin 150025, China

Copyright: © 2026 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: Since its proposal in the 1980s, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has become a pivotal direction for global foreign language teaching reform due to its philosophy of emphasizing “learning by doing” and focusing on linguistic meaning and communicative functions. China’s basic education English curriculum reform has also incorporated TBLT into curriculum standards and advocated its implementation in classrooms. However, after more than two decades of localized practice, TBLT has encountered numerous dilemmas in Chinese classrooms: the coexistence of theoretical advocacy and practical deviation, as well as formal imitation and substantive alienation. This paper systematically sorts out the theoretical core of TBLT, deeply analyzes the practical constraints it faces in China such as large class sizes, examination pressure, and teachers’ professional competence, summarizes the specific manifestations of the dilemmas, combs through domestic scholars’ attempts at localized improvement, and explores the possible paths for the integration of TBLT with China’s examination system.

Keywords: Task-based language teaching; Localization; English teaching; Examination system; Teaching dilemmas

Online publication: April 9, 2026

1. Introduction

Over the past three decades, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has undoubtedly been one of the most influential foreign language teaching methods. Centered on communicative tasks, it advocates that learners acquire language naturally in the process of completing real or simulated tasks, changing the linear logic of “learning first and then practicing” in traditional teaching to an integrated model of “learning by doing.” In 2001, the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China issued the *English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education and General Senior High Schools (Experimental Edition)* ^[1], which explicitly proposed “advocating the task-based teaching approach” for the first time, and this orientation has been maintained in all subsequent revisions of the curriculum standards ^[2].

Nevertheless, there is a stark contrast between the enthusiasm for theoretical advocacy and the cold reception in classroom practice. On the one hand, TBLT frequently appears in open lessons and demonstration lessons, becoming a “standard configuration” for teaching reform; on the other hand, in daily classrooms, teachers still adhere to the traditional PPP (Presentation, Practice, Production) model, leaving TBLT in the

awkward predicament of “a show for open lessons and absence from regular lessons.” This phenomenon of “two separate tracks” reflects the profound dilemmas of TBLT in the process of localization in China.

2. The theoretical core of task-based language teaching

To understand the dilemmas of TBLT, it is first necessary to return to its theoretical origins and clarify its core propositions.

2.1. The definition and characteristics of a task

The core concept of TBLT is the “task.” Nunan defines a communicative task as “a classroom activity in which learners understand, process, produce or interact in the target language, with their attention primarily focused on meaning rather than form,” emphasizing the promotion of language practice through the design of real tasks^[3]. Willis further points out that the essential characteristics of a task are: meaning-centered, with clear communicative goals, having some connection with the real world, and the completion of the task taking precedence over the accurate use of language^[4].

These definitions reveal the basic stance of TBLT: the ultimate goal of language learning is communication, and the cultivation of communicative competence cannot rely on rule memorization and mechanical drills, but must enable learners to experience, attempt, and construct language in real language use.

2.2. The implementation framework of TBLT

The implementation framework of TBLT proposed by Willis is widely cited, which consists of three stages^[4]:

Pre-task stage: Teachers introduce the topic, activate relevant language and schemata, and prepare learners for task completion. This stage usually involves forms such as vocabulary input and task demonstration.

Task cycle stage: As the core link, it includes three sub-links: (1) Task performance: Students complete the task in groups, with teachers patrolling without correcting errors; (2) Planning: Students prepare to report the task completion to the whole class; (3) Reporting: Students present the task results. Throughout the process, meaning expression always takes precedence over linguistic accuracy.

Post-task stage: After the task is completed, teachers guide students to focus on the linguistic forms used in the task and conduct necessary practice and consolidation. This stage is a reflection and refinement of language use in the task.

The uniqueness of this framework lies in that the learning of linguistic forms takes place after communicative tasks, not before. The underlying assumption is that after learners experience the “expression dilemmas” in communication, they will pay more active and in-depth attention to relevant linguistic forms.

2.3. The cognitive rationale of TBLT

The cognitive rationale of TBLT is mainly derived from second language acquisition research, especially the explanation of the internal mechanism of language learning from the perspective of cognitive psychology. Long’s Interaction Hypothesis holds that the key to language acquisition lies in meaning negotiation in the communication process. When communication barriers arise, learners make interactive adjustments such as confirmation, clarification, or repetition to make language input comprehensible, thus promoting the development of language competence^[5]. Such interaction not only helps to understand meaning but also guides learners to pay attention to the forms of the target language.

Swain’s Output Hypothesis further supplements the cognitive explanation^[6]. She points out that

comprehensible input alone is not sufficient to promote the all-round development of language competence; language output forces learners to shift from semantic processing to syntactic processing, that is, to pay attention to the accuracy of linguistic forms while expressing meaning. This shift in the depth of processing is an important driving force for the development of interlanguage^[6].

TBLT precisely provides a practical space for these two cognitive mechanisms: the interactive negotiation in the task implementation process creates a lot of opportunities for comprehensible input, while the reporting session after the task urges learners to express accurately under the real communicative needs. This teaching arrangement of “meaning first, form later” conforms to the natural law of learners’ cognitive processing, enabling language learning to occur naturally in real communicative situations and effectively promoting the reconstruction and development of the interlanguage system.

3. Practical constraints of TBLT in China

3.1. Dilemmas in teaching organization caused by large class sizes

Class sizes in primary and secondary schools in China are generally large, with 40 to 50 students per class in urban schools and even more than 60 in rural areas. Such class sizes pose threefold challenges to TBLT: First, limited interaction space. Group work is the main organizational form of TBLT, but in large classes, teachers find it difficult to attend to the progress of all groups, and some groups may deviate from the task track without timely guidance. Second, unequal reporting opportunities. Only a few groups can present in the reporting session after task completion, depriving most students of the chance of public expression and greatly reducing the communicative value of the task. Third, increased monitoring difficulty. During task performance, teachers need to observe the language use of each group to collect materials for subsequent form-focused instruction, but large class sizes make such formative assessment almost unfeasible.

3.2. Dilemmas in evaluation orientation caused by the examination system

Examinations are a key variable restricting teaching reform. China’s senior high school entrance examination and college entrance examination are mainly paper-based, focusing on the accuracy of linguistic knowledge and the assessment of reading and writing skills, which is structurally misaligned with TBLT’s emphasis on communicative competence and listening and speaking skills. Specifically, the examination system brings threefold pressures: First, the squeeze on time allocation. TBLT requires a lot of classroom time for task organization and result presentation, while examination-oriented teaching needs intensive test point training, and it is difficult to balance the two within limited class hours. Second, the misalignment of evaluation criteria. TBLT focuses on “whether the communicative task is completed,” while examinations focus on “whether the grammatical options are chosen correctly.” When the successful experience in the classroom cannot be converted into score rewards in examinations, both teachers and students will experience value confusion. Third, the narrowing of teaching content. TBLT advocates the introduction of complex real-world topics, but examination pressure forces teachers to narrow teaching content into a list of test points, with the authenticity and interest of tasks giving way to the utilitarianism of exam preparation.

3.3. Dilemmas in professional support caused by teachers’ professional competence

TBLT places much higher demands on teachers than traditional teaching methods. It requires teachers to have: a high level of linguistic competence to cope with various unexpected expression needs in tasks; strong classroom management ability to flexibly adjust in the dynamic process of tasks; and in-depth teaching understanding to

accurately grasp when to intervene, withdraw, and focus on forms.

However, there are still some shortcomings in the overall professional competence of China's English teaching force. Teachers in rural areas have limited linguistic competence and cannot freely respond to open expressions in tasks; even urban teachers, who mostly grew up in the traditional teaching model, lack personal experience and systematic training in TBLT. The insufficient professional support for teachers leads to the frequent "distortion and deformation" of TBLT in its implementation.

4. Specific manifestations of localization dilemmas

Despite the sufficient cognitive rationale of TBLT in theory, it has encountered multiple dilemmas in the process of localization practice in China. These dilemmas are not the fault of the theory itself, but are rooted in the complex educational ecological environment. An in-depth analysis of these specific manifestations helps us understand the real challenges faced by the implementation of the theory.

4.1. The "drillization" of tasks: Separation of name and reality

The most common phenomenon is the replacement of "tasks" with "drills." The so-called "tasks" designed by teachers are actually linguistic drills in the guise of tasks. For example, asking students to "make sentences with 'can' in pairs" seems to be interactive, but it is actually a variant of sentence pattern training. Such activities lack real communicative purposes, have no information gap, and do not involve meaning negotiation; in essence, they are traditional mechanical drills. Drills focus on the accurate practice of linguistic forms, while tasks focus on using language to solve practical problems and complete specific tasks. When students ask and answer questions while knowing each other's answers, language use loses the essence of communication and becomes a mechanical imitation of sentence structures. The deep-seated reasons for this are teachers' insufficient understanding of the essence of tasks and excessive attention to linguistic forms under examination pressure. "Tasks" have become a label to prove the "advancement" of teaching philosophy, while classroom practice still follows the old path.

4.2. The "theatricalization" of the process: A show for open lessons

In open lessons and demonstration lessons, TBLT is often pushed to the other extreme: excessive pursuit of formal completeness and lively scenes. Teachers design tasks elaborately, and students "perform" tasks in the classroom rather than "complete" them. This theatrical tendency has brought serious consequences. First, TBLT is alienated into a teaching "show," whose complexity is simplified into visible steps and lively scenes, while the internal cognitive mechanisms, such as meaning negotiation and attention allocation, are ignored. Second, the success of such theatricalization is difficult to replicate. Thus, a state of "two separate tracks" is formed between open lessons and daily teaching: TBLT is vigorously carried out in a lively way in open lessons, while solid drills are done in regular lessons. This separation strengthens teachers' sense of alienation from TBLT, making it difficult for them to truly integrate it into daily teaching practice.

4.3. The "disorder" of classrooms: Loss of management control

Another common dilemma is classroom disorder. When teachers attempt to carry out real task activities, due to the inaccurate grasp of task difficulty and ineffective classroom management, the activities may turn into chaos: students chat in their mother tongue, tasks deviate from the theme, and group work gets out of control. The experience of disorder often brings a strong sense of frustration to teachers. When they see the classroom

in a mess, and the teaching goals fail to be achieved, they tend to form a stereotype that “task-based teaching is inefficient and not suitable for students.” This sense of frustration prompts them to return to the familiar comfort zone—the traditional lecture mode and mechanical drills. This forms a vicious circle of “attempt-failure-withdrawal,” making it difficult for TBLT to take root in practice.

5. Existing explorations on localized improvement

Faced with the dilemmas, domestic scholars and frontline teachers have never stopped exploring. These localized attempts have accumulated valuable experience for the implementation of TBLT in China.

5.1. Integration of TBLT and traditional teaching methods

In response to the tension between TBLT and the existing teaching tradition, Cheng proposed that TBLT and the PPP model are not completely opposed, but can be integrated with each other^[7]. He advocated flexible selection in teaching practice: for simple and highly regular language items, the PPP model can still be used for direct presentation and practice to improve teaching efficiency; for complex communicative skills that require comprehensive application, TBLT should be adopted to provide students with opportunities to use language in real situations. This “hybrid model” lowers the implementation threshold of TBLT and makes it more acceptable to frontline teachers.

5.2. Localized transformation of the task cycle

In view of the problems such as inappropriate difficulty and excessive cognitive load that are prone to occur in the implementation of TBLT, Luo and other scholars explored the localized design strategy of the task cycle. The core idea of this strategy is to decompose a large and complex task into several micro-tasks, each focusing on a specific sub-goal. The micro-tasks form a logical progressive relationship, where the completion of the previous task is the basis for the next one, and all micro-tasks ultimately point to a comprehensive final task^[8]. This design of the task cycle not only ensures the integrity and authenticity of the task but also decomposes the cognitive load of a single task, enabling students to approach the task goal step by step.

5.3. Integration of tasks and textbooks

In response to the problem of disconnection between task design and textbooks commonly reflected by teachers, Gong and other scholars put forward the idea of “textbook-based task design.” This idea emphasizes that tasks should not be an additional burden divorced from textbooks, but an organic extension and deepening of textbook teaching^[9].

Specifically, teachers can design communicative tasks matching the themes, functions, and language items of textbook units based on them. For example, after learning the relevant vocabulary and sentence patterns of a certain topic, design a communicative problem that needs to be solved by using this linguistic knowledge. In this way, tasks form an internal connection with textbooks: textbooks provide language support for tasks, and tasks provide real situations for the application of textbook content.

6. Paths for the integration of TBLT and China’s examination system

6.1. Adjustment of the value orientation of examination reform

In recent years, the reform of the college entrance examination English has shown a tendency to tilt towards

communicative competence. The gradual promotion of listening and speaking tests, the emergence of question types such as continuation writing, and the improvement of discourse difficulty and authenticity are all leading teaching back to the essence of language use. This reform direction provides an institutional space for TBLT: as examinations pay more and more attention to comprehensive language application ability, the ability cultivation in TBLT classrooms can be converted into score rewards.

6.2. Reverse adaptation of TBLT to examinations

TBLT can also take the initiative to adapt to examination needs on the premise of adhering to its core philosophy. Common examination topics can be integrated into task design, making the task completion process a process of accumulating topic corpus at the same time; in the form-focused instruction stage after tasks, targeted reinforcement of grammatical items and vocabulary involved in examinations can be carried out; in the task reporting stage, written reporting forms can be introduced to train students' written expression ability.

6.3. Development of “exam-oriented tasks”

A promising exploration direction is the design of “exam-oriented tasks.” The so-called exam-oriented tasks are communicative activities formed by task-based transformation based on examination question types. For example, transforming a cloze test into a group discussion task: students first fill in the blanks independently, then discuss the basis for answers in groups, and finally share problem-solving strategies with the whole class. Such tasks not only serve exam preparation, but also retain the essence of communicative interaction.

6.4. Introduction of formative assessment

The real implementation of TBLT depends on the in-depth reform of the evaluation mechanism. If the completion of tasks is included in formative assessment and combined with the final exam results in a certain proportion to form the final grade, teachers and students will receive institutional incentives to implement TBLT. The ongoing reform of “process assessment” attempted in some schools is a beneficial exploration in this direction.

7. Conclusion

The localization process of TBLT in China reflects the complex interaction between imported educational concepts and local educational traditions. The root of the dilemmas does not lie in TBLT itself, but in its connection with reality; the exploration of solutions should not stop at adhering to or abandoning the concept, but at seeking a reconciliation between the concept and reality. From a more macro perspective, the localization of TBLT gives us the enlightenment that the introduction of any teaching method needs to go through a series of processes: understanding its theoretical core, transforming its operational forms, and reconstructing its relationship with the local context. Such localization is not a deviation from the original concept, but a new form growing in the new soil.

With the deepening of examination reform, the improvement of teachers' professional competence, and the accumulation of local research, TBLT is expected to find a more suitable living space in Chinese classrooms. The continuous advancement of this process requires the support of top-level design, the practical wisdom of frontline teachers, and more importantly, the rational reflection of educational researchers.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2001, English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education and General Senior High Schools (Experimental Edition), Beijing Normal University Press.
- [2] Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2022, English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition), Beijing Normal University Press.
- [3] Nunan D, 1989, Designing Tasks for the Communicative Classroom, Cambridge University Press.
- [4] Willis J, 1996, A Framework for Task-Based Learning, Longman.
- [5] Long M, 1985, A Role for Instruction in Second Language Acquisition.
- [6] Swain M, 1985, Communicative Competence: Some Roles of Comprehensible Input and Comprehensible Output in Its Development.
- [7] Cheng XT, 2004, Task-Based Language Teaching, Higher Education Press.
- [8] Luo SQ, 2008, A Study on Task Difficulty in Task-Based Language Testing, Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- [9] Gong YF, Luo SQ, 2015, Task-Based Language Teaching (Revised Edition), People's Education Press.

Publisher's note

Bio-Byword Scientific Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.