

A Brief Discussion on the Application of Task-based Language Teaching to Improve the Teaching Quality of English Communication Classes in Junior High Schools

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Abstract: With the progress and development of society and the continuous advancement of curriculum standard reform, society has higher requirements for students' English skills. The junior high school stage is the best time to cultivate students' communication skills, however, junior high school English classes are currently still based on traditional teaching as the main teaching method, which only focuses on cultivating students' reading and writing skills, thus neglecting the training of listening and speaking skills. Despite its evident benefits, the implementation of the task-based language teaching (TBLT) method in junior high school English communication classes is not without challenges. The current state of these classes reveals a significant gap in the integration of communicative tasks into the teaching process. This gap stems from a variety of factors, including the lack of appropriate resources, insufficient teacher training, and the deeply ingrained reliance on traditional teaching methods. This study will briefly explain the definition and characteristics of the task-based language teaching method, analyze the current situation of junior high school English communication classes, the difficulties of using TBLT in junior high school English classrooms, and the application methods of task-based teaching methods. The teaching method makes up for the shortcomings of English communication classes in junior high schools and improves the quality of teaching.

Keywords: Task-based language teaching; Junior high school English; Communication classroom; Second language acquisition

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1. Task-based language teaching (TBLT) method

1.1. Definition of TBLT

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) was proposed by American educationist Dewey in the 1990s based on the theory of constructivist theory. It advocates taking students as the main focus, emphasizing practical application as the primary goal, and assigning tasks in a task-oriented format. When conducting classroom

teaching, we advocate that teachers should start with students' abilities and needs, design specific and operable tasks around real student communication scenarios, and guide and help students to complete the tasks ^[1]. Task-based language teaching method is a theory further developed based on the communicative teaching method. It emphasizes learning through practice. Therefore, similar to communicative language teaching method, it advocates acquiring the target language from the real context. At the same time, it can also combine communication-oriented classes with traditional teaching method ^[2].

1.2. Features of TBLT

From the above, we can conclude that task-based language teaching method has the following characteristics. The first characteristic is authenticity, which emphasizes learning the target language through real-life topics and contexts. The second characteristic is emphasizing providing students with opportunities to acquire language naturally. The so-called natural acquisition means being able to learn through practice, learning through the use of language, and also learning by being able to use the target language flexibly in life, and finally achieve the goal of being able to use it in daily life after learning, thus forming a closed loop; instead of learning just for a single grammar point and example sentence like the traditional teaching method, in which the content that learners learn is separated from real life. The third characteristic is learner-centered teaching. Therefore, teachers are required to formulate tasks for specific student groups based on the number of students in the class, language mastery level, learning motivation, etc., so as to make the task-based language teaching method more efficient. The fourth characteristic is that it can stimulate students' learning motivation. Since the tasks come from real daily life, as long as the topics that the learners are interested in are selected, they can be guided to express themselves in the target language, thus improving their learning motivation. The fifth characteristic is that it emphasizes that learning and mastering the ability to use the target language is more important than learning the language form of the target language, but it can also take into account learning the language form of the target language.

1.3. Task composition

A task consists of six parts, namely purpose, context, meaning, authenticity, process, and outcome. The four most important parts are purpose, context, process, and outcome, which a qualified task must have.

2. Current teaching situation of junior high school English communication classes under the traditional teaching method model

2.1. Lack of communication classes

As mentioned above, the main purpose of English teaching in junior high schools is for examinations, especially in public high schools, because the current high school entrance examination syllabus does not test students' communication skills, and the so-called oral test is also very simple. The test paper still uses vocabulary and grammar, and students' reading and writing skills are the main examination contents, which makes both schools and learners pay insufficient attention to the cultivation of communication skills. Some schools do not even arrange classes for cultivating communication skills, leading to a situation where there is a lack of communication classes.

2.2. Rigid teaching methods

In exam-oriented education, the most important task of teachers is to ensure that students learn all the content in the high school entrance examination syllabus, which is a syllabus with clear goals and standard answers.

In order to test the teaching level of teachers and the learning level of students, the school will set up various assessment projects to check and assess the results, ranging from monthly exams to the final high school entrance exam. In order to make the teaching tasks go more smoothly, the school will also conduct assessments on students. Vertical management makes the teaching methods too rigid and can easily arouse students' rebellious psychology, leading to a decrease in learning motivation.

2.3. Single teaching content

Since the purpose of teaching under the traditional teaching method is oriented to the content of the high school entrance examination syllabus, no matter what topic appears in the textbook, the teaching content will be similar. For example, the part where students communicate and express their ideas will be completely removed from the classroom. Students will only learn three parts: words, grammar examples, and articles. When dealing with these three parts, teachers will mostly use the follow-up reading method, that is, learners follow the teachers' instructions and repeat continuously based on what the teacher read for memory training.

In addition, traditional teaching methods only emphasize delivering isolated knowledge points in a single classroom, which makes it impossible for learners to effectively and systematically connect all the knowledge points. Since there is no real context, students cannot connect the knowledge learned to real life.

2.4. Passive learners

The traditional teaching method is a teacher-centered approach. The role of students is only to follow the teacher's instructions and passively accept the content taught by the teacher. This results in the entire class being dominated by the teacher. Without self-thinking and self-expression, communication skills cannot be improved.

3. Reasons and difficulties in implementing communication classes

3.1. Teacher level

3.1.1. Incompatibility between traditional teaching methods and communication classes

In the realm of language education, communication classes have emerged as a pivotal approach to fostering students' "communicative skills." These classes aim to create a relaxed and engaging classroom atmosphere that encourages students to actively participate and freely express their thoughts. This pedagogical approach underscores the importance of student autonomy, daring them to voice their opinions and unleash their creativity within the classroom setting.

However, it has been observed that a majority of teachers continue to employ traditional teaching methods in these communication classes. Traditional teaching methods, characterized by teacher-led demonstrations and rote learning, often result in a rigid classroom environment. In this setup, students are expected to imitate the teacher's demonstrations and adhere to a standard answer. This teaching style, while effective in certain contexts, contradicts the very essence of communication classes.

Communication classes thrive on the principles of interaction, collaboration, and creative thinking. They are designed to move away from the conventional teacher-centric model to a more student-centric one. The focus is not just on the acquisition of knowledge, but also on the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Students are encouraged to explore, question, and construct knowledge rather than merely absorbing information passively.

In contrast, traditional teaching methods often limit students' potential for creativity and independent thinking. The emphasis on a "standard answer" restricts students' ability to think out of the box and stifles

their creative instincts. Moreover, the lack of interactive elements in traditional teaching methods can lead to a passive learning environment, thereby hindering the development of effective communication skills.

Therefore, it is evident that the traditional teaching methods, while still prevalent, are not ideally suited for communication classes. Teachers need to rethink their teaching strategies and adopt more flexible and interactive methods that align with the objectives of communication classes. This shift in teaching approach is crucial to ensure that students are not just learning the language, but also developing the skills necessary to use the language effectively in real-world situations.

3.1.2. Inability to adapt to the change of role in the communication class

The traditional teaching method is teacher-centered, so the teacher is the protagonist of the classroom, and the quality of the classroom depends on the content prepared by the teacher. In the communication classroom, after using the task-based language teaching method, the students are the protagonists, and the quality of the classroom depends on the tasks prepared by the teacher. The quality of the tasks involved matches the students, as well as the degree of completion of the students. Therefore, the role of the teacher in the communication classroom is the guide, as the creator and selector of the tasks, and as the introducer of the tasks before the task begins. Teachers are not allowed to interfere excessively in students' discussions while the tasks are in progress.

3.1.3. Insufficient understanding of task-based language teaching method

There are also some teachers who have inadequate knowledge about task-based language teaching methods. For example, they are not clear about the specific definition of the task and the content that needs to be included. This leads to their inability to design a qualified task. For example, they do not have a strong awareness of student-centeredness. As a result, the lesson plans they prepared still failed to meet the specific conditions of the students, and thus they were unable to design tasks that suited the students.

3.2. Learner level

3.2.1. Students' English proficiency varies widely

Due to the different foundations of students in the class, there is a large gap in their listening and speaking skills. Some students can read the text fluently, while some students cannot read simple words fluently due to their late introduction to English. This makes the implementation of communication classes more difficult.

3.2.2. Low learning initiative

Although communication skill is repeatedly mentioned in the "New Curriculum Standards," due to the long and lagging nature of the education reform process, it may lead to low student participation. In other words, the school has added communication skills in a timely manner in accordance with the requirements of the "New Curriculum Standards." However, since the final high school entrance examination does not test the students' communication skills, some students believe that they do not need to spend energy to develop their communication skills, resulting in low classroom participation, which in turn will have a negative impact on teachers' enthusiasm for teaching.

3.2.3. Inability to adapt to the change of role in the communication class

Affected by traditional teaching methods, students have become accustomed to being "filled in" in the classroom. Most students will not adapt to participating in a student-centered class because they have already adapted to the fact that all problems have standard answers, thus they are afraid of answering the wrong question.

4. Solutions

4.1. Teacher level

4.1.1. Teaching objectives of junior high school English communication classes

According to the “Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition),” junior high school students are required to be able to understand simple language materials in daily life, have a certain sense of language, and be able to use the language they have learned to communicate with others in daily life or general social situations. Additionally, students are required to express their own opinions and emotional attitudes, be able to synthesize, summarize, generalize, analyze, and judge main points, discover patterns, establish logical connections, think independently, identify problems, and creatively solve problems based on the acquired information^[3]. From this, we know that students in junior high school are required to be able to communicate briefly with others and clearly express their opinions and attitudes. It is relatively easy to achieve this goal in the course.

4.1.2. Four basic principles in task design

The core of using task-based language teaching method is to design tasks that are highly compatible with learners. In the country’s junior high school English classes, the tasks mainly carry two teaching purposes: one is to impart professional knowledge to students and the other is to develop students’ communication skills. Therefore, teachers must abide by the following four basic principles when designing classroom tasks: the principle of authenticity, the principle of interactivity and cooperation, the principle of information gap, and the principle of systematicity.

4.1.3. Allowing students to reshape their motivation for learning English

Junior high school English courses should have elements of social and cultural communication, the courses should systematically develop students’ cross-cultural communication and awareness, encourage students to interact with native speakers, and discuss the practical uses of foreign languages with students, so that students can learn with goals. For example, “Students, let’s talk about New Year’s plans. Please tell your partner about your plan for the next year, and then help us to introduce your partner’s plan, and talk about whether you think his plan is reliable?” The above dialogue, firstly, encourages students to speak and trains students to use future tense; secondly, it makes students realize the importance of communication skills. The cultivation of communication skills will also improve the level of reading and writing.

4.1.4. Creating a progressive classroom atmosphere

In the early stage, teachers can design some relatively simple tasks, such as preparing some scenes that will appear in schools, such as pictures of gymnasiums and libraries, and asking learners to divide into groups to describe the pictures. For example, they will use “sports center,” “gym,” “library,” and other words, and then what learners usually do in the gym and what is usually there in the gym are discussed to guide students to take the initiative to speak, thus gradually deriving sentences from single words, and actively speaking after taking the initiative to speak. Encouragement allows students to quickly see the results and increases their self-initiative in learning; in the later stages, the course difficulty can be gradually deepened, such as asking students to explain which part of the school they like best and why. Firstly, such tasks come from life and are close to learning. Secondly, it allows students to express their own opinions and increase their initiative in learning. Thirdly, when students explain their reasons, it can help them to develop critical thinking skills and an attitude of caring about the school and loving life.

4.1.5. Organically combining task-based language teaching methods with traditional teaching methods

When designing courses, teachers can combine task-based language teaching methods with traditional teaching methods. For example, when teaching past completion, teachers can arrange a small task and ask students to work in groups to compose a dialogue on the theme of “Have you had your lunch?” Some examples can be given first for their reference, such as “Yes, I have.” This allows students to have a preliminary understanding of this grammar point, that is, under what circumstances will I use this sentence, and how should I answer yes or no. Then, students are allowed to go on stage in groups to perform their own dialogues to deepen their impressions. Lastly, students were invited to comment on their group’s performance and summarize the grammatical phenomena they observed. After the task is completed, the students will have a good grasp of the grammar point. At this time, the examples of the grammar points in the book are explained, follow-up training is conducted, and after-class exercises are given to deepen their impression. In this way, task-based language teaching method is perfectly integrated into the grammar class based on traditional teaching method, thus improving the quality of teaching.

4.2. Learner level

4.2.1. Correcting students’ learning attitude

First of all, the learner’s learning attitude is the most important. Teachers must establish the concept of cultivating comprehensive quality talents. In other words, when teaching English, teachers should not be “score-based” and only teach what is required in the syllabus. In this case, learners will think that communication is unimportant and that the content taught in the classroom is not tested in the exam, thus resulting in the poor development of the communication class. It is necessary to establish the concept that learning English is ultimately about learning for use. The skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing must be improved. It cannot be limited to only one or two skills. In the long run, learners’ English skills will eventually be limited.

4.2.2. Establishing a confident learning concept

In addition to telling students that they can do it, teachers should show confidence in students and promote students’ skills through the teaching of communication skills. In addition, students must also establish the self-awareness of “I Can”^[3] and the concept that they must increase the use of English when learning English, and it does not matter even if they use it wrongly. They must let go of their shame and pay more attention to connecting the results and seeing more of their own progress. Teachers should also encourage learners to set achievable goals and increase self-efficacy. Only by actively participating in communication classroom tasks can learners maximize their communication skills.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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