

# A Study Focusing on Applying Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) Methods into English Vocabulary Teaching for EFL Learners

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## Abstract

To solve the problem of Chinese EFL students' passive and ineffective vocabulary learning, task-based language teaching (TBLT) methods were introduced to English classes at a university. With TBLT, students interacted with each other by using English, especially English words learnt, in order to fulfil the tasks designed by teachers. Based on second language acquisition theories, students were able to understand input and produce output during this process. This paper focuses on using TBLT in English vocabulary teaching in three non-English major classes of a Chinese university, involving the use of some word games. The word games' features, organization, and a skill set built through those games, will be discussed.

In terms of methodology, an online questionnaire survey was conducted among 93 university students from the three classes. Also, results of the students' before-task and after-task word quizzes on Moodle platform and exam paper results were analysed. The research findings showed that students enjoyed playing word games in the English class and benefitted from it, in terms of language development and building skills. This paper recommends teachers to use TBLT in English vocabulary teaching and learning, as it is practical and can assist in EFL learners' vocabulary acquisition.

## Key words

TBLT,  
English  
vocabulary  
teaching practice,  
interactive word  
games,  
input,  
output

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## Introduction

Typically, in an EFL class, Chinese students sit in a classroom and passively listen to the teacher's instruction. Teachers impart knowledge to students, but what happens in reality is, very often students cannot really understand the teacher's lecture, not to mention apply the knowledge in practice.

Generated in the 1980s, task-based language teaching (TBLT) method has proved helpful in solving this problem. TBLT refers to a teaching methodology used in a language classroom. Based on certain communicative methods and language projects, teachers design some specific and practical tasks. Students complete the tasks assigned by using the foreign language to express, communicate, consult, and respond, in order to master and use the language. It puts a stress on the students' language learning process and knowledge construction process, requiring students to change from passive recipients of knowledge to becoming active constructivists. Also, the teachers' role changes from a knowledge provider to a promoter of language output, through the process of engaging students in the tasks.

Some scholars have done research on using TBLT in university English classes. For example, according to Willis' theory (1996), about three TBLT stages, namely pre-task, task loop, and language focus, Chi and Li (2012) discuss how to apply these three stages in an English class. Similarly, based on

Skehan's three tasks' theory (1998), i.e., pre-task, while-task, and post-task, Zhao (2019) mentions some principles and steps of the design of a TBLT class.

Although TBLT is popular among teachers and students, as Liu (2011) suggests, it has faced some obstacles when it was applied in a class, such as students' frequent use of Chinese. Hua (2013) studies the problems and solutions when using TBLT in speaking classes, while Chen (2015) illustrates its successful use in a writing class. Meng (2019) argues that TBLT is very effective when teaching university students English reading skills. Although the use of TBLT in some components of university English classes has been discussed, using TBLT for English vocabulary teaching and learning still needs further research. This paper focuses on the application of TBLT in vocabulary acquisition and the effectiveness of this teaching method. In this research, three classes comprising 93 non-English major students at a university in China, learnt vocabulary with the help of games. Furthermore, a questionnaire survey was conducted, and students' exam results, as well as before-test and after-test results, were collected to analyse whether there was an improvement in their vocabulary acquisition.

### **Literature review**

To better understand TBLT, some notions such as "task", "TBLT", "input theory", and "output theory" need to be illustrated with more details.

#### **"Task" and TBLT**

Nunan (1989:10) defines "task" as the complement of an event with the use of target language in class, involving the understanding and application of the language, as well as the interaction between students. A task should be complete and can be regarded as communicative behaviour. Whether the task has been fulfilled depends on whether the aim has been accomplished.

With a particular aim in teaching and learning, teachers design some tasks for students to complete and ensure that the students apply English when doing these tasks. According to Richards & Rodgers (2001), compared with traditional instructional teaching, TBLT can stimulate the learning process and create a better learning environment for language learners. Study of the target language enables learners to indulge in understandable input and places them in some tasks which demand meaningful negotiation and communication, so that effective output can be produced.

#### **Input hypothesis**

As Krashen (1982, 1985) claims, the comprehensible input hypothesis stresses that in order to make sure that students understand the input, after offering students enough knowledge, teachers should design and give students some tasks to enable them to comprehend the knowledge, which would also promote students' active and autonomous learning. During this process, the teaching model shifts from closed to open-ended, and the communication method changes from mono-directional to bidirectional (Wen, 2010).

#### **Output hypothesis**

The output hypothesis put forward by Swain (1985) suggests that apart from "understandable input", second language learners also need understandable output, as language output can improve the fluency and accuracy of expressions used in the target language. When producing understandable output, learners can notice the weaknesses in the level of their second language, thus encouraging them to correct their use of expressions and improve their language proficiency. Only when understandable input and understandable output work corporately can learners' language abilities be enhanced.

In a nutshell, TBLT refers to a student-centred teaching method, wherein, by using the target language learners can understand the knowledge imparted to them in the classroom, produce meaningful output, and have effective interaction with each other. In the activities, tasks should be real-life based and communication-oriented, and more emphases should be placed on information and meaning. The completion of a task serves as a standard of self-evaluation and brings learners a sense of achievement (Chen, 2018).

### Applying TBLT in vocabulary teaching

Vocabulary is often said to be a boring part of English teaching, as sometimes teachers find it hard to make students remember and use the words learnt. The authors experienced first-hand some TBLT methods in vocabulary teaching in three classes comprising 93 non-English major freshers, including one design major class, at a university in China, and it turned out that these methods worked well with the students. The English textbooks being used were, *New Standard College English: An Integrated Course, 1&2*. As a prerequisite, students were assigned to study words from a wordlist in each unit, which indicates that they had received some input before the class. The next part of the paper will introduce some TBLT methods used in teaching vocabulary to make students produce understandable output.

### Fill in the word forms: - builds communication skills

Before class, students had studied a list of words of the unit as an input. In class, the focus of the vocabulary review section was to help students to use the words learnt as an output, and in this way improve their communicative skills. Therefore, some forms were prepared for students to fill in, as part of the class activity. The words missing in Paper A could be found in Paper B, and vice versa, as shown below.

| A | B        | C         | D        | E      | F           |
|---|----------|-----------|----------|--------|-------------|
| 1 | uneasy   |           | console  |        | probable    |
| 2 |          | excessive |          | reveal |             |
| 3 | mourning |           | vitality |        | sympathetic |

Table 1. Paper A – Word Bank

| A | B      | C        | D       | E          | F          |
|---|--------|----------|---------|------------|------------|
| 1 |        | infancy  |         | comprehend |            |
| 2 | evolve |          | imitate |            | discipline |
| 3 |        | response |         | distinct   |            |

Table 2. Paper B – Word Bank

In class, each student grabbed a piece of paper, Paper A or Paper B. Then, students A found students whose paper was different from theirs, resulting in students A and students B pairing up. Next, students explained the definitions of the missing words to each other, but they were not allowed to say the missing words when describing. Pairs worked together to fill in all the blanks with the correct spelling. When a student spelled a word out, his/her partner needed to check the spelling.

In this cooperative and communicative way, students could master the definitions and spelling of the words very well, and they had fun when playing the word game. Words were used in an actual scenario, thereby accomplishing the aim of the task.

### Chain story: - fosters students' story-telling ability

With words studied in advance, students tried to use those words in a chain story word game. Students worked in groups and used the given words to tell a story. See the word bank as follows:

|            |               |          |
|------------|---------------|----------|
| assignment | browse        | burglar  |
| calculator | camcorder     | check    |
| criminal   | cut and paste | download |
| dropout    | entertain     | escape   |

Table 3 Chain Story Word Bank

During the 15-minute communicative process, students recalled the meanings, used the words together, and created an interesting story as a group. This also cultivated their team spirit. Finally, the teacher invited the students, in groups, to share their story with the class. With the pressure of being asked to present, the students appeared more focused and engaged. Furthermore, students' story-telling skills were fostered when playing this game.

#### **Pictionary: - cultivates students' creativity**

Pictionary is a game played by a science geek named Sheldon in an American sitcom called *The Big Bang Theory*. Inspired by this, a Pictionary game was designed for students to review words while painting. Before class, the authors created a form for the students to fill up and provided them with some colour pens and A4 papers.

|  |   |
|--|---|
|  | Word +<br>Meaning:<br><hr style="border: 0; border-top: 1px solid black; margin: 5px 0;"/> <hr style="border: 0; border-top: 1px solid black; margin: 5px 0;"/> |
|--|---|

Table 4 Pictionary (Form)

|           |              |             |           |
|-----------|--------------|-------------|-----------|
| architect | assistant    | calendar    | co-worker |
| diaper    | disorganized | forgetful   | employer  |
| impatient | punctual     | requirement | schedule  |

Table 5 Pictionary (Word Bank)

In class, first, students formed groups of three, and the time limit was set as 15 minutes. Then, Student A picked up a vocabulary card, face down, and drew a picture based on the card within 1 minute. Student A was instructed to neither describe the word when drawing, nor write anything in their paintings. Other group members guessed the word and explained its meaning, then wrote down the English word with its Chinese meaning on the paper. Every group went through the same process. Each of the group members took turns drawing pictures and filling in the form. When they finished the first three paintings, they asked the teacher for more cards. At the end, the group which got the most words won the game.

The authors were amazed by how innovative the students had turned out to be; especially, the design and art students, who illustrated their creativity through many of their paintings. While other liberal arts and science students enjoyed playing the Pictionary game, design and art students showed their talent in painting a step further. Thus, this was a successful task for most non-English major university students.

#### **Charades: - boosts students' performing skills**

Charades is a game popular in western countries as well as in China. The authors readjusted the rules and made it a word game used in an English class. The aim of the task was to make students understand the words and act them out.

First, students formed groups of three and were given a stack of word cards. They were allowed to use their body language only, without using any spoken words. Students stood up, and each group formed a line. The third student, C, of each group, turned his/her back to the performing group members when it was their group's turn to act out the word.

|           |           |           |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Student C | Student B | Student A |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|

Table 6 Charades: Queue in the First Round

In each group, Student A picked up a word card and acted out the word to Student B without speaking anything. Student B either copied the movement from Student A, or created new acting gestures based on his/her own understanding of the word, which was then passed to Student C, who had, in the meantime, turned around after being told to do so. Student C had to guess the word and spell it out as well.

After the first round, Student A, in every group, ran to the end of the queue and Students B & C moved one step forward (see below). Thus, students changed their positions and roles, taking turns acting and guessing.

|           |           |           |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Student A | Student C | Student B |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|

Figure 7 Charades: Queue in the Second Round

Such a game of acting kept students from getting bored and weary. Instead, they were engaged in the acting and word review process. However, this game is recommended to be used in those classes where most of the students are active and outgoing, so that students do not feel uncomfortable when performing the task.

### Research Methods

Quantitative research methods were employed in this empirical study. Data were collected from two online questionnaires (pre-and-post-tests), Moodle platform, and from examination papers, as shown in the following sections.

### Questionnaires

A survey was conducted via two online questionnaires sent to three classes comprising 93 students, with 91 questionnaires collected. All the participants were non-English major freshers, with 56.04% of male and 43.96% of female students. The two questionnaires were used as a pre-test and a post-test, with some questions in common, before and after the introduction of word games in class.

There were five sections in the questionnaire. The first part was about the basic information of the participants; the second part was about students' attitudes towards the study of English words; the third part required students to self-evaluate their English level; the fourth part asked students' opinion about playing word games in class and the last part was about students' opinion whether word activities would indeed boost their vocabulary.

A Likert Scale was adopted, with 1 representing "strongly disagree", 2 representing "disagree", 3 representing "moderate", 4 representing "agree" and 5 representing "strongly agree", and points were given accordingly. The higher the overall score, the higher was the indication that the students liked playing word games to a greater degree.

### Result Analysis

As can be seen from the post-test data collected, on a scale of 1 to 5, with just under 4 points in average in Section 2, students showed a positive attitude towards vocabulary learning. Section 3 dealt

with students' English level, where students were asked whether they could recall words quickly; fully comprehend the teaching in the English medium classroom; quickly recognize words while reading, or while listening; and felt more at ease using words in speaking and writing, correctly. The result showed that compared to the average score in the pre-test, the average post-test score increased from 3.21 to 3.59 indicating that students' capability of applying words in practice had noticeably increased.

In Section 4, an overwhelming majority of university freshers (97.80%) liked joining word activities in English classes. The four main reasons why they liked doing word tasks in class were that they could enjoy "interesting" activities (94.38%) by "socializing with classmates" (83.15%) and "applying English" (77.53%) in a "stress-free learning environment" (78.65%).

As found in Section 5, doing word tasks made students gain more knowledge, improve efficiency in their studies, and were now able to generate positive output, as most of them found that they became more adept in English, particularly in speaking, listening, and in word acquisition. During the process of participation in the word games, students developed many abilities, especially communication skills (92.31%). Students became more attentive and engaged in class. Meanwhile, they enjoyed the stress-free learning environment and liked having English classes.

Having word activities not just benefitted students in class, but they also had positive effects on the students even after class. These activities motivated students to learn English willingly and helped them to build friendships with fellow students. Students loved playing word games and looked forward to playing more games in every class. In the questionnaire, the overall score was 71.57 out of 100, which meant that a significant majority of students enjoyed playing word games in class. Thus, the authors recommend that teachers should design more word activities/games/tasks tailored for university students, with a focus to reinforce their own efforts to encourage their students to practice vocabulary in real-life situations, and to make their teaching exemplar impactful for all teachers to emulate.

### **Moodle platform and examination papers**

Students were required to complete word quizzes using a standard format for different units arranged on Moodle, an online study platform used by the university, before and after the word games were introduced. The average scores were compared as follows.

According to Moodle results, students' performance on word quizzes improved quickly. Prior to the introduction of any word games, students' average score was recorded at 89.68%, while the average after-game score was 92.41%. Clearly, students mastered words better after participation in the word games.

More importantly, in the final examinations, the results showed the average scores of correct answers in the vocabulary section as 85.02%, which was noticeably higher, compared to the remaining parts of their answers in the English question paper. This illustrates that the word games worked very well in terms of students' vocabulary learning.

### **Discussions and limitations**

This study demonstrates that TBLT-based word games were popular among university students and decidedly helped them in their language learning and skill building efforts. In contrast to Liu's (2011) previous findings of students' frequent use of Chinese when doing a task, this survey found that English was frequently used when students were playing word games, as long as the games were well-designed, and students were properly instructed.

This study accords with relevant theories. Tasks, defined as "communicative behaviour" by Nunan (1989:10), were successfully designed and introduced in class, with a requirement for students to use appropriate words while interacting with others. As Richards & Rodgers (2001) point out, TBLT promotes the learning process and provides students with a stress-free learning environment, which is consistent

with the encouraging responses received from our students while answering the research question of why they liked playing word games.

According to Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982, 1985), words were learnt as an input when teachers interpreted some of them in class and students studied a word list before playing games. While doing word tasks, students had a productive outcome (Swain, 1985), as they became more confident and could produce more output, especially when speaking English and using words.

However, there are some limitations in this research. For instance, using a questionnaire as a methodology can be subjective. Students could sometimes respond with the answers that they know the instructor wants to hear, particularly in Section 2 regarding students' attitudes towards word learning. Therefore, class observation and instructors' evaluation of the students should be included when examining the results. Also, for future research, more data should be collected continually, using the Moodle platform, for instance, and examination papers, to ensure wider and more in-depth results to calculate progress and effectiveness of the tasks assigned.

### Conclusion

Teaching vocabulary is an art and the TBLT method is a good choice. With a particular objective in mind, teachers can design some interesting and useful tasks for students and keep them "learning by doing" (Dewey, 1916). Students need to have some input, then apply what they have learnt to practice, thus producing effective output. It shifts from a teacher-focused method to student-centred one. What teachers need to do is to primarily take care of the first and the last stages, namely, the plan management and the reflective stages of the tasks, while students should be given the opportunity to become the actual masters of the classroom and real users of the English language. After trying out several TBLT methods in class and analysing the research findings, it is safe to draw a conclusion that TBLT is a popular and practical methodology in English vocabulary teaching, at the same time contributing greatly to students' vocabulary learning. Tasks designed for this research showed a remarkable improvement not just in students' vocabulary building, but also demonstrated that playing word games, tremendously enhanced students' communication ability, story-telling skills, creativity, and performance skills. TBLT thus used in a language learning classroom ensures that students have a rich, immersive learning experience.

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