

Task-based Language Teaching in L2 English Writing Classrooms: Insights from Chinese Senior Secondary Schools

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Abstract

There is little research on the task-based teaching approach in senior secondary L2 English writing classrooms. This study carried out an exploratory sequential mixed methods study to explore the suitability and adaptations of task-based language teaching in the domain of secondary schools in small cities. First, the researcher surveyed six EFL senior secondary teachers of different teaching experiences in China by convenient and purposive sampling to get background information, then had semi-structured interviews with them individually. To follow the interviews, the researcher surveyed 148 students via an online questionnaire also by convenient and purposive sampling. Findings indicated that, although most teachers acknowledged the usefulness of TBLT, they regarded it unsuitable and unfeasible in the context of Chinese senior secondary L2 writing classrooms. Also, students in the study ranked clear instruction and vocabulary increase as the first two contributors in improving their L2 English writing. But half of all students also valued an interesting writing classroom and took it as a third facilitator to develop their writing. Besides, adaptations were suggested to include professional task design, teacher discussion, reward mechanism and teacher profession development. In the future, further research is needed to examine the findings in this study, generalizing them to different contexts, ages and domains, and exploring teachers' individual differences and their choice of teaching approaches.

Keywords: Task-based language teaching (TBLT); L2 writing teaching approach; Chinese secondary teachers of English; a mixed methods study; teaching theory and practice

Introduction

In the recent East Asia region, concepts of communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based language teaching approach (TBLT) gain popularity for education policies (Nunan, 2003). For example, in 2001, the new round national curriculum innovation was launched by the Chinese government, and TBLT was advocated as a teaching approach in the official syllabus (Hu, 2005a). Six years later, Ministry of Education [MOE] (2017) acclaims that teachers should increase open task-based activities and explorative learning content, offer an opportunity for students to express their own perspectives in EFL context, encourage students to learn to cooperate with peers, improve their capabilities of communication. But what the document promotes maybe not corresponds to what teachers practice. Indeed, though with the wide promotion in Asian area, the suitability of TBLT in this context is in great need (Nunan, 2003) as the traditional presentation-practice-production (P-P-P) approach is still more preferable for a lot of teachers in this context (Tang, 2004; Tong, 2005).

According to Richards and Rodgers (2001, p. 228), “tasks are believed to foster a process of negotiation, modification, rephrasing and experimentation that are at the heart of second language learning”. However, whether TBLT is feasible in Asian EFL settings still needs to be verified (Carless, 2009). At the present China, although the amount of research on TBLT in the secondary L2 English classrooms has increased since the past decades (Carless, 2012), there is still rather little on its specific implementation in secondary L2 English writing classrooms.

Therefore, the present research adds to this line of studies and seeks to shed light on the practical implementation of TBLT in L2 English writing classrooms in Chinese senior secondary schools, to examine its perceived suitability and adaptations in the context. In the research, perspectives from senior secondary teachers and learners will be provided through a mixed research design via leading interviews and additional questionnaire methods.

Literature Review

Task-based language teaching

Task-based language teaching (TBLT), a member of the communicative language teaching (CLT) family, follows the key role played by communicative tasks (Wen, 2019). In TBLT, the basic concept for designing a linguistic program or a lesson is called “task” (Ellis, 2009). A pedagogic task was defined as “a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form” (Nunan, 2004, p. 4). The aim of the task was to activate students to use a range of language functions and structures including making suggestions, agreeing, disagreeing, talking about quantity, how much/ how many, wh-questions, and so on (Nunan, 2004, p. 21).

In terms of classroom practice, according to Nunan (2004), there are seven rules in task based classrooms: supportive materials and lectures, related or unrelated tasks, language recycling, active learning, target language use, a mixture of language form, function and meaning, reflection and a transmission from reproducing to creating. In a task based classroom, Ellis (2003, p. 20) put forward a framework for task-based lesson designs with three “stages of task cycle” as a chronology of task-based lesson (see Table 1). The pre-task stage is a stage that prepares students for the later tasks by introducing these tasks, making requirements clear and ensuring that students clearly know what the following tasks require them to do and be ready psychologically; the during task phase is a stage that engages a particular number of students in real communicative tasks in a particular duration to use the target language and produce outcome; the post-task phase is a stage for feedback and correction and reinforcement. In order to distinguish a pedagogic task from a common teaching activity, Ellis (2009) put forward four specific standards: meaning-focus, learning gap for communication, opinion expression or meaning inference, various tools for task completion and outcome statement. These standards make the pedagogic task in task-based classrooms distinctive from a common deed in usual classrooms. In practice, there are two forms of TBLT, the strong form and weak form that needs to be differentiated (Carless, 2007; Shehan, 1996). The strong one admits the significance of meaning-making in real word context and highlights authentic tasks, while the weak form is not so strict with the above requirements but allow various tasks to enhance language communication.

TBLT in Chinese secondary schools

It is claimed that Chinese senior secondary schools should take into account the design of tasks with seven factors: clear objectives, practical meanings, information reception, management and delivery, English use, doing things, a specific outcome and students’ life experience and interests (MOE, 2017). In fact, the implementation of TBLT in Chinese secondary contexts is confronted with considerable challenges, mainly including the exam system, teachers’ knowledge and attitudes and classroom management (Wen, 2019; Xu, Liu & Jiang, 2008; Zheng & Adamson, 2003; Zheng & Borg, 2014). In fact, the biggest and constant barrier against the

localization of TBLT in China may be the exam system, which will strongly impact the suitability of TBLT and thus teachers' attitudes. Willis and Willis (2012) pointed out that TBLT had been regarded as inappropriate to prepare examinations and it was claimed to lack priority over the instructions of grammatical knowledge. Therefore, for some national systems, it might be more productive to enhance the effectiveness of P-P-P rather than introducing TBLT (Carless, 2009, p. 63). Another obstacle stems from teachers' limited knowledge of TBLT on its basic theory and practice. Chen and Wright (2016) supported that not all secondary school instructors were capable to employ tasks in teaching, particularly for novice teachers, and most teachers reported lack of inner confidence in utilizing tasks. Moreover, Wen (2019) doubted that some of the English teachers who claimed to employ TBLT in their classroom actually hadn't carefully studied this theory, nor would they blend teaching practice, research and textbook compilation together and devote themselves to the localization of TBLT. A third obstacle stems from management of classes, particularly large-size ones, which is widespread in China. According to Zheng and Borg (2014), it was hard for the teachers to keep their large classes disciplined, quiet and orderly which were inclined to become noisy quite easily in Chinese secondary schools.

To address the above issues, adaptations should be made to the current context and task-based teaching support should be provided with training, materials and assessment system. It is suggested that a weak version of TBLT, a "situated task-based approach", was required in this context: the role of grammar instruction, tasks and examinations are blended and adapted to support each other (Carless, 2007), with a task-based exam system built to enhance this communicative method (Davison, 2007) and with a more efficient assessment system (Xu et al., 2008). In addition, Xu et al. (2008) suggested that teachers' education conceptions should be updated and sufficient training courses should be supplied in time. And Wen (2019) publications about proper implementation of TBLT are in great need in China. Besides, it is necessary to acknowledge teachers' teaching autonomy in secondary schools so that they can blend authentic tasks in classrooms as they like (Chen & Wright, 2016). Thus, despite the fact that TBLT has gained a widespread acknowledgement from policymakers, educators and teachers, it is undoubted that they also need to address many challenges to localize it and obtain sufficient support from education institutes.

Second language (L2) writing teaching

To classify diverse paths to teach L2 writing, according to Barkaoui (2007), there are three focuses as per what students are required to gain for a successful essay in a second language. The first text-oriented category considers L2 writing improvement in the light of the features of the produced texts. As per this direction, an efficient writer is required to learn the spelling, lexical rules, dictionaries, sentence structure, passage and rhetorical routines of the second language (Barkaoui, 2007). Secondly, the process-oriented category regards the learning of L2 writing as the learning of effective writing strategies (Barkaoui, 2007). They include macro-strategies like scheduling, making a draft and correcting, and micro-strategies like simultaneously concentrating on content and form, and automatically searching for lexical and syntactic ingredients (Cumming, 2001). Lastly, the sociocultural dimension considers the composing improvement as the acquisition of the text types, concepts, and activities of the audience, which highlights the significance of setting and target audience in the course of L2 writing learning (Barkaoui, 2007).

The text-oriented dimension is compatible with the widespread traditional teaching method or specifically the P-P-P method in Chinese secondary English writing classrooms, while the sociocultural and especially the process-oriented directions are suitable in a task-based

writing classroom. This combination has been increasingly welcomed by many pioneer teachers. However, the sociocultural approach may be sometimes ignored by teachers in a conventional or an innovative classroom because of lack of time or inadequate consciousness in an L2 English writing classroom.

TBLT in L2 English writing classrooms

In recent years, a series of studies have started to investigate the effectiveness of TBLT on English writing classrooms, but mostly at a tertiary level (Ahmed, Jamilah & Bidin, 2016; Marashi & Mirghafari, 2019; Sundari, Febriyanti & Saragih, 2018). For example, Ahmed et al. (2016) indicated that task-based instruction was more effective than the traditional type in terms of freshmen's L2 English writing performance as per complexity, fluency and accuracy. Also, Tabar and Alavib (as cited in Sundari et al., 2018) argued that task-planning had a positive effect on participants' performance in personal and decision-making tasks, and concluded that planning via cooperation vitally had facilitated EFL students' writing ability in general. Thus, it may be obvious that TBLT was significantly effective in improving adults' L2 English writing performance in tertiary classrooms. In addition, findings from reflective journals suggested that most learners considered TBLT as the most interesting method since it enabled them to make use of existing linguistic resources (Ahmed et al., 2016). Therefore, TBLT not only outstands in educational experiments in contrast to the traditional method, but also tends to be supported by EFL learners in colleges and universities.

It is the same case when it comes to Chinese context. In China, TBLT has been proved to be more effective in improving students' English writing performance than the traditional method in the context of senior secondary school, senior secondary vocational school and university (Fang, 2013; Ji, 2014; Wang & Wang, 2015; Wu & He, 2014). For example, Ji (2014) argued that senior secondary schoolers in the experiment group (task-based writing group) achieved 40% higher scores than those in the control group (traditional writing group). This study also indicated that TBLT contributed to motivate students to write, increase their confidence in writing and raise their awareness of cooperation in learning writing. In addition, Wu and He (2014) found that both lexical tokens and density in the writings of vocational secondary students in task-based writing classrooms were significantly higher than those in P-P-P writing classrooms. In other words, students in task-based writing lessons were more likely to produce writings with more varied words and lexical words. According to Wang and Wang (2015), considerably larger proportion of university students in task-based experimental group than the control group considered writing classrooms satisfied due to their salient improvement in terms of content points and vocabulary use. Thus, task-based writing classrooms could enhance Chinese secondary and tertiary students' writing attainment, boost their confidence and strengthen their satisfaction in writing and writing lessons.

However, there are still little research on this topic in Chinese context as only the above four studies and few others are accessible and relevant to Chinese task-based writing teaching at present. Furthermore, all the above studies were investigations on the effectiveness of TBLT in comparison to the traditional pattern while few mention the in-depth opinions and interpretations of Chinese teachers of English. According to Willis and Willis (2012, p. 188), "even though TBLT has become increasingly recognized as an effective pedagogy, its location in generalized socio-cultural theories of learning has led to misunderstandings and criticisms". And "there were actually a number of factors challenging large-scale adoption of TBLT in Chinese context" (Carless, 2009, p. 62). Hence, it is much needed that we investigate what secondary teachers of English and their students in Chinese context are thinking of this innovation.

Therefore, the current study will explore the suitability and domestication of TBLT in senior secondary English writing classrooms by carrying out a small scale study in the context of five senior secondary schools in three less developed cities of southern China as these cities are more common than metropolises in China.

Research Questions

Q1. To what extent is TBLT suitable for senior secondary writing classrooms in Chinese secondary schools?

Q2. What adaptation can be made to increase the feasibility of TBLT in senior secondary writing classrooms in Chinese secondary schools?

Method

Design

To address the research questions, an exploratory sequential design, with dominant qualitative and supportive quantitative approaches, was carried out in the current study to gain a wide range of triangulated data, combining individual interviews and questionnaires. According to Creswell (2012, p. 535), a mixed method design is a procedure in collecting, analyzing and mixing both quantitative and qualitative methods in a single study or a series of studies to understand a research problem. A mixed method research provides a better understanding of how effective developed task-based materials for writing class are and in what aspect of writing skill is more effective. Thus, research tools are more reliable and valid in a mixed method research (MMR) as opposed to a single paradigm (Zohrabi, 2013).

Participants

Participants in this study were 6 secondary teachers of L2 English (referred as Teacher A, B, C, D, E and F) and their students chosen via convenience and snowball sampling, which could be inclined to bias but offer feasibility and convenience (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2017). In the process of sample selection, teaching backgrounds such as training experience, teaching grades, teaching experience, and dwelling city were taken into consideration in order to make sure participants were a set of representative samples of senior secondary teachers of L2 English in Chinese southern average-developed cities. As shown in Table 2, six teacher participants were selected from three modestly developed cities in southern China, where school education hasn't developed as fast as those in metropolitans. Though most teachers in these cities would have been trained before their teaching practice, they usually found themselves stuck in both students' low achievement and lack of teaching development. Among them, two had teaching experiences of about 5 years in high schools, two over 10 years and two about half year. Five in six teachers were teaching English in 2 classes in a term with only one teaching one class.

Besides, 148 students (56 males and 92 females; 27 10th graders, 31 11th graders and 90 12th graders) taught by these teachers, senior secondary school learners learning English as a second language in the less developed cities, were also participants in this study. In particular, most of them were low-achievers in English examinations. These teacher participants were asked to have a semi-structured interview with the researcher while student participants were required to respond to an online questionnaire on English writing classrooms. Prior to this study, an information sheet and consent form were sent to all participants to get their permission to participate in this study.

Instruments

A. Teacher interview

Semi-structured interview is a widespread and efficient tool to explore teachers or educators' opinions and attitudes on task-based teaching in a qualitative study (e.g., Carless, 2009; Chen & Wright, 2016; Zheng & Borg, 2014), which helps to gain a thorough and in-depth emic view on participants' viewpoints. Based on the interview protocol in Carless (2007), a semi-structured interview protocol was adapted by the researcher in this study (see Appendix 2) to carry out online interviews with senior secondary teachers of English from several schools in a Chinese southern city. This protocol first started with a framework of open questions and allowed new questions to arise according to what interviewees had said. In the study, semi-structured interview contributed to dig out teachers' understandings and interpretations of TBLT in English classrooms and specifically in English writing classrooms in senior secondary schools. However, some interviewees might not tell the truth or hide some truth because of the interview attitude or face problem. Thus, the researcher was patient to make interviewees feel safe and verify the immediate interpretations in interviews. Further, in order to improve the validity of the qualitative data, member check was conducted by sending the final report back to interviewees to examine its accuracy; a rich, thick description, as well as contradictory evidence were presented in results part (Creswell, 2014, p. 201-202). Meanwhile, steps in procedures of case studies would be documented as detailed as possible (Yin, 2009; as cited in Creswell, 2014), and the transcripts of recordings and definitions of codes would be checked repeatedly in order to improve the reliability of the qualitative data (Gibbs, 2007; as cited in Creswell, 2014).

B. Teacher questionnaire and student questionnaire

Two online questionnaires were produced by the researcher (see Appendix 1 and 3), one for teacher interviewees and another for their students. The first one in English was sent prior to semi-structured interviews to get teachers' teaching background information first, like "How many years have you been an English teacher at high schools?". To follow semi-structured interviews, another questionnaire in Chinese was sent to interviewees' students to obtain learners' attitudes and opinions towards task-based writing classrooms to triangulate teachers' perceptions and suggestions. Its questions consisted of 4 parts, including background information questions (4 items) like "What's your type of class, key class or parallel class?", 5-point Likert Scale questions (5 items) on attitudes like "Do you enjoy teacher-centered instructive English writing classes?" rated from "Not at all"(1) to "Very much"(5), interview-based multiple-choice questions (5 items) like "Which section do you prefer in an English writing class?" with interview-based answers like "teachers' explanation", "doing exercises" or "group discussion" and last an open question on suggestions asking "Do you have any questions if your English teacher is going to conduct interactive activities in an writing class?". Here, multiple-choice questions provided verification to the 5-point Likert Scale ones. However, it couldn't be guaranteed that all students of interviewees would respond to this interview, which was unavoidable. The composite reliability of the questionnaire items was .779, indicating acceptable reliability.

Procedure

First, a questionnaire was answered by 6 teacher interviewees before the semi-structured interviews. Then each teacher participant had an individual semi-structured interview with the researcher and each interview lasted from about half an hour to about 1 hour. During the interviews, questions were asked by the researcher based on the interview protocol (see Appendix

2) and further questions were asked based on interviewees' answers. In the process, the researcher would identify inconsistent descriptions and confirmed the real one by asking a similar question from another perspective. The interview would be recorded during the interview, transcribed within 24 hours in mandarin Chinese, then translated into English, and coded by the researcher to elicit insightful points about teachers' perspectives of the implementation and suitability of task-based writing lessons. Also, quick notes on key statements would be collected during the interview to support the later notes from the transcriptions and coding. Meanwhile, a questionnaire was responded by the secondary student subjects. Data from this questionnaire would be collected, analyzed and compared with that from interviews to support or reject teachers' views when it came to the second research question.

Overall, although the samples might not represent the entire picture of views in southern China, I believed that the data from 6 carefully selected interviewees and their students were sufficient to offer a diversity of in-depth views and rich interpretations on the practical implementation and suitability of task-based teaching approach in secondary English writing classrooms.

Data Analysis

Data from teacher questionnaire and the interview were collected and analyzed in an inductive and qualitative way. In the process, emergent thematic analysis (Mackey & Gass, 2005) was used. The transcripts for each interviewee were set apart as per the questions in the interview protocol (see Appendix 2), and then checked again for emergent themes and patterns for comparison to verify common or different conceptions and arrangement across teacher subjects. Data from student questionnaire were analyzed in an inductive and quantitative way.

Results

Teacher questionnaire

Two teachers had taught English in senior secondary schools for less than 2 years, two around 5 years and two over 10 years (see Table 2). Most of them except one had been trained as an English teacher prior to teaching life. As demonstrated by Table 2, most English learners except those in Teacher E's class were low achievers in school English exams, which implied that most of the students in the study had a low level of English language proficiency.

Semi-structured interview

A. Teachers' interpretations of TBLT

Two consistent themes turned up from the process of data analysis: the definition of TBLT and task, and strengths and weaknesses of TBLT. Variance was found among interviewees when asked to describe about TBLT and "task". Their answers were summarized in Table 3. as shown in Table 3, almost no teachers could interpret TBLT or task thoroughly, but saw TBLT as a classroom activity to involve students, and sometimes group work. And most agreed that TBLT was learner-centered and required teachers' comment after task completion, and more suitable in reading classrooms. Half teachers emphasized student interaction, scaffolding for task completion, antecedent explanation of tasks and purpose for language improvement.

In other words, these teachers may know about TBLT only to some degree, and perhaps most are not clear about it, as

Some teachers perhaps can't come up with proper tasks to match the teaching content some time or they don't take students' reactions as priorities but are more concerned about whether they complete the teaching of learning objectives. Honestly, only a few around me would

pay attention to the upgrade of teaching methods. (Teacher B)

Teachers around me are too overwhelmed by routine teaching, homework correction, school scrutiny and other management work to explore innovative teaching approaches. Besides, age may be a big thing here as novice teachers have great initiative in learning new things while those over 40 perhaps can't afford to learn or know about a brand-new teaching approach. (Teacher C)

In terms of advantages of TBLT, as shown in Table 4, most teacher participants mentioned students' greater interest as half referred to effective teaching of learning objectives and student involvement, as it

Can motivate the students for they will get bored if listening to teachers for a long time and it seems that students can learn well in a task-based classroom. (Teacher B)

Helps teachers and students know exactly what they need to do. I think this approach is ok in secondary English classrooms since the students are required to learn independently in a task-based class. That's presently required by the education bureau. (Teacher D)

Can reduce learners' resistance against English learning and raise students' interest in English because this innovation is learner-centered, takes advantage of learners' strengths and thus tend to involve students more effectively. (Teacher F)

When it comes to disadvantages of TBLT, as shown in Table 5, most teacher interviewees reported the restrictions from students' averagely low English proficiency, as

In a task-based classroom, teachers can't input adequate language knowledge, which students truly long for and need to obtain. Weaker and shy students with scanty vocabulary are common in our class and would be passive in such a communicative classroom as they would have difficulty understanding basic language points when led by instructors. Beside, secondary learners may have adapted to traditional classrooms. (Teacher C)

Most students cannot follow the guidance and meet the requirements of tasks in my class. They would not listen to or cannot follow teachers' explanation in a traditional lesson, not to mention a learner-centered one. They lack vocabulary and grammatical knowledge greatly. (Teacher D)

B. Teachers' beliefs on the suitability of TBLT in task-based writing classrooms

Two themes emerged in the data analysis on this topic: usual teaching practice in writing classrooms, and feasibility of task-based writing classrooms. Firstly, when asked what they usually did in an English writing classroom, all teacher interviewees consistently reported the utilization of the traditional method and little use of task design in a secondary writing classroom, as:

We usually instruct the language points of topic words, sentence patterns and writing steps in an English writing classroom while tasks or classroom games are seldom used in this context. We generally concentrate on grammar review and exercise practice instead of English communication in a graduating year 12 English classroom. (Teacher C)

We focus on sentence making, essay writing, content instruction and example correction in examination-oriented English writing classrooms. Usually, we only have limited amount of time in a lesson, so we seldom use tasks but ask learners to write as soon as instructed. (Teacher B)

Our English writing classrooms are mostly teacher-centered and focus on sentence making, correction and corrective feedback, but students may still fail or refuse to follow teachers in such a less challenging traditional classroom. (Teacher D)

Secondly, almost all of the interviewees except Teacher C were positive about the

suitability of TBLT in overall Chinese context, for example:

It is feasible in the majority of places. (Teacher A)

TBLT is certainly feasible in the local context and it is great to make students learn through English use. (Teacher B)

This approach is definitely feasible in our context and actually many teachers around me are using it. (Teacher F)

However, in the specific context of their secondary writing classrooms, all interviewees were pessimists towards TBLT, doubting the suitability and feasibility of this innovation due to students' low proficiency, student introverted characteristics, examination system and unnecessary of tasks, and thus presently insisting on the use of the traditional teacher-centered approach to teach writing, claiming that:

TBLT is not suitable for considerably low-achievers in parallel classes who can't understand basic learning content, not to mention be engaged in task-based classroom, who greatly lack with vocabulary and wouldn't speak English in classrooms; and few of whom would finish the tasks, which would exhaust and frustrate teachers. It is a waste of time when a majority of students look at each other with confusion, unwilling to communicate, and fail to complete the task whereas students actually can learn something in a traditional classroom. (Teacher A)

TBLT can be used in year 10 and 11, but it may be impractical to utilize it in a year-12 English writing classroom since the input and enhancement of language points are the priorities to prepare students for the university entrance examinations. (Teacher B)

If we have out-going students who have a certain level of English knowledge, this method will be used successfully and achieve a satisfying outcome, but the fact is almost the opposite. Most students in my class are rather shy and not good at expressing ideas in English. (Teacher C)

Tasks are impractical, infeasible in the context because they aren't suitable for all students, ignoring the need and abilities of some students. It's almost impossible for them to prepare a small public speech in several minutes. This approach is only suitable in English classrooms in megacities or only public classes in the context of small cities. I don't believe my students can finish the tasks nor can they adapt to this approach at a night. Most importantly, these activities are unnecessary in English writing classrooms. (Teacher E)

Unlike reading class, TBLT is unsuitable in secondary English writing classes which had better focus on instructions and practice as secondary students in my classrooms now can't write in English fluently and correctly. We can only use instruction-based class (Teacher F)

Thus, it was a complicated case here in Chinese less developed city. Teachers might be positive about this innovation, but implementation was another issue. And some were even skeptical of the effectiveness of TBLT teaching approach, as

Low-level achievers in less developed areas would do better in a traditional writing classroom in comparison to an innovative one. My experiences have proved it. (Teacher C)

Students won't lag behind too far away if following teachers step by step in a traditional classroom, otherwise some low-achievers would fail to catch up with others and give up listening in a task-based class. (Teacher C)

Apart from the above three factors, there might be another issue that hindered the feasibility of TBLT in English writing classrooms, the teachers' knowledge about TBLT, for example:

I suppose there are a considerable number of novice teachers, maybe half in our school who may find this teaching approach difficult to carry out in their classes. (Teacher B)

Many teachers are not familiar with this approach and won't take risk implementing it before ready. (Teacher E)

Thus, most teachers in this research didn't consider TBLT suitable in their secondary writing classrooms, and some didn't think there was room for TBLT and even adaptations for it.

C. Teachers' beliefs on adaptation for task-based writing classrooms

Two themes emerged in the data analysis on this topic: positive strategy and reasons behind students' low achievement. When it came to strategy to adapt TBLT in English writing class, teachers emphasized the significance of the practicality of tasks in terms of task complexity, task types, language support, student needs and teaching coherence, as well as teaching discussion, incentive mechanism, teaching profession and pilot teaching, claiming that:

Task complexity must be adjusted to the English knowledge of students. So it is necessary to discuss about it in teaching meetings to ensure that different levels of complex tasks be assigned to students of varied English proficiency. Besides, to motivate students to involve themselves in task completion, an competitive incentive mechanism should be designed to make them competitive. (Teacher A)

Teachers should be concerned about whether the task is practical in a writing class, how a task can be used in the class and how to raise students' interest in task completion. Besides, teachers should make sure the fluent use of tasks in writing classrooms and all the teaching steps are coherent in the whole class, which is solvable in most cases. Also, a variety of tasks instead of only one type of task should be utilized in class to engage students more effectively. (Teacher B)

It is better to localize it as too learner-centered may cause many problems, so teachers need to increase assistance in such an interactive classroom. Besides, learners should be mentally encouraged to speak English and remove their shyness. Designed tasks must be feasible and adjusted to students abilities and led by teachers step by step otherwise students can only look at it and sigh. (Teacher C)

Teachers should try their best to know details about this innovation. It is unreasonable to promote it in a short term. In the long run, pilot teaching should be arranged to check students' reactions and this approach can't be implemented until satisfying results emerge. (Teacher E)

In addition, teacher participants also referred to the factors behind students' common low attainment in English, learning history and family influence:

These senior secondary students are low achievers in English because they didn't learn well in junior secondary levels and failed to fill this gap in the recent years. Besides, the high achievers have been selected by several celebrated high schools with most low achievers left behind for other schools like ours. (Teacher C)

My students don't hate English but they also don't like it. They haven't learn English well since at a young age and felt helpless when failed. Families' perceptions play a role in their initiative in learning English, too. (Teacher D)

Questionnaire data

A. Students' beliefs on writing classrooms

According to the 148 questionnaire responses from students respondents in the study (see Table 3), half of all respondents had conservative attitudes towards the writing classrooms while about 30% enjoyed the features of this innovation. Also, in terms of concerns in a writing classrooms, half students hoped that teachers could emphasize vocabulary and grammar knowledge while half were willing to have a more interesting writing class, and 21% showed objections towards interaction in writing classroom. In terms of reasons behind their improvement in writing performance, the majority of students valued clear instruction from teachers, 57% referred to upgrade of vocabulary while 54% thought highly of interest in writing

classrooms.

This quantitative finding was consistent with that from semi-structured interviews, which suggested that clear instructions on language knowledge and examinations were of most significance, and some teachers also regarded this innovation as useful and effective when used appropriately.

B. Students' suggestion on effective writing classrooms

When giving advice on improving their writing classrooms, the majority show indifference saying “I don't know” or “I think it is already ok” while about 30% respondents mentioned teachers' more focus on basic language knowledge, and 18% hoped for a more interesting and interactive writing classrooms. The indifference answers might be because of the low English proficiency, lack of confidence or passive attitudes. However, the above results still supported that in semi-structured interviews which found that knowledge instructions suited their classroom most and TBLT did have some advantages.

Discussion

In summary, the above rich, thick results yielded two main findings: 1) TBLT might be recently unsuitable for Chinese senior secondary writing classrooms; 2) suggested adaptations included proper task design, incentive measures, pilot implementation and profession development that would facilitate successful and fluent implementation of this innovation in the context.

Responding to question 1, it was unreasonable to say TBLT now suited for English writing classrooms in Chinese senior secondary school context. Indeed, all interviewees in the study admitted that they mainly adopted the traditional method in a usual senior secondary English writing class in a text-oriented dimension (Barkaoui, 2007), when focusing on the teaching of vocabulary, grammar, mainly sentence construction, and perhaps paragraph and passage production. And mixed methods data indicated that the implementation of traditional teaching method catered to both instructors and learners in this context. Further, most interviewees regarded TBLT unsuitable, even unnecessary in their senior secondary writing classrooms in practice due to the realities. However, surprisingly, TBLT was recognized as culturally suitable in Chinese classrooms by almost all teachers in the study. And some teachers and learners still valued this innovation. Thus, though perceived as unsuitable, a task based EFL writing class still had a place in Chinese secondary classrooms.

Responding to question 2, there were four measures suggested in the study to ensure the feasibility and improve the suitability of tasks. Firstly, teachers should consider task complexity, task types, teacher support, student needs and teaching coherence, taking students' proficiency, teaching objectives, involvement of the whole class into account when designing task-based lesson, which could be further discussed in teaching counsels. Secondly, an incentive mechanism should be put forward to raise students' interest and engagement in task completion. Thirdly, pilot practice of senior secondary task-based writing classrooms was a must before its widespread implementation, to ensure that the utility of TBLT had adequate premise. In that case, pilot practice could examine students' attitude and abilities to complete task and fully prepare them in task-based instructions. Lastly, many Chinese senior secondary teachers needed to develop their profession such as getting a whole picture of TBLT (Ellis, 2009; Nunan, 2004) before implementing tasks in the teaching of secondary writing. This included how to design a task-based lesson (Ellis, 2003), how to implement tasks as per four specific standards in Nunan (2004) and how to make them feasible and effective in secondary writing classrooms. In this process,

guidance of task design and control was in great need at present (Wen, 2019). However, qualitative results suggested that teachers were too busy with daily routine work to upgrade their profession and the aged teachers might not have sufficient time nor energy to keep upgrading themselves. A report of the findings was sent back to teacher interviewees and three randomly selected respondents and all of them agreed with the findings, improving the accuracy of data.

Findings indicated that the teacher-centered approach tended to function better in current Chinese senior secondary classrooms where most students, especially those in graduating level, were faced with high pressure from examination competition. This finding backed up many previous studies (Carless, 2009; Willis & Willis, 2012; Zheng & Borg, 2014). For example, Carless (2009) pointed out that strengthening instructive P-P method might be more profitable than trying the communicative TBLT in context of some exam systems, and Willis and Willis (2012) argued that tasks had been considered as improper to prepare learners for examinations, away from the focus of grammar instructions. Additionally, Zheng and Borg (2014) claimed that the implementation of TBLT would consume too much time to make learners acquire adequate language knowledge in a lesson to achieve good attainment. Thus, we could claim that the traditional teaching method was likely to be more effective and popular in non only Chinese English classrooms but also specifically the senior secondary L2 writing classrooms.

Besides, the popularity of the teacher-centered method were also ascribed to students' low proficiency of basic L2 writing skills and shyness characteristic which supported Hu (2005 a) which stressed that most secondary learners in Chinese less developed cities had considerably low level of English attainment as they were likely to lack exposure to English-using environment and find university or college entrance examination the only reason to learn English (Hu, 2005a). Also, findings showed that these senior secondary students hadn't learnt English well since they were at a primary school or junior secondary school, leaving a huge knowledge gap between their English knowledge and their school level. Thus, as a learner-centered approach, TBLT may not have the "right" learners in the context of Chinese senior secondary writing classrooms in small cities.

Also, the overwhelming withdrawal from TBLT might be due to teacher profession. The research found that most teachers in the study actually had a vague picture of TBLT, which supported previous studies (Willis & Willis, 2012; Chen & Wright, 2016; Wen, 2019). For example, Willis and Willis (2012) emphasized the difficulties for some secondary teachers like in-service teachers in using tasks properly in English classrooms and Chen and Wright (2016) indicated that a large proportion of Chinese secondary teachers were unconfident in employing them in English classrooms. Further, Wen (2019) speculated that some teachers who thought they were using TBLT actually didn't implement it appropriately. Thus, teacher profession development had been blocked by some practical issues and then had hindered the suitability of TBLT in the context, to some extent.

Additionally, the lack of suitability of TBLT in the context may be related to the type of English class, writing class, where TBLT was perceived as redundant or unsuitable. This was consistent with Ellis (2003) which indicated that it was almost impossible to timely monitor every students' task completion and gave detailed corrective feedbacks to them in a 40-minute task-based English classroom when encouraging students to prepare for English report in a short time. This was true especially when weaker students might have more detailed spelling or grammatical errors and prefer a teaching approach for all but not for some students. However, the perceived unsuitability of TBLT writing class contradicted previous studies like Ji (2014). This might be because Ji (2014) had more advanced EFL senior secondary students in a more developed city.

Overall, though senior secondary teachers had overall positive attitudes towards TBLT to some degree and a certain proportion of learners valued classroom interest, most teachers didn't believe the practicality of this innovation in the teaching of specific L2 skills, English writing, nor did they presently implement it in practice. This finding was consistent with a series of previous studies on TBLT in Chinese overall English classrooms (Wen, 2019; Xu et al., 2008; Zheng & Adamson, 2003; Zheng & Borg, 2014). For example, Carless (2007, 2009) similarly found that teachers preferred traditional test-oriented method compared with TBLT, regarding the former more effective. Also, the acknowledgement of TBLT in China culture supported many previous studies, like Chen and Wright (2016), which stated that teachers in secondary schools were generally positive towards TBLT. But this study expanded the field from EFL teaching to EFL writing teaching and specified the context in a representative less developed areas in China.

However, the above findings contradicted many previous quantitative studies like Ahmed et al. (2016), Ji (2014), and Wu and He (2014). These empirical studies found that task-based English writing classrooms were more effective than the traditional one as per learners' productive achievement in the context of overseas tertiary, Chinese secondary and Chinese vocational secondary writing classrooms, respectively. But these researchers didn't specifically mention the English proficiency of students in their studies. The contradiction may be due to the age of university participants in Ahmed et al. (2016) and the students' English proficiency in Ji (2014) and teachers' profession in task design and implementation in Wu and He (2014). We could infer that TBLT might have the potential to improve secondary learners' writing performance more efficiently than the traditional teaching method, but on the condition that students had a certain level of communicative ability in English and teachers had the capability of designing and employing appropriate tasks. Meanwhile, even though TBLT was not as effective and popular as the traditional teaching method in the context of the present research, classroom interest was regarded by student respondents as the third facilitator to achieve writing improvement, following clear instruction and vocabulary increase. This conformed to the advantages reported by teacher interviewees, increasing learners' interest, initiatives and engagement in class. Thus, though not as effective as traditional method, TBLT is still needed to match student needs.

To balance the mainstream need of basic language knowledge instruction and the additional requirement to make writing classroom more interesting, a weak form of task-based language teaching approach (Shehan, 1996; Carless, 2007) was suggested in this context. It meant that teacher-centered and text-oriented (Barkaoui, 2007) instruction and practice played a dominant role while learner-centered and process-oriented (Barkaoui, 2007) teaching was supportive in a senior secondary English (L2) writing classrooms. In other words, tasks could be used to assist the instruction of language knowledge to improve students' performance in exams (Carless, 2007). It seemed that a weak task-based language teaching approach might be the most effective way to teach English writing, with grammar instruction dominant and TBLT feasible in the context. As such, the traditional text-oriented method would be mainly adopted to make sure clear and explicit instruction of language knowledge while process-oriented task-based language teaching approach be added to stimulate students' interest and involvement. Therefore, future reach could be conducted on the implementation of the weak form of Task-based writing class in the field of L2 writing teaching.

Conclusion

Though TBLT has been globally recognized as an effective L2 teaching approach and become the orthodox in English teaching in China, it is another issue when it comes to practical

implementation in the domestic context. Findings in the current investigation indicated that TBLT still lacked suitability and feasibility as a dominant teaching approach in the teaching of senior secondary English writing in Chinese small cities, due to practical issues about students, teachers, class type and the exam system. Besides, findings also suggested that adaptive actions, including careful task design, teaching discussion, motive mechanism and teachers' profession development, could be taken to guarantee effective and successful implementation of TBLT in the context. While previous literature claimed that TBLT was more effective than traditional teaching method in the teaching of writing in Chinese secondary and tertiary EFL classrooms, and overseas tertiary EFL classrooms, this study provided empirically in-depth evidence from secondary teachers and students, revealing that TBLT actually seemed unfeasible in the context at least at the moment. It did contribute to explore the internal views and attitudes of in-service secondary writing teachers and their students, which helped to give a hint on whether TBLT were adopting as promoted by the authority and why it was turned down in Chinese EFL writing classrooms. In that case, this study also offered realistic suggestions on adaptations to localize TBLT in the context.

The above findings implied that there were actually a series of practical issues in the way to its successful and feasible implementation as imposed by the Ministry of Education, which were impossible to circumvent and entailed immediate and patient measures to resolve. As such, a weak form of task-based writing classrooms might be more localized and effective than a strong one or the sole traditional method in Chinese EFL senior secondary context, combining the advantages of both language instruction and pedagogic tasks as attractors, prompters and motives for learners. It also indicated that education authorities had better publish guidance materials to inform how to implement TBLT properly and effectively and developed a localized national or municipal syllabus based on local pedagogic conditions. And school authorities should arrange sufficient teaching training courses to update teacher profession and therefore ensure effective use of this innovation.

I recommend that future L2 investigators replicate this investigation to further justify generalizability of my findings to other social or cultural settings, different school levels in the teaching of L2 writing. Besides, it would be productive if future researchers investigate the relationship between TBLT and Chinese secondary writing, in both qualitative and quantitative ways. Also, future researcher can study the suitability and effectiveness of a weak form of Tasked based EFL or L2 writing classroom. In addition, since teachers' individual differences like teaching profession may also play a part in interpretations and implementation of TBLT, I present that other researchers consider these features to scrutinize the suitability and feasibility of TBLT in Chinese secondary context. In the future, if the education authorities were serious about the study, they would add more feasible details and materials as guidance for enormous secondary EFL teachers stuck in actual implementation of TBLT and promoted this innovation in a more cautious and practical way.

However, the current study confronted some limitations. First, classroom observation could have supported the interview findings, but it was not allowed in the current situation. Alternatively, opinions from learners of teacher interviewees were collected to give a triangulated view to justify the interview outcomes. Also, as a common limitation of a qualitative study, generalizations were unlikely to be achieved in this study but I believe this research still provides insightful clues about the present, practical implementation of TBLT in the teaching of English writing in Chinese senior secondary schools in average developed cities.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Teacher questionnaire.

Nick name:

Teaching subject:

Teaching grade:

Q1: how many classes are you teaching?

Q2: how many years have you been an English teacher?

Q3: how many years have you been an English teacher in this school?

Q4: how many years have you been an English Teacher At high school?

Q5: how many students in your class?

Q6: how many students in each of your classes?

Q7: what are the average attainment scores of English in each of your classes?

Q8: have you got teacher training before working as an English teacher? If so, how long does your teacher training last?

Appendix 2. Semi-structured interview protocol for teachers.

1. In terms of English language teaching (ELT) approaches, what do you think Chinese teachers are good at doing?

2. What do teachers usually do in their English writing lessons?

3. What do you understand by the term task-based teaching?

4. How often do you use a task in your language writing classroom?

5. Can you give an example of a task you have carried out with your students in writing lessons?

6. What do you do in the post-task stage of the task cycle in writing lessons?

7. What are the positive elements of task-based teaching?

8. What are the negative elements of task-based teaching?
9. What do you think are teachers' main objections to task-based teaching?
10. What are the main issues/problems in the classroom implementation of tasks? And in writing lessons?
11. How well do you think teachers in your school understand task-based teaching?
12. Have you been able to get your students to interact much in English in writing lessons?
13. Do you think task-based approaches put too much emphasis on oral communication?
14. To what extent are your school tests and examinations task-based?
15. Do you think examinations play a role in the acceptability of task-based approaches?
16. How do you see the relationship between task-based teaching and grammar?
17. Can you give an example of a task you integrated with grammar in writing lessons?
18. Do you think task-based approaches are culturally suitable for Chinese?
19. What might make task-based teaching more manageable or feasible for your school context? English writing classrooms?

Appendix 3. Student questionnaire.

A learner questionnaire on Chinese senior secondary writing classrooms of English

1. Nickname:

2. Grade:

3. Class Type: A. Key class B. Parallel class C. weaker class

4. Average achievement in usual English exams:

A. Excellent B. Merited C. Modest D. a bit low E. very low

Questions:

5. Do you like learning English?

A. Not at all(1) B. not really(2) C. undecided(3) D. somewhat(4) E. very much(5)

6. Do you like English writing class?

A. Not at all(1) B. not really(2) C. undecided(3) D. somewhat(4) E. very much(5)

7. Do you prefer that the teacher mainly instruct knowledge in your writing class?

A. Not at all(1) B. not really(2) C. undecided(3) D. somewhat(4) E. very much(5)

8. Do you like an English writing class mainly consisting of classroom activities like group discussion, role play, or response competition?

A. Not at all(1) B. not really(2) C. undecided(3) D. somewhat(4) E. very much(5)

9. What has made you like your English teacher?

A. Clear and understandable instruction B. interesting class C. good looking D. patient and kind
E. exam-based expertise

10. What do you like your English teacher mainly focuses on?

A. Classroom activities B. key points in university entrance exams C. vocabulary D. grammar like tenses E. sentence structures

11. Do you like interacting with your teachers or other classmates?

A. Not at all(1) B. not really(2) C. undecided(3) D. somewhat(4) E. very much(5)

12.. What has made you seldom speak English in your English writing class?

A. Don't know how to pronounce words B. lack of vocabulary C. be afraid of making mistakes
D. Lack of collocations or sentence structures E. unwilling to speak because of other reasons

13. Do you often play games, discuss within a group or compete responding to teachers?

A. Not at all(1) B. not really(2) C. undecided(3) D. somewhat(4) E. very much(5)

14. Which activities do you prefer in your English writing class?

A. Teachers' instructions B. doing exercises C. answering oral questions D. group discussion
E. playing games like role plays

15. What do you think has improved your English writing?

A. My flow in class B. my study after class C. teachers' clear instructions D. interesting lessons
E. preview

16. Do you have any suggestions if your English teacher brings activities in future English writing class?

