Feature

OPEN ACCESS

Empowering Chinese high school students: Transformative reading lessons with the task-based learning approach

Shiqi Cai

School of Foreign Languages, Guangzhou College of Commerce, Guangzhou, Guangdong Province, China

Abstract

This essay investigates the implementation of the task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach in Chinese high school English as a Second Language (ESL) reading lessons. Despite China's Ministry of Education's endorsement of TBLT, its application in the Chinese language classroom remains challenging due to factors such as traditional examination systems and teachers' limited knowledge of TBLT principles. Drawing on the author's experience as an English teacher, the project aims to explore how TBLT can be effectively integrated into ESL reading instruction. The objectives include explaining the main characteristics of TBLT, identifying issues in the Chinese EFL context, providing rationales for TBLT use, and constructing three reading lesson plans that adopt the TBLT approach. The lesson plans, which incorporate authentic materials and a variety of tasks, are designed to promote fluency in reading for information and to develop students' awareness of real-world issues. The essay concludes that TBLT, with its learner-centered and goal-oriented nature, can enhance motivation and engagement in language learning, and that it is particularly suitable for contexts where students are preparing for overseas studies and need to develop communicative skills and creativity. The project also emphasizes the critical role of teachers in facilitating TBLT lessons and the need for ongoing professional development to support the effective implementation of TBLT in Chinese EFL teaching.

Keywords task-based language teaching, TBLT, tasks, English as a Second Language, ESL, reading instruction

1. Introduction

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is a learner-centred approach that generates opportunities for meaningful language practice; thus, it has attracted significant attention in the past decades. Since 2001, China' Ministry of Education (MoE) has introduced the new National English Curriculum Standards (NECS), which advocates a paradigm shift from the conventional teacher-centred approach to a more communicative approach to language teaching, in particular, the adoption of TBLT (MoE, 2001). However, even though it is mandated by China's Ministry of Education, the implementation of TBLT in the Chinese language classroom is problematic. Previous research conducted by Deng and Carless (2009) suggests that the activities in a Chinese primary school focused mainly on forms rather than meaning and finds insufficient evidence that the activities reflected the principles of TBLT on account of constraints such as traditional examinations and teachers' limited knowledge of how to implement task-based activities. Zheng and Borg's (2014) research further indicates a common misconception that tasks are predominantly associated with activities relying on output skills and are even equated with oral pair and group work by Chinese ESL teachers.

Additionally, reflecting from my previous work experience as an IELTS reading teacher, teaching second language reading in China in fact often emphasizes the linguistic aspects, especially in terms of vocabulary and grammar, and therefore conveys an underlying message that reading is simply a tool to learn a language or pass the language exams. However, as a valued aspect in not only academic field but also our daily life, reading should be an enjoyable process that allows students to acquire information and communicate, and that meanings behind the linguistic forms are equally important. In other words, through making the connection with what the text means to the learners, teachers are expected to bring in the belief that we read not only to learn a language but also to learn and communicate knowledge.

Therefore, through this project, I aim to extend the understandings of task-based language teaching beyond an emphasis on output skills and explore how to integrate task-based teaching and ESL reading in practice. The objectives of this assignment are as follow:

- To explain the main characteristics of the task-based language teaching.
- To identify the issues of TBLT in the Chinese EFL context.
- To provide rationales for the use of TBLT in the Chinese EFL classrooms.
- To construct three effective reading lesson plans

adopting the TBLT approach in a Chinese high school context.

2. Pedagogical Approach

2.1. Task-based Language Teaching

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is an approach that facilitates second foreign language learning by engaging learners in performing tasks that lead to interactionally authentic language use (Ellis, 2013). Compared with the conventional approaches to language teaching, which is usually specified in terms of linguistic items such as grammar, lexis and functions (Littlewood, 2007), TBLT is able to develop linguistic competency as well as other aspects of communicative language uses by engaging learners in tasks, particularly real-life tasks, with an emphasis on both language form and language use (Richards, 2015).

2.2. Definition of Pedagogical Task

To start with, a major concern regarding the factors that make a second language learning activity a pedagogical task is raised. Long (1985) made a distinction between target tasks and pedagogical tasks. According to Long (1985), target tasks refer to the everyday tasks that people do in their daily life, while pedagogical tasks are the simplified versions of target tasks for language classroom use. Willis (1996) further defines the pedagogical task as activities in which the learners use the target language for a communicative purpose to achieve an outcome.

The pedagogic tasks that are used in my following teaching section are designed in line with Skehan's (1996) comprehensive criteria: (1) pedagogic tasks are activities where meaning is primary, which differs from the traditional language teaching activities with an exclusive focus on a particular aspect of languages, such as vocabulary and grammatical forms. (2) In a pedagogic task, there is some communicative issue to solve, which is also referred to as having a gap between the communication partners. (3) The pedagogic activities should relate to real-world activities. Simply put, the tasks are similar to the activities that learners do in their real-life setting. (4) The fourth characteristic of tasks has to do with the assessment of the task. To be more specific, tasks are assessed in terms of not only the linguistic outcomes but also the actual communicative purpose of the task.

2.3. Tasks in TBLT

Tasks are crucial in the TBLT syllabus, and they are flexible pedagogical tools that can play different roles in the syllabus (Samuda & Bygate, 2008). For example, Ellis (2003b) has distinguished two types of tasks: unfocused and focused tasks, denoting whether or not a task has a particular linguistic focus. Furthermore, Ellis (2013) proposes another two task types: input-based and output-based tasks, and he suggests that their distinction lies in whether the learners are required to produce language while carrying out the task. Specifically, in the output-based tasks, learners are engaged in either speaking or writing activities, while in the input-based tasks, listening and reading activities are the primary focus.

As Leaver and Willis (2004) point out, TBLT is a multifaceted approach, and it can be adopted for different purposes in various syllabus types. Accordingly, there are two common types of syllabi in language pedagogy: task-based syllabi and the task-supported syllabi (Ellis, 2003b). In a task-based syllabus, pedagogical tasks are allocated in a considerably central role in the syllabus design and assessment without linguistic specifications (Ellis, 2003a; Ellis, 2003b; Ellis, 2013; Samuda & Bygate, 2008). The task-supported syllabus, on the other hand, still emphasizes the key role of tasks, but they do not constitute the primarily defining components in the syllabus or assessment (Ellis, 2003a; Richards, 2015; Samuda & Bygate, 2008).

2.4. Focus on Form

TBLT requires a primary emphasis on meaning. However, it also provides opportunities for focus on form, even though the occasion might vary. Skehan (2003), for example, have restricted focus- on-form to the pre-task and post-task stages, while Ellis (2003b) claims that it can be incorporated into the performance of the task. Even though the advocates of TBLT differ in interpreting how linguistic features can be best addressed and achieved, it can be generally agreed that focus-on-form is compatible with task-based teaching. Long (2000), for example, has proposed an incidental technique called *focus on form*, which 'involves briefly drawing students' attention to linguistic elements in context, as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning, or communication' (p.185). In the context of reading lessons, it means that this technique aims to incidentally allocate learner's attention to language, such as grammar and vocabulary, with a major focus on the meaning of the text. An example in the lesson plans is the use of textual enhancement in the reading text, which highlights the new vocabulary in the text by the mean of boldfacing (see appendix 2). By making the language features more perceptually salient, it is able to direct learners' attention to the form in the input (Meguro, 2019). The attention to form helps learners see how linguistic forms are compiled into the meanings required to perform a task (Ellis, 2013).

2.5. The framework for TBLT lesson

Willis (1996) has suggested a framework for TBLT lesson including three phases: *pre-task*, *task cycle* and *language focus*. According to Willis (1996), the components of the TBLT framework are discussed as follow:

The *pre-task* phase serves as an introduction to the lesson topic and preparation for the task implementation, such as highlighting useful vocabulary, activating previous knowledge, and helping learners understand the task instructions.

After sufficient preparation, learners are required to complete the task with specific outcomes using the target language during the *task cycle* stage, which incorporates three components: task, planning and report. Specifically, learners are expected to perform the task in pairs or small group, prepare a report for the whole class about how they

do the task and what conclusion they have achieved, and present their findings to the whole class in spoken or written form.

The final phase is the *language focus* stage, where the specific language features from the tasks are highlighted and examined.

3. Teaching Second Language Reading with TBLT

Reading is defined by Grabe and Stoller (2019) as the process of making meaning from a printed text and forming a coherent interpretation of information. According to Alderson (2000), there are two principal components in the process of reading: word recognition and comprehension, both of which are crucial elements for reading successfully. Additionally, Richard (2015) points out that reading comprehension is a complex cognitive process that requires various types of knowledge such as grammar, vocabulary and background knowledge. Simply put, a good reader is able to decode the words, recognize them and understand the relations between them using their pre-existing knowledge. Correspondingly, to comprehend a written text, there are two common types of processes: top-down and bottom-up processing. Top-down processing has to do with learners' previous information knowledge of the world to comprehend a text rather than relying on the individual words; on the other hand, the bottom-up processing takes place when the learners look for clues and recognize words in the text to better comprehend it (Richard, 2015). Top-down and bottom-up take place simultaneously and interactively while processing the information of a written text; therefore, drawing on these two processes, a number of reading strategies can be applied into the language classroom, such as connecting learners' background knowledge with the topic and making predictions before reading, using knowledge of discourse (such as discourse markers) to understand how the text is structured and guessing meaning from the context clues during reading and summarizing and reflecting on the process about what has been learned after reading (Grabe & Stoller, 2019).

The traditional type of reading in the language classroom is intensive reading, which is directed by the teacher using a reading text that learners might not be able to understand without guidance (Macalister, 2014). While intensive reading is undoubtedly a critical part of successful teaching of reading, Macalister (2014) has suggested that there are two main issues with intensive reading: firstly, teachers have devoted too much to it; secondly, they do it poorly. Additionally, using a difficult text as a linguistic object can be demotivating for learners because it conveys a subliminal message that reading is a tool to learn a language rather than a source of information and knowledge about interesting and important issues. Therefore, intensive reading 'should be part, rather than the sum, of a reading programme (Watkins, 2017, p.22)' and a more balanced reading programme should be promoted.

The basic proposition underlying TBLT, on the other hand, advocates that the language classroom should mirror the real world outside the classroom (Skehan, 1996). That is to say, the tasks in a reading classroom should parallel the natural process of reading outside the classroom, where learners read fluently for purposes, pleasure and information (Willis & Willis, 2007).

The rapidity of reading is one of the crucial aspects. To develop reading fluency, the importance of selecting suitable materials in a TBLT reading lesson should be emphasized. Nation (2007) has proposed five desirable conditions for meaning-focused input: (1) learners are familiar with the input materials; (2) the materials are interesting and appealing to learners; (3) the materials are comprehensible to a large extent with only a small number of unknown language items; (4) learners can learn the new language features through the context clues and prior knowledge; (5) there is a considerable amount of input. Under these conditions, the meaning-focused input is likely to help learners develop fluency, that is, the ability to process receptive and productive language at a reasonable rate (Nation, 2014).

Another significant factor in developing reading proficiency is placing reading in a more comprehensive task design rather than considering it as an isolated skill, which means learners read to achieve a particular communicative outcome, such as completing a piece of writing, a presentation or other tasks that are appropriate for their language proficiency and interest (Watkins, 2017). By doing that, learners will have a stronger reason to read and develop the necessary skill of integrating information from reading into other communicative aspects.

In conclusion, in line with the TBLT principles underpinning the relevance between the language classroom and real-world communications, the TBLT reading lessons aim to help learners read fluently for communicative purposes, with a major focus on the meaning of messages using comprehensible texts.

4. Rationale

4.1. Rationale for the task-based approach in language teaching

There are a number of reasons why language learners might benefit from task-based language teaching and learning. Firstly, using tasks in language teaching provides numerous opportunities for learners to practise using language interactionally and communicatively. This aligns with the claim emanating from the field of second language acquisition (SLA) that language learning is most effectively achieved by interactions and communications rather than being explicitly taught (Ellis, 2013). In addition, as a learner-centred and goal-oriented approach, TBLT requires learners to produce a clear outcome through tasks rather than practising correct language uses in exercise, thus, increases learners' motivation (Willis, 1996), which is a significant factor in second language learning success.

While TBLT is government-mandated in China, there is still a gap between the policy and its implementation. A few significant obstacles to adopting the task-based approach in the Chinese EFL teaching can be concluded as large class size, the public examination system, inappropriate textbook materials, teachers' limited

knowledge of TBLT and learners' passive classroom attitudes (Deng & Carless, 2009; Littlewood, 2007; Liu et al., 2021; Zheng & Borg, 2014).

However, an increasing volume of literature also highlights the effectiveness of the task-based approach in Chinese EFL teaching. The research conducted by Liu et al. (2021), for example, indicates that despite the insufficiency of comprehensive understanding, the majority of Chinese teachers (about 80% of the participants) express positive attitudes towards practising TBLT and willingness to gain a deeper understanding, because they believe it creates a motivational, collaborative and interactional learning environment. Additionally, according to Ellis (2003; 2013), the EFL context in many Asian countries, including China, has limited the learners'

accessibilities to communicate outside the language classroom, and the adoption of TBLT has provided and optimized the opportunities for L2 communication inside the classroom. Furthermore, as TBLT not only develops learners' fluency and confidence in communication but also promotes linguistic accuracy (Ellis, 2013), it is able to fulfil the expectation of the Chinese examination system. Finally, Littlewood (2007) pointed out that passive learning attitudes are not inherent in Asian students but rather a result of the teacher-centred educational environment. Asian learners accept and prefer TBLT over the traditional teaching approach even though they might initially demonstrate negative feelings towards TBLT (Lai, 2015). Nevertheless, it should also be acknowledged that more practical and professional teaching training programmes should be carefully considered for TBLT's further development in Chinese EFL teaching.

In addition to the importance of TBLT discussed above, I choose TBLT as the pedagogical approach of my project because I believe the principles of TBLT are compatible with my teaching context, which is decided based on my previous job as an English teacher in a high school international preparatory program. In this one-year program, students only take English and art lessons to prepare for their future studies in overseas universities for arts and design. Therefore, learners are less burdened by the demands of efforts to achieve academic goals but are expected to develop their communication skills and creativity. As a learner-centred approach that promotes meaningful and engaging language practice in the real world rather than having examinations in minds (Willis & Willis, 2007), TBLT might be more suitable in this teaching environment than the traditional language teaching methods. Furthermore, the learners in the program often have a relatively high- level language proficiency with an average IELTS score of 6 to 6.5; thus, the core of the curriculum is to help learners use their pre-existing knowledge for more communicative purposes willingly and confidently rather than teaching them to use new linguistic features accurately to achieve high scores in exams. Therefore, the reading lessons are expected to help learners gain experience of reading fluently in English to acquire information, which is a crucial skill in their future overseas studies.

4.2. Rationale for Teaching Plans

4.2.1. Materials

The reading texts used in the lessons are authentic materials about wildlife protection, adapting from the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) website. First of all, my major consideration is that the texts should be meaningful, relevant and motivating to learners; thus, I have decided on the topical articles about wildlife protection. In addition to its social significance, this topic is comprehensible for learners because it does not require much specialized background knowledge. However, I have also shortened and slightly simplified the texts considering the original texts might be too long, and certain words are beyond learners' comprehension. Finally, to relate to the real-life aspect of TBLT in these reading lessons, authentic reading materials, which have a social purpose of promoting wildlife protection awareness rather than being written specifically for language learning, are adopted. Authentic materials are found to be effective for ESL learners' reading comprehension because they closely relate to daily lives and enhance learning motivation (Kung, 2019).

4.2.2. Teaching procedures & the teacher's roles

The lesson follows the framework of TBLT (Willis, 1996): pre-task, task cycle and language focus. As a learner-centred approach, TBLT usually involves an active role of learners, but to ensure its successful implementation, the role of teachers in these teaching procedures should also be highlighted (Van den Branden, 2016).

Before the TBLT practices, the teacher plays a crucial role in considering learners' needs and learning conditions carefully, selecting appropriate learning materials and deciding on the focus of the lessons. (Van den Branden, 2016; Willis, 1996). Those aspects are discussed in the previous sections.

In the pre-task stage, the teacher is expected to support students with guidance and clarify the specific purpose of reading as a facilitator (Willis, 1996). To accomplish this goal, several activities are designed. First of all, even though it is unnecessary to start with grammar before the task, introducing critical vocabulary before tasks are recommended (Willis & Willis, 2007), considering that it can provide more instant and direct support for learners' comprehension when reading the text. Apart from the text enhancement, glossed items and using pictures to teach the new words, learners' attention can be directed to the unknown vocabulary in a meaningful context through the activity of quiz and watching a video, which are also used to activate learners' prior knowledge about the topic (i.e. wild elephants). As for the teacher sharing personal story related to the topic (i.e. volunteering in an elephant sanctuary in Thailand), it aims to engage learners' interest. Additionally, discussions are promoted in the pre-task stage, which provide not only an opportunity for learners to express their opinions but also a clear purpose for reading (Willis & Willis, 2007).

During the task performance, the teacher is a mediator and monitor. According to the seminal concept of the zone of proximal development developed by Vygotsky (1978), which focuses on the pivotal role of social interactions in second language acquisition, working in collaboration with a more skilled and knowledgeable

instructor or peers helps learners achieve their potentials in language learning. Therefore, rather than giving learner complete freedom in completing the tasks, the teacher provides clear instructions and scaffolding for the learners, leading them progressively toward a deeper understanding of the tasks and ultimately greater independence in the learning process. Opportunities for collaborative peer learning are also included in the lessons so that the less competent students can develop with support and guidance from their more skillful peers. Furthermore, the teacher needs to monitor the process and learners' task performance (Van de Branden, 2016). For example, while assigning the reading articles, the teacher will set a time limit and give reminders of the remaining time to help learners manage their reading time and to make sure all the groups are working at a similar speed (Richard, 2015). Another advantage of the predetermined time limit is that with some pressure, learners tend to work faster than usual and develop their reading fluency (Nation, 2007; 2014). While monitoring the process, the teacher needs to motivate and activate every single learner's participation in the task (Van den Branden, 2016).

The teacher is also responsible for integrating a linguistic focus into the reading lesson, such as introducing or reviewing vocabulary in the pre-task stage, as well as engaging learners in language- focused activities and practices after the task, such as helping them identify and gain a deeper understanding of specific language features (Willis & Willis, 2007; Van den Branden, 2016). Finally, the teacher will assess learners' task performance and language development and provide feedback. For future perspectives, Van den Branden (2016) has suggested another role of the teacher in TBLT as a researcher that contributes to the further development and refinement of TBLT in the pedagogical field.

4.2.3. Tasks

In lesson plan 1, learners are asked to read an article about wild elephants from three aspects: fun facts about elephants, their importance and the threats they are facing. The purpose of this reading task is to allow learners to gain a deeper understanding about elephants' physical and behavioral characteristics and their living conditions. When learners possess more knowledge about wildlife and understand it better, they care more deeply for it. The information from the first reading passage also serves as a foundation for the two following reading lessons. The learners then are asked to utilize the information acquired from reading and do a creative writing task to compose a short story from an elephant's point of view. There are several expected language features from this writing task, such as using a correct tense for narrative, clear event sequences, and producing clear and coherent writing. However, as mentioned earlier that creativity is highly valued in the lessons, more importantly, learners are expected to visualize their story with imagination, empathy and information they have learned from reading.

The task used in lesson plan 2 is jigsaw reading, where each learner reads a different section of a written work and exchange information with their peers (Willis, 1996). Learners are expected to read an informative text about the illegal ivory trade network from different perspectives,

determine the main idea and identify how it is supported by details and orally report to the class. It is a cooperative learning strategy that incorporates speaking and summarizing skills into a reading lesson.

In lesson plan 3, the first task for students is to choose an appropriate reading article related to the class topic and find useful information from it. Traditional reading classes often involve texts that are selected by the teacher or decided by the curriculum. However, there should be space in the reading classroom to include reading materials that are chosen by the learners themselves. For one thing, learners can take advantage of the process of selecting texts and negotiating how the texts can be used to practice reading (Watkins, 2017). For another, there is a communicative purpose to reading (i.e., finding an appropriate text that contains useful information), and an outcome to achieve (i.e., using the text in class), and it reflects the real-life aspect of TBLT, as finding appropriate reading materials for information is something that learners do in real life.

The final task aims to help learners realize that languages can be a powerful tool to address real-life problems and advocate for the issues that matter to our life. After gaining a foundational understanding about the topic from the previous two reading lessons and their own text, learners can develop a sense of empowerment and deliver a message to the public. Learners are required to use this information to compose a letter to everyone at school about why protecting elephants is important and what we can do to help them survive. To enhance the importance of the outcome, learners are asked to choose the best letter, which will be later displayed at school.

5. Procedure of lesson plans

5.1. Background Information

The teaching context of this assignment is based on my previous work experience, when I was teaching English in an international programme of a public high school in Guangzhou, China. This programme provides art, design and English courses for senior high school students who are going to study arts and design in overseas universities. The students have access to telephones, laptops and the internet in the classroom.

Course	A preparatory art, design and English program in a public senior high school
Size of class	24 learners with a balanced gender mix
Level of students	Intermediate to upper-intermediate level
Age	17-year-old
Duration	1 hour
Topic	Protecting wild elephants
Main aims of lessons	- To be able to read in English fluently for information;
	- To be able to develop an awareness of protecting wild elephants.
Materials used	Quiz, pictures, videos, reading texts, laptop and Internet, etc

The three lesson plans are designed with a TBLT approach, with the same focus on the theme of protecting wild elephants, progressing in depth to enhance students' English reading proficiency while simultaneously reinforcing their understanding of the importance of wildlife conservation.

Lesson Plan 1 focuses on introducing students to the physical and behavioral characteristics of elephants, their significance, and the threats they face. By integrating a variety of materials such as personal experiences, images, videos, and online quizzes, this lesson engages students' interest and facilitates their English reading skills through practical activities like group discussions and creative writing.

Lesson Plan 2 examines more closely on the topic, guiding students through group reading and discussions to understand and summarize different aspects of the illegal ivory trade network. Using the jigsaw reading method, students work collaboratively within groups, each focusing on a part of the reading material, then share and integrate their sections in class, ensuring that every student comprehends the entire content.

Lesson Plan 3 empowers students to select reading materials relevant to the course theme and apply their learned knowledge and information to write a letter about elephant conservation. This plan enhances students' information selection and processing skills through self-directed research and reading, and develops their writing and persuasive skills through the letter-writing activity.

These three lessons were arranged in sequential nature, progressing from foundational knowledge acquisition to deeper understanding and application, and finally to independent inquiry and creative expression. Such a structured approach not only improves students' English reading and writing abilities but also enhances their awareness and sense of responsibility towards global issues like wildlife conservation. The plans are designed to be technologically integrated, utilizing available resources like phones, laptops, and the internet to make learning more dynamic and interactive, catering to the needs and future aspirations of international program students.

5.2. Lesson plan 1

Aims:
- To be able to gain a deeper understanding of elephants regarding their physical and behavioural characteristics, significance and threats;
- To be able to incorporate the information from reading into storytelling writing.

Timing	Procedures
Pre-task	
10 minutes	*Greeting*
	Start with greetings and casual conversations with students to get their attention.
	Lead-in
	1. Tell the students that we are going to read a text today. Show a few pictures of elephants and ask students to guess the topic. 2. Share my own experience of volunteering in an elephant sanctuary in Thailand. 3. Ask students to complete a quiz about elephants (see appendix 1) through Kahoot. Discuss the answers with the class. 4. Ask students what more they know about elephants and write down their answers on the board. 5. Pre-teach the critical vocabulary using pictures, such as 'trunk', 'tusk', 'matriarch', 'poaching', etc.
Task Cycle	
20 minutes	*Reading*
	1. Ask students to read an article about elephants, including three sections: 'Elephant Fun Facts', 'Why Elephants Matter' and 'The Threats Elephants Face' (see appendix 2) and set a reading time limit of approx.12 minutes. 2. Divide students into six groups and ask them to discuss the article, trying to understand the main ideas and help each other figure out the new vocabulary. 3. Invite one student from each group to share what they have learned about elephants.
20 minutes	*Creative writing*
	1. After students finish reading and discussing, ask them to create a short diary from the point of view of an elephant. Students will need to: - Use their imagination and work together with their group members to compose a piece of creative writing in the form of storytelling. - Use the information from the reading as a reference and the available technology such as phones, laptops and the internet. 2. Ask students to share their diary with the whole class and compare their stories in terms of how they interpret and incorporate the information similarly or differently.
Language focus	
10 minutes	- Discuss and analyse what are the expected language features in the form of narrative writing, e.g., using elaborative and descriptive language; using clear event sequences; produce clear and coherent writing, etc. - Learners edit their writing based on the discussion. Due to the time limit, they can finish it after class.

5.3. Lesson Plan 2

Aims:

• To be able to read and understand the main idea of an informational text and identify the supporting details;
• To be able to summarize the illegal ivory trade network from different perspectives and explain the content to the peers.

Timing	Procedures
Pre-task	
10 min	*Lead-in*
	1. Start with greetings and casual conversations with students to get their attention.
	2. Introduce the topic by playing the video: How poaching is changing the face of African elephants https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K8EVQdIUWBE
	3. Start a discussion with the class:
	- What does it mean by 'changing the face of African elephant'?
	- What are the causes of elephant poaching?
	- What are the effects of elephant poaching?
	- Do you know any other wildlife crime?
	- Why do we need to stop wildlife poaching, and how can we do it?
	4. Introduce critical vocabulary, such as 'conservation', 'traffickers', 'wildlife rangers', etc.
Task Cycle	
30 minutes	*Jigsaw reading*
	Step 1:
	- Divide students into four groups and assign the same section of reading text (see appendix 3) to the students of the same group. For example, each learner in group 1 is responsible for the content of section 1: *History of Ivory Trade,* while group 2 is responsible for section 2: *Geography of Ivory Trade.* - Tell the students that they need to read their respective information, summarize the main idea and determine the key details to support the main ideas (10 minutes).
	Step 2:
	- After each student has finished reading their own section individually, they compare their ideas, clear misconceptions and work together with their group members to fill out the worksheet (see appendix 4). - The teacher walks around the classroom, reminding learners to work together with their group members, checking understanding and providing support as needed.
	Step 3:
	Regroup the students. Assign one student from each of the original groups in a new group, with each group representing the entire version of the reading text. For example, in group A, there are learners responsible for section 1 to 4 respectively.
	Step 4:
	Have them alternate explaining what they read to their new groups (approx. 3 minutes per student). For example, in group A, the student assigned with section 1 will summarize and explain the content of section 1: *History of Ivory Trade* to the other members in group A. All the students will learn and understand the whole reading text at the end of the activity.
10 minutes	*Report*
	Invite groups of volunteers to present the summary to the whole class orally.
Language focus	
10 minutes	*Discussion*
	- Discuss how the main idea of a text is determined and how it is supported by key details and examples. - Differentiate between contexts during the task that calls for formal English (e.g., presenting ideas) and situations where informal discourse is appropriate (e.g., small-group discussion)
	Follow-up practice (homework)
	- Have the learners do the research and write a formal report on the current efforts to combat the illegal ivory trade and provide suggestions of ways to encourage people to stop buying ivory products. - Learners are required to use formal English and include main ideas, supporting details and examples in their reports.

5.4. Lesson plan 3

Aims:

• To be able to select their own reading materials that are appropriate and relevant to class topics.
• To be able to apply the knowledge learned from the previous lessons and their text to compose an informative letter for protecting wild elephants.

Timing	Procedures
Pre-task	
10 minutes	*1. Greeting*
	Start with greetings and casual conversations with students to get their attention.
	2. Reviewing the important vocabulary
	such as 'tusk','poaching', etc
	3. Reviewing the previous two lessons with the class and brainstorming ideas
	-What do we know about elephants? -Why are they endangered?
	-What do we know about the ivory trade? How can we stop it? -What can we do to protect elephants?
	The teacher writes down students' answer on the board.
	4. Introducing the task: writing a letter to school about elephant protection
	-The letter includes the importance of elephants, the current threats that they face, and ways in which we can help protect them.
	-The best letter chosen by the class will be displayed at school.
Task Cycle	
40 minutes	*Choosing suitable text* (10 minutes)
	- Each student finds an article online that they are interested in and is related to the class topic, then critically reads it and discusses it with their peers.
	- The teacher walks around and provides support if students have troubles looking for relevant articles. For example, the teacher can give prompts and encourage students to think from different aspects of why elephants should be protected, such as elephants as empathetic beings, their significance to the environment or cultures, etc.
	A letter to school (20 minutes)
	Have students write a letter to the school, using the reading texts from the previous and current lessons as a reference and the available technology such as phones, laptops and the internet.
	Presenting the letters (10 minutes)
	- Put the learners in a group of four, have them share their writing with their group members, and give each other feedback.
	- Invite volunteers to share their writing with the class.
Language focus	
10 minutes	1. Analyse the register of writing a letter.
	2. Discuss how we can present informative and persuasive language in writing.
	3. After discussion, learners give each other feedback and edit their writing. Due to the time limit, they can finish it as homework.

6. Conclusion

Reflecting on my previous teaching experience, I have noticed that the traditional Chinese EFL reading lessons are usually used to teach linguistic features, which sometimes bore the learners. Therefore, this project aims to incorporate the task-based approach and the teaching of reading, bringing in a belief that reading is not only a tool for language learning but, most importantly, an enjoyable process of acquiring knowledge and developing social awareness. While conducting this project, I have been convinced that the TBLT approach is effective in the Chinese EFL context for its key characteristic: learner engagement, which increases learners' motivation in English learning. Additionally, TBLT is favoured because it helps learners see the relevance of what they are learning to the world outside the classroom. However, implementing the task-based approach in language teaching is still challenging, especially for inexperienced teachers, including myself, because teachers unfortunately do not have much opportunities to choose what they teach, and sometimes have to develop ways to subvert a task from a textbook given by schools or governments in line with TBLT. Therefore, in the process of designing a task, it is important for teachers to always bear in mind what learners want languages to do for them outside the language classrooms and in the broader world, and to continue to explore different possibilities and reject unsuccessful attempts until finding the right way to approach it.

Shiqi Cai is currently an English teacher in the Foreign Language Department at Guangzhou College of Commerce. She graduated from the University of Sydney with a master's degree in education (TESOL), achieving an overall high distinction. Her primary research interest lies in pedagogical approaches to teaching English as a second language and second language acquisition (SLA).

References

Alderson, J. (2000). *Assessing reading*. Cambridge University Press.

Deng, C., & Carless, D. (2009). The communicativeness of activities in a task-based innovation in Guangdong, China. *Asian Journal of English Language Teaching, 19*, 113–134.

Ellis, R. (2003a). Designing a task-based syllabus. *RELC Journal, 34*(1), 64–81. https://doi.org/10.1177/003368820303400105

Ellis, R. (2003b). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford University Press.

Ellis, R. (2013). Task-based language teaching: responding to the critics. *University of Sydney Papers in TESOL*, 8, 1-27.

Grabe, W., & Stoller, F. (2019). *Teaching and researching reading* (3rd ed.). Routledge.

Kung, F. (2019). Teaching second language reading comprehension: the effects of classroom materials and reading strategy use. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching, 13*(1), 93–104. https://doi.org/10.1080/17501229.2017.1364252

Lai, C. (2015). Task-based language teaching in the Asian context: where are we now and where are we going? In M. Thomas and H. Reinders. (Eds.), *Contemporary task-based language teaching in Asia*, (pp. 12–29). Bloomsbury Academic.

Leaver, B., & Willis, J. (2004). *Task-based instruction in foreign language education: practices and programs*. Georgetown University Press.

Littlewood, W. (2007). Communicative and task-based language teaching in East Asian classrooms. *Language Teaching, 40*(3), 243-249. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444807004363

Liu, Y., Mishan, F., & Chambers, A. (2021). Investigating EFL teachers' perceptions of task-based language teaching in higher education in China. *Language Learning Journal, 49*(2), 131–146. https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2018.1465110

Long, M. H. (1985). A role for instruction in second language acquisition: task-based language teaching. In Hyltenstam, K. & Pienemann, M. (Eds.), *Modelling and assessing second language development* (pp. 77-99). Multilingual Matters.

Long, M. (2000). Focus on form in task-based language teaching. In Lambert, R., Lambert, R., Shohamy, E., & Walton, A. (Eds.), *Language policy and pedagogy: essays in honor of A. Ronald Walton* (pp. 179-192). John Benjamin.

Macalister, J. (2014). Teaching reading: Research into practice. *Language Teaching, 47*(3), 387-397. https://doi.org/10.1017/S026144481400007X

Meguro, Y. (2019). Textual enhancement, grammar learning, reading comprehension, and tag questions. *Language Teaching Research, 23*(1), 58–77. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168817714277

Ministry of Education of China (MOE). (2001). *National English curriculum standards for nine- year compulsory education and senior higher school education*. People's Education.

Nation, P. (2007). The four strands. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, 1(1), 2–13. https://doi.org/10.2167/illt039.0

Nation, P. (2014). Developing fluency. In Muller, T., Adamson, J. S. A., Brown, P. S., & Herder, S. (Eds.), *Exploring EFL fluency in Asia* (pp. 11–25). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137449405_2

Richards, J. (2015). *Key issues in language teaching*. Cambridge University Press.

Samuda, V., & Bygate, M. (2008). *Tasks in second language learning*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Skehan. P. (1996). A framework for the implementation of task-based instruction. *Applied Linguistics, 17*(1), 38-62. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/17.1.38

Skehan, P. (2003). Task-based instruction. *Language Teaching, 36*(1), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1017/S026144480200188X

Van den Branden, K. (2016). The role of teachers in task-based language education. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 36*, 164–181. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190515000070

Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society: the development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.

Watkins, P. (2017). *Teaching and developing reading skills: Cambridge handbooks for language teachers*. Cambridge University Press.

Willis, D., & Willis, J. (2007). *Doing task-based teaching*. Oxford University Press.

Willis, J. (1996). *A framework for task-based learning*. Longman.

Zheng, X., & Borg, S. (2014). Task-based learning and teaching in China: Secondary school teachers' beliefs and practices. *Language Teaching Research, 18*(2), 205–221. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168813505941

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

JLT Journal of Language Teaching

Call for Papers

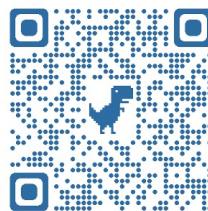## Submit via https://jlt.ac/

Areas of Interest:

Language teaching intervention and experiments; Curriculum development; Language teacher education; Bilingual education; New technologies in language teaching; Testing, assessment, and evaluation; Educational psychology, and more.

We accept the following types of submission:

1. Research article: (6,000 to 8,000 words)
2. Review: (3,000 to 8,000 words)
3. Book review: (up to 3,000 words)
4. Features: (3,000 to 8,000 words)

Scan to submit your articles* & read more articles for free.

*Article Processing Charges Apply.

Contact: editor@jlt.ac

Pioneer Publications