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Adapting task-based language teaching to Chinese EFL classrooms: A post-method perspective on lesson design and implementation challenges

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Abstract

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has been widely advocated for developing learners' communicative competence, yet its implementation in Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom presents practical challenges. This paper critically examines the design of a 90-minute task-based English lesson for Grade 8 students in a public junior middle school in Nantong, Jiangsu Province, China. Drawing on Willis's (1996) TBLT framework, the lesson is organized into three stages: pre-task, task cycle, and language focus. Using the textbook topic "An Interview with an ORBIS Doctor" as the basis for a role-play task, the lesson integrates vocabulary learning, reading, listening, speaking, and grammar instruction, with particular attention to the passive voice. The paper evaluates the lesson design through the post-method pedagogical principles of particularity, practicality, and possibility. The analysis highlights the potential of contextualised, meaning-oriented tasks to encourage learner participation, collaborative learning, and communicative language use while connecting language learning with social awareness. It also identifies challenges associated with large classes, differences in learners' language proficiency, limited exposure to English outside the classroom, time constraints, and established teacher-centred teaching practices. The paper argues that effective TBLT implementation requires context-sensitive adaptation rather than the uncritical application of a fixed methodological framework. It concludes by emphasizing the importance of balancing meaning-focused communication with explicit attention to language form in Chinese EFL classrooms.

Keywords task-based language teaching; English as a Foreign Language; Chinese junior middle school; post-method pedagogy

1. Introduction

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has attracted considerable attention in second and foreign language education because of its emphasis on meaningful communication and the use of language to achieve communicative outcomes (Ellis, 2003; Willis, 1996). Rather than treating language learning primarily as the mastery of isolated grammatical structures, TBLT engages learners in purposeful tasks through which they can develop their ability to use the target language. This orientation is particularly relevant to English language education in China, where the 2022 National English Curriculum Standards emphasize the development of students' language use abilities and the integration of language learning with meaningful learning activities (Ministry of Education, 2022).

Despite its pedagogical potential, implementing TBLT in Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom involves considerable challenges. Large class sizes, differences in learners' language proficiency, limited exposure to English outside school, and established teacher-centred teaching practices may restrict opportunities for sustained communicative interaction. Previous studies have also highlighted the complexity of adapting task-based approaches to local educational contexts and existing teaching practices (Chen & Wright, 2016; Liu & Guo, 2020; Kessler et al., 2021). These challenges suggest that the successful implementation of

TBLT requires more than the adoption of a prescribed teaching framework; it also requires teachers to make context-sensitive pedagogical decisions.

In response to these considerations, this paper critically examines the design of a 90-minute task-based English lesson for Grade 8 students in a public junior middle school in Nantong, Jiangsu Province, China. The class consists of 55 students aged 13–15, whose English proficiency is at a pre-intermediate level. Centred on a simulated interview with an ORBIS doctor, the lesson draws on Willis's (1996) framework of pre-task, task cycle, and language focus. It integrates vocabulary learning, reading, listening, and speaking, while providing opportunities for learners to use the passive voice in meaningful communicative contexts.

Drawing on Kumaravadivelu's (2006) post-method pedagogy, particularly the principles of particularity, practicality, and possibility, this paper critically evaluates the rationale and potential limitations of the proposed lesson design. Rather than reporting an empirical investigation of learning outcomes, it explores how task-based principles can be adapted to the specific needs and constraints of a Chinese EFL classroom. It argues that effective TBLT implementation requires a balance between meaning-focused communication, attention to linguistic form, and sensitivity to the local teaching context. The paper first discusses the theoretical rationale for the lesson design, then evaluates its pedagogical implications through the three post-method principles, and finally considers the challenges and possibilities of implementing TBLT in Chinese junior middle school classrooms. The contribution of this paper lies not in proposing a new model of TBLT, but in illustrating how task-based principles can be adapted to a specific Chinese EFL classroom. In particular, it examines how a role-play task can be supported by pre-task scaffolding, explicit attention to language form, and task repetition, while taking account of learners' proficiency, class size, and local teaching conditions.

2. Rationale

The rationale is divided into three parts: the rationale for TBLT, the rationale for Willis's framework, and the rationale for the Lesson Plan.

2.1. TBLT

TBLT is the primary approach informing this lesson plan. It is closely related to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), as both emphasize meaningful language use. However, TBLT places tasks at the centre of the teaching and learning process, using them to organize classroom activities and create opportunities for learners to achieve communicative outcomes. Rather than simply adding communicative activities to a language-focused syllabus, TBLT gives priority to meaning-oriented task completion while allowing attention to linguistic form to arise before, during, or after the task. Scholars have proposed different frameworks for TBLT and offered various definitions of tasks in language teaching.

Prabhu (1987) proposed that in TBLT, students should focus on the task itself and solve a specific communication problem through the task, while how to complete the task and the result of the task completion are secondary. His TBLT framework is divided into pre-task, task, and post-task. According to him, a task is an activity that forces students to use some mental process to conclude the material provided while allowing teachers to monitor and manage the process. While his TBLT framework is teacher-oriented, he laid the foundation for the subsequent development of TBLT. Nunan (1989) believed that TBLT requires students to play different roles through set tasks in the language learning process, to promote learning through communication. He defined a *task* as "a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form" (Nunan, 1989, p. 10). Nunan was the first person who stressed meaning in the definition of a task (Mao, 2012), and he divided tasks into real-world and pedagogical tasks. By summarizing Ellis's (2003) views, his TBLT framework contains pre-task, during task and post-task. He claimed that TBLT is based on constructivism and constructs tasks based on students' learning needs and social talent requirements. Students will take themselves as the subject of learning, complete the task in the interaction, and finally achieve the purpose of mastering the language.

2.2. Willis's Framework

This lesson plan is mainly designed on Willis's framework. Willis (1996) divided the TBLT process into three stages: pre-task, task cycle and language focus. The pre-task stage mainly has three purposes: Introduce the task so that students have a preliminary understanding of it; Display materials related to the task, such as topic-related words, so that students can intuitively understand the task objectives and teaching content;

Analyze relevant materials for pre-task teaching activities. These are all prepared for the main task. The Task cycle stage contains three contents: First, students should complete tasks in groups or pairs. Teachers must ensure that all students participate in the correct tasks in this process. Second, planning occurs after students have completed the task, but before reporting, students should plan how they will report and maximize their learning and communication opportunities. The report is the last part of the task cycle. Students show how well they have completed the task. The language focus stage mainly tests the completion of tasks, defines, interprets and practices language features, and focuses on the accuracy of language application. His definition is, "Tasks are activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome" (Willis, 1996, p. 23). Willis (1996) gave a more systematic exposition of TBLT, which provided necessary theoretical support for its specific application. She stated that in the traditional teacher-centred teaching model, students could only passively follow the teacher's instructions, which severely inhibits students' initiative to learn independently, so a student-centred classroom model must be applied. China's Ministry of Education (2022) issued a new National English Curriculum Standards based on the 2017 version, which emphasizes cultivating students' language use abilities and adopting holistic tasks in teaching. As a result, this teaching plan is based on Willis's framework, hoping to change the traditional teacher-centred mode and improve students' learning autonomy.

2.3. Lesson Plan

2.3.1. Pre-Task

The Pre-task phase has three intentions: connect with previous knowledge, introduce the lesson's topic, and prepare for the main task.

First, the teacher introduces the word "charity" by telling a personal story, making students recall what they learned in the previous lesson, and inviting them to share their knowledge about "charity". This process is what Willis and Willis (2007) called the "spontaneous exchange of meanings" (p.8). It stimulates students' interest and engages them quickly. Then the teacher shows some logos of different charities and asks the students to guess what they are to introduce the topic and task of this lesson: an Interview with an ORBIS Doctor. Based on individual differences in students' current knowledge, the teacher presents a video to scaffold students with some basic information about ORBIS. Finally, since students have not been exposed to interview activities before, the teacher provides an interview sample text. Before reading, students need to predict the content according to the vocabulary and phrases given by the teacher. After reading, the teacher and students check their predictions together. This prediction activity is designed to activate students' prior knowledge and encourage them to use contextual clues to anticipate the content of the reading text. Although it involves some inferencing, it is more appropriately understood as a pre-task scaffolding activity than as a reasoning-gap task in Prabhu's (1987) sense. By checking their predictions against the text, students can develop their understanding of the topic and practise skimming and scanning. As a result, one of the primary reasons for the pre-task stage is to create expectations, prepare valuable materials, and arouse students' interest in the subject matter.

2.3.2. Task Cycle

The task-cycle stage contains three parts: task, planning and report.

Firstly, in the task part, students are asked to brainstorm in groups the questions they would like to ask an ORBIS doctor and write them down to create a question list with possible answers. This process can be described as collaborative brainstorming and the exchange of ideas. They work in groups to generate different questions based on their interests and interpretations of the topic, and it is genuine for them to share different ideas so that learners can have more chances to use the language (Willis & Willis, 2007). Writing down the list of questions exercises not only their listing ability, but also their writing ability to a certain extent. Then, they need to do a role-play interview in pairs. If students encounter something they cannot express in English, they can use gestures or Chinese for help, which reflects the application of translanguaging. As García and Wei (2014) said, translanguaging rejects monolingual bias and advocates for speakers to use intertwined linguistic repertoire for meaning-making. Bui and Tai (2022) claimed that it is beneficial for learners with the same native language to use translanguaging in a TBLT class. The use of gestures and students' first language may help sustain communication, although it does not guarantee fluency in English. During this part, students' mistakes do not matter, and the teacher needs to monitor all the students engaged in the right task. Therefore, the meaning-orientated and student-centred principle of TBLT is reflected. Ellis (2009) stated that 'meaning' should be the main focus in a language teaching task. Willis and Willis (2007) argued that TBLT is not for exams, but for learners to use English in the real world, so grammatical accuracy is not the initial aim. Here, the lesson

plan sees meaning as the starting point of the task and encourages learners to engage in meaning-making communication with the repertoires they already have.

Secondly, in the planning part, students need to plan the outline of their report, exchange question lists and answers among groups, modify the list after and rehearse the interview. In this part, the teacher will selectively point out students' mistakes to give them some advice and feedback. As befits a public presentation, the emphasis is on accuracy, structure, and lucidity (Willis & Willis, 1996). Finally, in the report part, some representatives are invited to report the task to the whole class, while others can comment and add extra points to their interviews. The teacher acts as a "chairperson" (Willis & Willis, 2007, p.59) to encourage students, praise their improvements, increase their motivation and confidence, and note some continuing mistakes. According to students' mistakes, the teacher adds an extra review to the reading text. The teacher invites students to read the whole text to let the students have some listening practice. At this time, students can compare what they have done with the given text example. This component exposes students to more subject-related content and gives them more opportunities to practice using the target language (Willis & Willis, 1996). These two components provide pupils with a natural impetus to develop and improve their language skills and communicate effectively using language suited to the situation.

As a result, the task cycle gives students a comprehensive view of language use in the real world (Willis, 1996). Therefore, authenticity is another principle involved in this lesson plan. In Morrow's (1977) opinion, authenticity means the language produced by authentic people for authentic audience to convey authentic meaning. In this lesson plan, no matter the pictures and video displayed in pre-task or the experiences narrated by teachers and students are all derived from real-life situations to create an authentic language learning context. According to Ellis (2003), "authenticity concerns whether a task needs to correspond to some real world activity, achieve situational authenticity" (p. 6). This means that tasks should be related to students' real-life situations, such as going shopping and going to a dentist (Waer, 2009). In this lesson plan, the role-play task in which students need to be interviewers and interviewees is defined by Ellis (2003) as an unfocused task drawn from real life. Students can use all their language resources for meaningful purposes if actively engaged. This, in turn, helps them understand how to conduct an interview appropriately and increases their language fluency. Integrating teaching into an authentic context can help improve students' exposure to real language and increase the possibility that students will use the language skills acquired in real-life environments outside the class. Therefore, authenticity in language teaching and learning is crucial.

2.3.3. Language Focus

It comes to the final stage: language focus. Principles like "from fluency to accuracy" and "from meaning to form" are involved at this stage.

Firstly, the teacher asks students to underline sentences containing 'be' plus past participles in the given text, drawing their attention to specific language features encountered in the preceding reading and listening activities. These consciousness-raising activities are intended to direct students' attention from meaning to linguistic form (Willis & Willis, 1996). The teacher then explains the grammatical rules for the passive voice in the simple present and past tenses. This is intended to help students organize their observations of specific linguistic features and notice patterns in the text (Willis & Willis, 1996). Afterwards, students complete a matching exercise to consolidate their awareness of these features. The purpose is not to expect immediate mastery, but to help students notice the forms and begin to use them where appropriate (Willis & Willis, 1996). Finally, students repeat the role-play with different partners. This provides an opportunity to revisit the initial task and incorporate some of the expressions and language features encountered during the lesson. Although students are encouraged to use the passive voice where appropriate, the main purpose remains communicating relevant information about ORBIS rather than producing predetermined grammatical forms. In this way, task repetition can encourage learners to revisit the original task while maintaining its meaning-focused orientation. Willis and Willis (1996) suggest that repeating a task allows learners to incorporate linguistic features on which they have previously focused. Previous research has also examined task repetition as a way of supporting L2 performance, although findings from other modalities should not be assumed to transfer directly to this oral role-play (van de Guchte et al., 2015).

To end the lesson, the teacher inspires students to consider the significance of international charities and what students themselves can do and introduces a song called "We are the World" to resonate with students to do some meaningful charitable work for the world. The purpose is to promote students' reflection and higher-order thinking skills. It is in line with the necessity of developing students' global skills when teachers not only teach languages but also enhance learners' character strands and positive values (Mercer et al., 2018).

3. Evaluation

3.1. Criteria

Kumaravadivelu (1994, 2001, 2006) argued that teachers rely on their personal intuition and experience to decide what to teach to handle daily teaching challenges, so the gap between what theories recommend as "methods" and what teachers actually do are pretty significant. Therefore, he proposed "post-method" based on the limitations of "method". It is not a specific pedagogy, but a context-based pedagogical proposition and a set of macro strategies designed to help solve the conundrum that confuses teachers: the choice of pedagogical methods. It is a system centred on teacher autonomy and characterized by particularity, practicality, and possibility, which helps foreign language teachers achieve breakthroughs in personal teaching theory and practice. Therefore, particularity, practicality, and possibility can be considered basic principles for organizing foreign language teaching. They are intertwined and interact with each other. In the following evaluation section, these three criteria are used to evaluate the effectiveness of the lesson plan.

3.2. Particularity

Particularity means that any pedagogy must be tailored to a particular environment. Policymakers and teachers should have a critical understanding of local teaching conditions. Teachers should observe their teaching behaviour, reflect on teaching outcomes, solve teaching problems and put them into practice again, and they should teach in different ways according to different situations.

TBLT has been widely promoted as a core component of curricula or syllabi in several Asian nations these years (Butler, 2011). And many scholars (e.g., Ji & Pham, 2020; Kessler et al., 2021; Zhang & Luo, 2018) have researched the application of TBLT in China. Wang (2007) said that since China's New Curriculum Standards were published in the 2000s, TBLT has been attaching attention to China's EFL classrooms. More recent studies have investigated how TBLT can be localized in Chinese secondary schools, including in examination-oriented settings (Lu et al., 2025; Lu et al., 2026). This lesson plan is designed for a public junior middle school classroom in Nantong, Jiangsu Province, China. The specific characteristics of the class, including its relatively large size of 55 students and the learners' pre-intermediate English proficiency, have informed several instructional decisions. For example, the pre-task stage includes video input and a model interview text to provide background knowledge and linguistic support before the main task. Students are also encouraged to use gestures or their first language when necessary to maintain communication. These adaptations illustrate how general TBLT principles can be adjusted to meet the needs and constraints of a particular classroom. The lesson also takes students' interests, needs, and abilities into account in an effort to make the task more engaging, meaningful, and accessible. Given students' limited prior knowledge of the topic and interview activities, the use of a model text and skimming and scanning is intended to prepare them for the subsequent task.

From the lead-in to the final closure, the teacher uses context-related materials and personal experiences to connect the lesson topic with students' prior knowledge and interests. The charity logos, ORBIS video, model interview, and closing reflection are intended to make the topic accessible and situationally relevant. These choices show how the lesson is adapted to the particular learners and teaching context.

3.3. Practicality

Practicality means that teachers should revise relevant theories according to teaching practice and finally form their own effective teaching. It is a dynamic, continuous process of practice and summary, focusing on teachers' reflection and action.

In this teaching plan, the teacher adapts TBLT principles to the local teaching context and develops an approach suited to the learners' needs. In some Chinese EFL contexts, particularly where examination requirements and curriculum coverage strongly influence classroom practices, teachers may place considerable emphasis on explicit grammar explanation and controlled practice. However, teaching practices vary across schools, regions, and individual teachers. Previous studies have discussed the challenges of implementing TBLT in Chinese EFL classrooms (Chen & Wright, 2016; Liu & Guo, 2020), while recent research has examined how teachers adapt task-based instruction and how their experience and beliefs influence implementation (Lu et al., 2025; Lu et al., 2026; Xuan et al., 2026). TBLT may offer opportunities for learners to use language to achieve communicative outcomes, while explicit attention to form can still be incorporated at appropriate stages of a lesson. Research on a task-based course for low-proficiency EFL learners has also highlighted the importance of considering task difficulty, teacher feedback, and pairing arrangements (Fujita & Shintani, 2025). These

considerations are relevant to the design of the present lesson, which includes preparatory input, pair work, and explicit language support.

This lesson adopts a task-based orientation, with the interview role-play serving as the central task around which the lesson is organized. Pre-task activities provide learners with the background knowledge and linguistic resources needed to engage in the task, while the subsequent language focus stage draws attention to relevant grammatical features. The matching exercise and task repetition provide further opportunities for learners to notice and practise these features. Therefore, this lesson combines a meaning-focused task sequence with explicit form-focused instruction and controlled practice. This reflects an attempt to adapt task-based principles to the needs of learners in a particular EFL context. Throughout the lesson, students read a model text, watch an English video, prepare questions, and participate in role-play and group discussion. These activities are designed to create opportunities to draw on reading, listening, writing, and speaking skills in an integrated way. Recent studies of localized TBLT in Chinese secondary schools have explored similar efforts to balance communicative tasks with the requirements of local teaching contexts (Lu et al., 2025; Lu et al., 2026). The discussion and music appreciation activities after the language focus stage are additional extensions of the lesson design rather than core stages of Willis's (1996) framework. They are intended to encourage students to express their views and connect the lesson topic with social concerns. This approach is consistent with the view that task-based pedagogy may need to be adapted to particular cultural and educational contexts (Ji & Pham, 2020). As the lesson has not been empirically implemented and evaluated in this paper, these features should be understood as anticipated pedagogical opportunities rather than demonstrated improvements in students' competence.

However, there also exist some limitations of TBLT in this context. Firstly, it is not efficient to use TBLT to introduce new language features (Swan, 2005). China is linguistically diverse, while opportunities for students to use and be exposed to English outside the classroom may be limited. So, it is crucial for students to learn some language features. As reflected in this lesson plan, the teacher does not require students to master the language forms, although some grammatical features are taught. However, when students lack some knowledge of language forms, they will find it challenging to carry out communication tasks. Secondly, TBLT is time-consuming and "requires long-term planning and serious organizational considerations" (Mao, 2012, p. 2438). As seen from the lesson plan, the class has a considerable size of 55 students. It is not easy to control the difficulty level of tasks because of individual differences. Students may need more linguistic resources to handle holistic communication if the task is too complex. Finally, TBLT does not correspond to some students' learning and teachers' teaching cultures. Many researchers (e.g., Liu & Guo, 2020; Chen & Wright, 2016) studied Chinese teachers' belief toward TBLT and their application in EFL teaching. They found that although teachers hold a positive attitude towards TBLT, believing that TBLT helps improve students' overall English ability, they rarely used it. Liu and Guo (2020) found that teachers believe traditional teaching has excellent advantages in helping them test students' mastery of what they have learned, but TBLT has high requirements for teachers. Therefore, although teachers admit the superiority of TBLT, they still adopt the traditional didactic teaching method in the daily classroom. TBLT is just a stunt to cope with the teaching inspection, teaching competition and model class. It shows that the teacher's agency is influenced by past experiences, both personal and professional, in the iterational dimension (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). In this lesson plan where TBLT is adopted, some students who prefer traditional 3P modes may not be actively engaged in the tasks. And other teachers who have no deep understanding of TBLT may find it meaningless because it has no main points of linguistic forms.

3.4. Possibility

Possibility means that foreign language teaching should be sensitive to social politics and attach importance to valuable information to construct learner identity. It also advocates the development and usage of social consciousness in the classroom to meet the dual needs of language and society.

The text of this lesson plan comes from a middle school English textbook in China. However, the teacher only selects this text in the unit as the teaching material, and does not follow the steps in the textbook. This reflects the role of teachers' personal ideology in teaching. Just as Kumaravadivelu (2006) said, teachers' conception of teaching comes not only from their own classroom experience, but also from the broad social, economic and political environment in which they live. They can change classroom goals and activities in ways that policymakers, curriculum designers or textbook writers do not expect. In this lesson, the topic of international charities is used to support the language-learning objectives while inviting students to consider wider social issues. The principle of possibility can be understood in relation to learners' developing identities, agency, and awareness of social inequalities. The topic of ORBIS provides an opportunity for students to

consider why some people may have limited access to eye care and how international charities, local communities, and individuals can respond to these needs. Through discussion, learners are encouraged not only to develop social awareness but also to see themselves as individuals who may contribute to their communities. Recent discussions of learner and teacher agency in language education highlight the importance of understanding how identity and agency shape language learning and teaching (Tao & Gao, 2026). Although this lesson is designed for Grade 8 learners and therefore keeps the discussion accessible to their age and language proficiency, it may create space for them to connect language learning with broader social realities.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, TBLT informs this lesson plan by organizing classroom activities around a communicative role-play task. The proposed design aims to provide students with opportunities to develop relevant language knowledge, practise communication and group work, and gain experience in conducting an interview. However, in teaching contexts where teacher-centred and form-focused practices remain influential, the implementation of TBLT may involve practical and pedagogical challenges. Teachers therefore need to consider how TBLT can be adapted to the specific conditions of their classrooms while balancing meaning-focused communication with attention to linguistic form. For teachers, this is a dynamic and iterative process that requires ongoing reflection and context-sensitive decision-making. As the lesson is presented as a proposed design rather than an empirically evaluated intervention, its anticipated benefits would need to be examined through classroom implementation and subsequent evaluation.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted without any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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