

An Investigation of Task Design, Implementation and Evaluation in Teaching Literature in a Chinese University

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Abstract: This paper constitutes a study of the exploration of effective tasks in teaching literature course. The definition of tasks, tasks design, implementation and evaluation are investigated. The effective tasks in teaching literature are identified in the 4 perspectives: linguistic competences, literature knowledge, affective outcomes and other competences and skills.

1. Introduction

When learning British and American literature, students can learn the language with the interaction of the text. At the same time, they can learn the literature which is an essential part of another culture which will enhance the development of cultural competence as well as the cultivation of students' aesthetic taste and enhancement of their literary appreciation level^[14]. However, in terms of the teaching method, some problems arise in British and American Literature. Cheng et al (2002) have conducted a survey on teaching “English and American literature” in Chinese colleges and universities^[2]. It is found out that more than 60% of the teachers still follow the more traditional teaching approach. That is to say, the teachers only teach literary knowledge and selected readings in literature class with scarce focus for students' participation. The traditional approach goes on four stages. When talking about a writer or a piece of work, it starts with the background of the times and then the life of the writer. After that, it would be the ideological value and next the artistic characteristics of the works. This spoon-fed procedural teaching is problematic with boring classroom atmosphere and passively motivated students^[2].

2. Task-based language teaching

To reform the above situations, teachers and practitioner researchers have called upon the application of task-based language teaching in the teaching of literature course. Task-based teaching approach, a learner-centered teaching method is adopted by teachers to create appropriate tasks to guide students to go through the completion of the task. By leading the students to participate in the task with active participation, the construction of knowledge is completed. Song (2015) argues that the effectiveness of task-based approach has changed the drawbacks of traditional teaching method in British and American literature^[11]. Yu et al (2016) demonstrate the benefits of task-based approach

in literature course not only develop students' language competence, but also their knowledge of the world and pragmatic competence as well as students' cognitive and affective capacities ^[13]. Besides students' competences, Zhu (2009) has carried out a questionnaire survey of task-based approach in teaching history of British and American literature among students to prove that the task-based approach is conducive to improve students' comprehensive English ability such as cooperative learning and autonomous learning ^[15].

3. Challenges: task design, implementation, and effective tasks

Knowing the benefits and strengths of task-based approach in teaching literature, nevertheless, teachers still have no idea as how to design, implement and evaluate the effectiveness of tasks in literature course. There is little research and findings to show the design, implementation, and evaluation of effective tasks in teaching literature. Therefore, with the interests to explore further about the effectiveness of tasks in teaching literature, this paper will move on to the investigation of the following research questions:

- 1) How can teachers design and implement tasks?
- 2) What are the effective tasks in teaching literature (students in university of science and technology)?

Considering the clarity and structure of the paper, the following sections will be: a literature review about key concepts and debates; theoretical framework; tentative methodological approach and in the end the ethical issues and knowledge generation.

4. Task design

The issue always puzzles a task-based practitioner is how we can design tasks. Therefore, before designing a task, we need to know the definition of a task.

4.1 Definition of tasks

After reviewing and analyzing the definitions by researchers and scholars, tasks are described as the 6 dimensions from Ellis (2013): scope, perspective, authenticity, linguistic skills, psychological process, and the outcome. And, the different dimensions of a task are demonstrated through a picture-drawing task as an example ^{[3][4]}.

4.1.1 Scope

A task is a workplan for students' activity.

A task works as a plan for students to practice language in the communication process. In view of Breen (1989), a task is 'a structured plan for the provision of opportunities for the refinement of knowledge and capabilities entailed in a new language and its use during communication. For example, a picture-drawing task is a plan for the students to draw up a picture through the communication and interaction in the discussion ^[1].

4.1.2 Perspective

A task involves a primary focus on meaning.

When describing the features of tasks, Skehan (1998) mentioned that meaning is primary when performing tasks ^[10]. Samuda and Bygate (2010: 16) reinforced that idea that tasks "requires a meaningful target outcome or outcomes" ^[9]. Again, when performing the picture-drawing task, students will focus on the negotiation of meaning to get the pictures done in the communication.

4.1.3 Authenticity

A task involves real-world process of language use.

Skehan (1998) defined tasks to have “some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities”^[10]. For instance, the picture-drawing task is related to the real-world activities. When performing these kinds of tasks, students can practice the language and communication which are needed in the real-world situation.

4.1.4 Linguistic skills

A task can include the holistic 4 language skills.

Samuda and Bygate (2010: 16) indicate that performing tasks can involve the holistic language use with listening, speaking, reading, and writing^[9]. Take the picture-drawing task as an example again, students will have to read the instructions of the task, speak, and listen to their classmates in the discussion and then write down to details of the discussion before they move on to draw the picture.

4.1.5 Psychological process

A task engages the cognitive process of the learners to conduct the workplan.

Prabhu (1987: 24) defined a task as the “cognitive process to give information through some process of thought, and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process”^[8]. Nunan (2011: 4) echoed the thought to define a communicative task to be “a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language”^[6]. The picture-drawing task involves, no doubt, the cognitive process of comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the language during classroom interaction.

4.1.6 Outcome

A task has clearly defined communicative outcome.

Willis (1996: 23-25) elaborated that “tasks are always the activities where the target language is used by learners for a communicative purpose to achieve an outcome”^[12]. The picture-drawing task is to draw a picture as an outcome during the communication process by the learners.

5. Task implementation

Based on the framework of Ellis, the task implementation will be divided into three stages: pre-task, while-task, and post-task^[3]. The pre-task phase is to lead in to the task. The teacher will first explain students' goals through specific objectives, and helps students establish different goals according to their own motivation and needs. After establishing teaching goals, teachers can activate and strengthen students' willingness to learn and communicate by providing examples of tasks, carrying out activities like target tasks, giving language guidance and strategic guidance, and a series of warm-up activities such as topic discussion or introduction to literature works. The while-task is the core stage of task-based teaching, and its role is to carry out tasks. By carrying out the student-centered tasks, real world communication will be focused. At the same time, negotiation of meaning and cooperation will be promoted among students to practice both linguistic skills and literature knowledge. The post task is to reflect on the task. Teachers will guide students to evaluate their language behavior correctly by reviewing the completion of the task, and then to obtain relevant experience in language, literature knowledge and competences and skills like communication strategies. Finally, by extending activities to provide students with more practice opportunities,

students will generate their own emotional response towards literature.

6. Tasks and Literature

It is beneficial for teachers to adopt tasks in teaching literature course. First, a task is a workplan of a student-centered activity, which is motivating for students to learn literature. Second, conducting tasks in literature will involve the learning of authentic material in real world communication. Third, performing a task in literature course will involve the holistic language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In such case, students can develop their language acquisition, awareness, and competence.

7. Evaluating Literature Course

Scholars have defined the following perspectives for the assessable outcomes of literature course.

Parkinson and Thomas (2016) classified the typology of potentially assessable outcomes of teaching literature course^[7]. 1) Affective outcome. When learning literature, learners can draw on emotional response towards some novels, plays or poems. It can help “enhance the awareness and understanding of one’s own emotional life”^[7]. 2) Learning how to learn. The learning we acquire in literature can generate “some general set of skills and attitudes which will enable us to cope with different tasks in the real world”^[7]. 3) Literature-related knowledge and skills; 4) Language competences.

Fan and Rui (2005) analyzed the two levels of purpose of teaching literature as a general elective course in university^[5]. They (2005) explained the reform of college English requirements according to MOE is, on one hand, to further improve the students' language competence, on the other hand, to improve the students' humanistic literacy and the cognitive level of English culture, to improve the students' cross-cultural communication competence^[5]. To combine the assessment requirements of using tasks in teaching literature, tasks would be considered effective to meet the following details. (See figure 1)

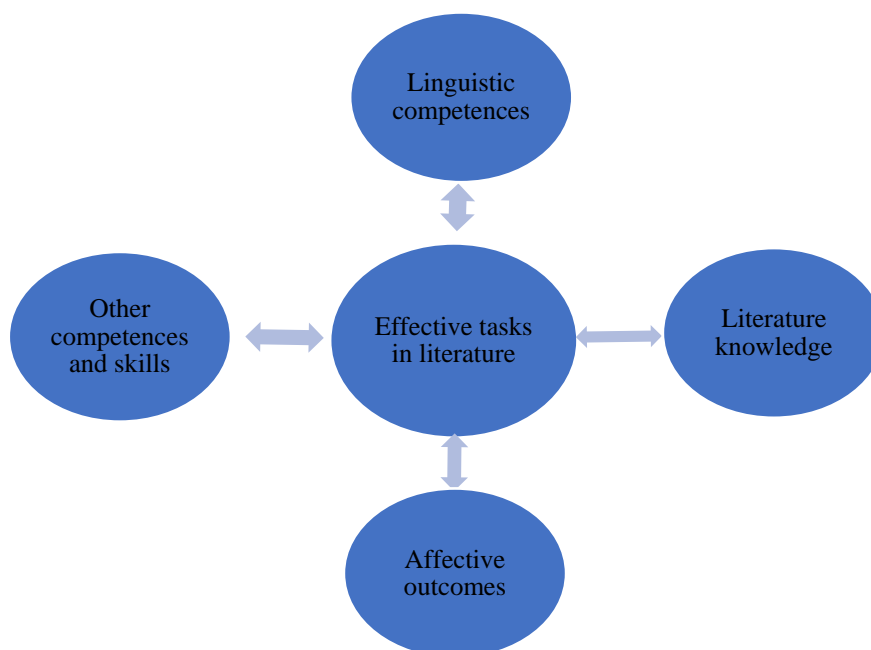


Figure 1: Assessment details for effective tasks in teaching literature

As we can see, the linguistic competences will include the language with fluency and accuracy.

The literature knowledge contains literacy knowledge such as metaphor, simile, and point of view. Affective outcome is about the students' emotion response, ethical and humanitarian attitudes, humanistic literacy, and cultural understanding. As for the other competences and skills, they are the critical and analytical ability; social skills and the learning ability the students acquire during the process of performing tasks in literature class.

8. Conclusion

This paper has reviewed on theoretical framework to design, implement and evaluate tasks in teaching literature. The definition of tasks, tasks design, implementation and evaluation are investigated. The effective tasks in teaching literature are identified in the 4 perspectives: linguistic competences, literature knowledge, affective outcomes and other competences and skills.

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