Chapter 67
Effects of a Technology–Enriched, Task–Based Language Teaching Curriculum on Chinese Elementary Students' Achievement in English as a Foreign Language

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ABSTRACT

Despite the great potential technologies bring to TBLT, few studies have examined the effects of technology-enhanced TBLT curriculum on students' language development, especially among young learners. This paper addresses this need by reporting the impact of a technology-enhanced TBLT curriculum on Chinese elementary students' English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning using a Non-equivalent Groups Design. A total of 471 fourth grade students from 4 low-SES schools outside Beijing participated in the study. Students' growth in their English achievement was assessed using pre and post-tests before and after the intervention. A descriptive analysis was first conducted after completion of data collection, and then a t-test was conducted to determine the effect of the intervention. Results indicate that students who received the intervention progressed much more quickly in overall language proficiency than those who did not receive the treatment. The study points to the great potential of implementing comprehensive technology-enhanced TBLT at the curricular level.

INTRODUCTION

Task-based language teaching (TBLT), a process-oriented language teaching approach that promotes communicative language teaching as the core of syllabus design and instructional goals (Littlewood, 2004; Nunan, 2004; Willis, 1996), has gained increasing popularity in English as a foreign language (EFL) context in Asia and around the world in the past three decades. In fact, it has been adopted by several governments and regions, including China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, as their national approach to EFL teaching in the hope that it will help promote learners' competence in the target language through authentic learning experiences (Adam & Newton, 2009; Cheng & Luo, in press). In China in particular, TBLT was endorsed as the teaching method to be used by teachers in the National English Curriculum Standards (NECS) in 2001 and again in the revised version in 2012 by the Ministry of Education (MoE) (Cheng & Luo, in press; Luo, 2011). This endorsement has created a TBLT fever across China as all teachers of English in China have to follow what is stipulated in the NECS.

Accompanying the TBLT fever, many challenges and constraints surfaced in implementing TBLT in classroom settings including societal institutional level constraints and conceptual constraints (e.g., conflicts between teachers' and schools' local values and TBLT principles and misconceptions regarding TBLT) as well as classroom-level constraints, (e.g., Adams & Newton, 2009; Butler, 2011; Littlewood, 2007; Luo, 2011). Classroom constraints and challenges, for example, range from issues of task design (e.g., how to design tasks to generate meaning-based communication or how to make tasks more authentic or perceived as authentic among the students) to issues of implementation including how to address students' passive learning style and over-reliance on the teacher, how to manage crowded and cramped classrooms, and how to address mixed-proficiency levels in the classroom and students' avoidance of the use of the target language in fulfilling the communicative tasks (Lai & Li, 2011). To address these different levels of challenges, new technologies, with the promise to expand the range of tasks with online resources, enhance the authenticity of tasks and motivation for task implementation, facilitate student ownership of and agency in the tasks, and provide convenient venues for follow-up and assessment (Lai & Li, 2011), are utilized in TBLT (Kern, 2006; Kern, Ware & Warschauer, 2004; Skehan, 2003; Thomas & Reinders, 2010). In the Chinese context, a new kind of technology-induced pedagogy, "Multimedia EFL Teaching," has emerged (Zhong & Shen, 2002). It is expected that English teachers, now encouraged to follow TBLT, use different multimedia technologies, such as commercially made courseware (ke jian) (e.g., those that accompany the textbooks they use) or English programs (e.g., www.englishfree.com. cn, www.cnr.com, or programs from CCTV-9), self-made courseware including PPT, webpage, or audiovisual materials using Flash, or technologies such as interactive whiteboards, email, films, MTV, songs, computer games, and the Internet in their instruction. Multimedia courseware (commercially or self-made) is now used for creating a good learning environment, reading instruction, vocabulary learning, writing, and speaking, as well as assessment (Li & Ni, 2012).

Despite the great promises that technology might bring to TBLT, relatively little research has been conducted on technology-enhanced TBLT. Though computer-assisted language learning (CALL) is not new, the use of technology in TBLT is a relatively new phenomenon due to a historical separation between CALL and TBLT, particularly the marginalization of technology within the TBLT research (Skehan, 2003; Thomas & Reinders, 2010). As Thomas & Reinders (2010), editors of the first ever collection of international research to consider the synergies between TBLT and CALL, argue that due to a research agenda that has been overdriven by designing syllabus

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