

## APPLICATION OF TASK-BASED LEARNING IN TEACHING BUSINESS CHINESE READING IN THAILAND

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**Abstract:** Task-Based Learning (TBL) has been attracting the attention of researchers and language teachers for many years. However, far less research has been carried out as to whether TBL works for teaching Business Chinese Reading. This study aims to offer a unique contribution by integrating a discussion of TBL pedagogical principles with descriptions of their application to teaching Business Chinese Reading. This study uses the basic principles and main ideas of TBL as the foundation and combines the specific characteristics of Business Chinese Reading. Integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches, this study examines the knowledge and application of TBL among Assumption University students who study Chinese as a second language. To testify TBL is more effective than traditional teacher-center instruction, an experimental study is carried out in the research. The research subjects consisted of 54 senior students in Business Chinese Department of Assumption University. Students in both experimental group and control group received a pretest during the week before instruction began, and they also received a post-test during the week after instruction concluded. From the analysis it is easy to get the conclusion that TBL used appropriately in teaching Business Chinese Reading is helpful in improving students' reading skills.

### Introduction

With the progress of international economic integration and the deepening of Chinese economic reform, Chinese foreign trade is developing rapidly and business activities between China and foreign countries are getting more and more frequent. Recent developments in China help accelerate her links with foreign countries, especially with the developed countries, by increasing exchange of business. Modern China has been regarded as a world factory where over one hundred thousand foreign enterprises have settled down, and hundreds of thousand foreign entrepreneurs, businessmen and managers are living and working there.

In order to have a better understanding of modern Chinese business, university students, who study Chinese as a second language and choose business Chinese as a major, need to read and analyze Chinese business articles. Business Chinese Reading course builds such a bridge for those university students who wish to acquire necessary business Chinese knowledge and skills that may be needed in their commercial contact with local dealers, or wish to do business in China or work for the

companies which have close contact with their Chinese counterparts, and thus to enhance their success in business.

I have been teaching business Chinese in Assumption University of Thailand for more than four years. I'm happy to see a good number of Thai students take great interest in learning business Chinese. However, in my advanced Business Chinese Reading classes, I have found an unusual phenomenon: many advanced level Thai students who have very good Chinese language abilities cannot understand a simple Chinese business article. One reason for this is that Business Chinese Reading is not just a basic Chinese reading. Business Chinese Reading requires not only advanced business knowledge but also advanced Chinese language.

Business Chinese Reading course focuses on the business and economic life of China today, with a higher level of specialization. In addition to language related to commodities and trading, it gives an up-to-date picture of the economic situation in China, and gives the readers an insight into the culture of Chinese business and economic life. This requires comprehensive knowledge of the essentials of Chinese economic circumstances and rules for business performance, such as government and trade, international business law, products and pricing, advertising and publicity, international business cooperation, accounting and financial management, finance and securities, the stock market, business environment, business strategy, human resource management, operations management and innovation, information technology and e-commerce, business ethics and corporate social responsibility, etc. In front of so many reading tasks, it's better for the teacher to apply the Task-Based Learning model into teaching Business Chinese Reading among those students who study Chinese as a second language.

### What is Task-Based Learning?

According to Kris (2006), tasks are activities and that these activities are goal-directed. Rod (2003) asserted that tasks hold a central place in current second language acquisition research and also in language pedagogy. David (2005) stated that task-based language teaching has strengthened the six principles and practices including a need-based approach to content selection, an emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language, the introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation, the provision of opportunities for learners to focus not only on language but also on the learning process itself, an enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning, and the linking of classroom language learning with language outside the classroom.

Task-Based Learning is a method of instruction in the field of language acquisition. It focuses on the use of authentic language, and to students doing meaningful tasks using the target language. Assessment is primarily based on

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task outcome which makes Task-Based Learning especially popular for developing target language fluency and student confidence. In Task-Based Learning, the tasks are central to the learning activity. TBT was originally developed by Prabhu while working in Bangalore, southern India. Prabhu (1987) figured out that his students could learn language more effectively when their minds are focused on the task, rather than on the language they are using. Lynn & Rudi (2005) ascertained that teacher should develop learner autonomy through task-based language learning.

In the model of Task-Based Learning described by Jane Willis (2005), the traditional presentation, practice, production lesson is reversed. The students start with the task. When they are completed it, the teacher draws attention to the language used, making corrections and adjustments to the students' performance. Jane Willis broke Task-Based Learning into three sections: the pre-task, the task cycle, and the language focus. Dick Allwright (2009) suggested that if the language activities involve the learners in solving communicative problems in the target language, language learning will take care of itself. Betty & Jane (2005) pointed out that task-based instruction has taken a number of different shapes since its first appearance on the foreign language and second language teaching scene.

Business Chinese Reading course is designed to meet students' need for increased comprehension and speed in reading research material related to business. This course aims to enable students: to expand the knowledge of Business Chinese vocabularies; to lay a foundation for students' future business activities conducted in Chinese through teaching common Chinese business vocabularies, special sentence patterns and professional knowledge; to develop students' reading skills and to improve their ability to understand articles concerning economic issues and their capability of using proper business language through practice in a simulated business context.

### **Characteristics of Task**

#### **Task Should Be Interesting**

Interesting is the most important point for students. If students are interested, they will learn actively. Otherwise they will not be interested which means the tasks are failure. Teacher assigns different tasks according to students' real situation and students' interesting aspect. Teacher should choose tasks which attract students' strong interest. Students can practice what they have learned on the spur of the moment. Whenever students feel the knowledge is useful then will stimulate their deeper learning desire.

#### **Task Should Be Classified**

Because of students' individual differences, teacher should classify tasks into different layers. Let students experience the accomplishment of completing

tasks, therefore enhance students' confidence. Tasks can be classified as basic level, intermediate level and advanced level. Basic level tasks are designed for all the students. Intermediate level task are design designed for those students whoever want to improve their knowledge. Advanced level task is alternative for best students.

#### **Task Should Be Systematic**

When design tasks, teacher should focus on the relation of different language points and let students' tasks and knowledge to form a system. Tasks involve background knowledge and new knowledge. On the one hand, students learn new knowledge and review the background knowledge. On the other hand, students integrate the background knowledge and new knowledge. At the same time, when design task, teacher should pay attention to consistency of language points. Teacher should design task in proper sequence. Students both consolidate what they have learned and explore the new knowledge during the process of completing task. Students finish tasks one by one, finally accomplish the teaching objective, and naturally form the systematic knowledge.

#### **Tasks Should Be Real and Reasonable**

When design tasks, some teachers just put all the language points into the tasks, not consider the rationality and feasibility of the tasks. Only the real and specific tasks can stimulate students' learning interests and learning motivation. Only the real and reasonable tasks can let students participate in the study activities in an active role. Only the specific and reasonable tasks can training students problem-solving and analysis ability.

#### **Task Should Be Professional**

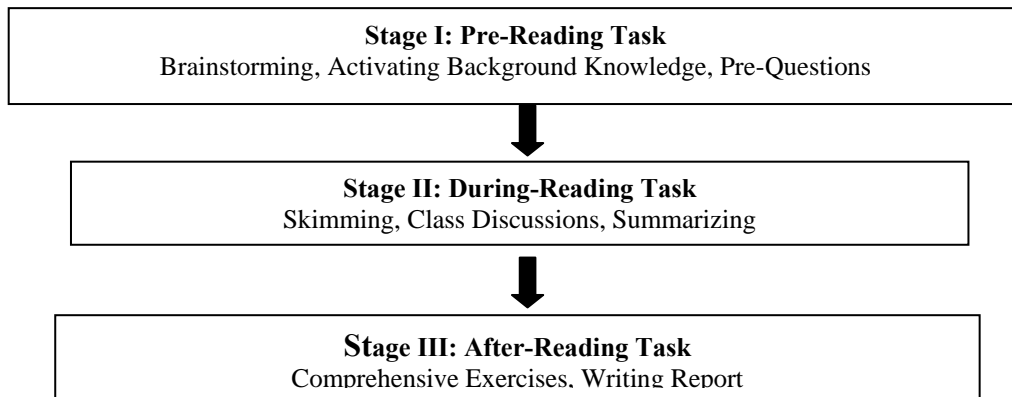
The objective of Business Chinese Reading is to let student learn business Chinese knowledge, and read the corresponding authentic commercial articles. So the tasks should be designed to meet students' need for increased comprehension and speed in reading research material related to business.

#### **Task Should Be Creative**

Tasks should allow students use different methods and operate in different way. On the one hand, open-minded tasks create a broad space for students to show their personalities fully. On the other hand, open-minded tasks can avoid students' plagiarizing. Therefore, when teacher designs tasks, should leave the creative space for students in order to cultivate their creative thinking.

### **Designing Task-Based Activities**

Teacher can design specific tasks to improve students reading skills and comprehensive ability of using Business Chinese language. The aim of Task-Based Learning is to create a real purpose for language use and provide a natural context for language study. When using Task-Based Learning in Business Chinese Reading, there should be three stage processes: pres-reading task, during-reading task, and after-reading task.



**Figure 1: A Framework for Task-Based Learning**

### **Pre-Reading Task (PRT)**

Before students interact with authentic Business Chinese Reading materials, teacher introduces the topic, lets the students brainstorm about this topic, and activates student's related background knowledge, all of which might help the students to recall some knowledge related to PRT. PRT can also include playing a recording of students doing the task, which gives the students a clear model of what will be expected of them. The students can take notes and spend time preparing for the coming task. Use one Business Chinese Reading class "Well-Known Brands and Famous Trade Marks in China" as an example.

#### **Task1: Brainstorming**

When teacher was teaching "Brands and the Culture of Trade Marks", first let students in pairs of groups brainstorm as many as words or expressions related to the topic "well-known brands and famous trademarks", every student in the group offers an idea in turn. It is very important to allow students to share ideas as they come to mind. Each group puts down their words or expressions on a piece of blank paper. Then stick the pieces on a board to check. Brainstorming is a good approach in pre-reading stage in which students provide wide-range ideas and share their opinions on a topic. Whenever the students completed the task in pairs or groups using the language resources that they have as the teacher monitors and offers encouragement.

#### **Task 2: Activating Background Knowledge**

First teacher introduced that the world economy has entered the new stage of brand sales at present. Enterprises with famous brands and famous products expand their market shares endlessly. The economic results of the enterprises increase accordingly. Then ask the students to tell what they already know about the "Chinese famous products" or their experiences of using some products made in China. Since China is a world factory, more or less, students have used Chinese products or heard of other people's opinion about Chinese goods. The difficulty is depended on students' background knowledge and task's complexity. The more background knowledge students have, the better in reading new business articles. Activating students' prior knowledge

aims to stimulate students' interest of new reading comprehension.

#### **Task 3: Pre-questions**

Before reading the business articles, students in pairs or groups forecast the contents and list the questions which students presume should be answered in the articles, according to the articles' title or related pictures. Then, ask pairs or groups a few questions they would like answers to. After implementing this task, group representatives prepare a short oral report to tell the class what content they presumed and what questions they asked. Meanwhile the teacher is available for the students to ask for advice to clear up any language questions they may have.

#### **During-Reading Task (DRT)**

After brainstorming, activating students' background knowledge, and pre-questions, it is easier for teacher to facilitate students to skim key words, discuss key points, and summarize the Business Chinese Reading by students' own comprehension. At this stage teacher gives some feedbacks that motivate students to strive for accuracy and students have the chance to input and output the language.

#### **Task 4: Skimming**

Skim the business articles especially the title, subtitle, subheading, and illustrations. Consider reading the first sentence of each paragraph to quickly identify the main ideas, topic sentences, and key words. The teacher then highlights relevant parts from the authentic reading material or asks students to notice interesting features within those articles. This task aims to improve the students' ability of speed reading and gist reading.

#### **Task 5: Class discussions**

What is well-known brand? What is famous trade mark? What is the relationship between famous products and the enterprise's success? What is the relationship between famous products and the country's economic development? Do you agree or disagree that "Every successful enterprise in the world has its own well-known mark, likewise, behind every well-known mark stands a successful enterprise." and why? Let students input the reading information and use tables or flow charts to show the content of the business Chinese reading.

### **Task 6: Summarizing**

Encourage pairs or groups themselves to summarize the key ideas of reading materials. The teacher chooses the order of when students will summarize and give the students some quick feedback on their conclusions, then compares to each other. Teacher and students together check which one is the best. Students groups made a lot of interesting conclusions, such as: Creation of Chinese famous brand by quality; Chinese famous brands are to be pleased and also worried; From famous brand products to famous brand country; Build famous brand to stand strong position by made in China; Bringing up the competitive brand group to push the development of the Chinese industry.

### **After-Reading Task (ART)**

At this stage, teacher selects language areas to practice based upon the needs of the students and what emerged from the task. The students then do necessary comprehensive exercises, and write reports to practice new words, phrases and patterns and increase students' confidence.

### **Task 7: Comprehensive Exercises**

Teacher should design different kinds of comprehensive exercises to check whether or not the students really understanding the reading. Such as: multiple choices, true or false, fill in the blanks with appropriate words, rearrange the give words into a sentence, rewrite the sentences with the given constructions, answer the questions according to the reading, etc.

### **Task 8: Writing Report**

Questions for thinking: Do you know any Chinese or Thai famous products in the international market and why they can be successful? Please choose one famous Chinese or Thai products to write an investigation report simulating the reading materials. Students can surf on the internet to collect the related information or conduct a market investigation with your friends or family members.

### **Assessing Students in Task-Based Learning**

The research subjects consisted of 54 senior students in Business Chinese Department of Assumption University. The 27 students in the experimental group participated in task-based learning, while other 27 students in the control group received traditional teacher-center instruction. Students in both groups received a pretest during the week before instruction began, and they also received a post-test during the week after instruction concluded. The data of this experiment was collected through testing, and SPSS was used to analyze the data.

To testify whether the experimental group and the control group differed significantly before the experiment, a paired samples t-test was employed to compare the pre-test scores of the experimental group and those of the control group. The results indicated that there were no significantly different in students' levels of vocabulary, grammar, reading skill, and writing skill.

After one semester's experiment, paired samples t-test revealed that students in the experimental group participating in task-based learning obtained significantly higher questionnaire scores than those in the control group receiving the tradition teacher-center instruction. This suggested there were significant differences between task-based learning and traditional teacher-based instruction.

From the analysis it is easy to get the conclusion that the task-based learning approach used appropriately in business Chinese reading classroom is helpful in developing students' reading abilities. It is significant to apply task-based learning in teaching business Chinese reading.

### **Advantages of Task-Based Learning**

#### **Students Are Active and Creatively in Task-Based Learning**

The language explored arises from the students' needs. This need dictates what will be covered in the lesson rather than a decision made by the teacher or the textbook. Task-Based Learning requires students themselves to finish learning tasks. Students, who are the real master of learning, choose the strategy and methodology by themselves. Task-Based Learning offers more opportunities for the students. If they need knowledge and resources, students should find and select by themselves. Because tasks related to students' life, so students will try their best to finish the task. Students, who want to show their creativity different from other peers, will use all kinds of new way or unique way to complete task.

#### **Students Understand the Knowledge Integrally in Task-Based Learning**

In traditional teacher instruction class, students can not understand and experience the truly meaning of knowledge. The students will have a much more varied exposure to language with Task-Based Learning. They will be exposed to a whole range of lexical phrases, collocations, and patterns as well as language forms. In Task-Based Learning, students should understand both the background of knowledge and the effect of the applied knowledge. By completing different tasks, student may have a clearer comprehension of some confused conceptions in the past, therefore understand the knowledge integrally. The students are free of language control. In all three stages they must use all their language resources rather than just practicing one pre-selected item.

#### **Students Develop Personalities and Improve Abilities in Task-Based Learning**

If teacher just instruct to all the students regardless of their differences of study ability and personality, some students will don't understand while others already know the answer. A natural context is developed from the students' individual experiences with the language that is personalized and relevant to them. In Task-Based Learning, teacher classifies basic level tasks, intermediate level tasks and advanced level tasks. Some students can continue the advanced level tasks when they finish task advance of time.

### Teacher's Role in Task-Based Learning

Teacher's role has changed from a powerful dictator into a task advisor, a task booster, a task coordinator, a task designer, a task evaluator, a task facilitator, and a task guide.

#### A: Task Advisor

Whenever students have problems, teacher gives the spontaneous suggestions.

#### B: Task Booster

Teacher supports students to complete task successfully in terms of their abilities.

#### C: Task Coordinator

Teacher coordinates pairs or groups' activities and encourages them to do the best.

#### D: Task Designer

Teacher designs appropriate tasks according to students' level.

#### E: Task Evaluator

Teacher evaluates students' outcome of task-based learning in order to improve the teaching quality.

#### F: Task Facilitator

Teacher facilitates students to meet their needs of learning new knowledge.

#### G: Task Guide

Teacher leads students to complete tasks one step by one step.

### Conclusion

This study introduces the definition of Task-Based Learning, characteristics of task, task-based activities designing, students' evaluation in Task-Based Learning, advantages of Task-Based Learning, and teacher's role in Task-Based Learning. Task-Based Learning helped the students learn to work creatively and increased the students' self-confidence, and encouraged them to express their opinions. Task-Based Learning is advantageous to the student because it is more student-centered, allows for more meaningful communication, and often provides for practical extra-linguistic skill building. Group discussion can increase peer interaction and effectively improve students' learning performance. Moreover, as the tasks are likely to be familiar to the students, students are more likely to be engaged, which may further motivate them in their language learning. Furthermore, the task-based learning could promote mutual encouragement among peers, and more harmonious relationships between students and teachers.

However, students' initiative learning is the key of successful Task-Based Learning in Business Chinese Reading. Business Chinese Reading requires not only advanced business knowledge but also advanced Chinese language. In order to help students develop language skills in a dynamic and communicative context and expand their critical thinking abilities, teacher should design specific tasks for students to complete, such as: brainstorming, activating background knowledge, pre-

questions, skimming, class discussion, summarizing, comprehensive exercises, and writing report. In other words, we should change from teacher-center to student-center. Therefore, teacher's role has to change from a powerful dictator into a task advisor, a task booster, a task coordinator, a task designer, a task evaluator, a task facilitator, and a task guide.

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