

# ***Challenges of Developing English Education in China A Comparison between PPP and TBLT***

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**Abstract:** Under the influence of globalization, English has a growing influence on China. Since 1976, the year that marks the ending of the Cultural Revolution, English education has begun to rise in China, and then has experienced tremendous challenges and changes over the past decades. Various teaching methods have also emerged in foreign language education during this procedure. This paper starts from reviewing how the English education in China has developed from the Cultural Revolution in 1966 to the early 21st century, then investigates two popular teaching methods during this period - PPP (presentation, practice, and production, which is the traditional teaching method) and TBLT (task-based teaching method), compares the differences between the two teaching methods and analyzes their advantages and problems. Finally, some countermeasures are suggested to solve these problems, including adjusting the class scale to fit different types of teaching methods, combining PPP and TBLT where available, introducing new technologies as tools, etc.

**Keywords:** PPP, TBLT, English Education in China

## **1. Introduction**

English education has been a hot topic in Chinese educational research since the middle of the 20th century, and a variety of English language teaching methods have been applied in the class. Studies and evaluations on these teaching methods have thus become a focus in the academia. In this article, the authors start from reviewing the history of the policies for the English education in China in the past few decades, and then compare the differences between the traditional teaching method PPP (presentation, practice, and production) and TBLT (task-based language teaching). Based on the comparisons, several recommendations have been proposed to improve the current status of English education in China. The article is arranged as follows: section 2 reviews how the policies guiding the English education in China has developed, and then investigates PPP, which is the exam-oriented teaching method that the policies above have led to, and TBLT, which is the more creative but also challenging approach; section 3 compares the two methods and claims their advantages and disadvantages respectively; section 4 provides recommendations for the English education in the future based on the analysis in the previous section; and section 5 concludes the article.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. The Policy

From 1966 to 1976, China experienced the “Cultural Revolution.” After the development of the People’s Republic of China, foreign language education has changed a lot. Lam divided the history of foreign language education in China into four phases since 1966: Repudiation of the foreign language learning; English for rebuilding ties with the western countries; English for modernizations; English for international influence (since 1991). [1] put it simply, 1977 can be seen as the year that divided the two stages, as it saw the very start of the rapid development of English education in China. Therefore, the history of English education in China will be reviewed in the following part as the stage before 1977 and the one after.

#### 2.1.1. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976)

Foreign Language Education and Foreign culture were banned in China in the first five years of the Cultural Revolution. In 1971, the United Nations has recognized China as its official member, which was five years before the Culture Revolution ended in 1976; in 1972, Richard Nixon visited China, which promoted Sino-American discourse towards commercial, cultural, and education exchange [2] and promoting the relationship between China and the West. Due to the Cultural Revolution, China's attitude toward Western culture and language has not changed much till 1976, when China decided to open her door to the West.

#### 2.1.2. After the Cultural Revolution (from 1977)

Foreign language education in China has developed rapidly since 1977. In 1978, the National Forum on Foreign Language Education was held, which emphasized the critical role of foreign language education in moving toward the “four modernizations.” Wen and Hu claimed that the most significant policies are: “Proposals for Enhancing Foreign Language Education” in 1979 by the Ministry of Education; the “Plan for University English Teacher Training” in 1980 by the State Council; the “College English Syllabus for Science and Technology Student in 1985 and the “College English Syllabus for Arts and Social Sciences Students” in 1986. [3] These documents regard English as a basic subject as necessary as Chinese and Mathematics in primary and middle schools throughout the country, specify the learning contents of different students and compile teaching materials, and support the construction of teachers of foreign language education.

In 1979, the score in the foreign language examination accounted for only 10% of the total examination scores; in 1980, it increased to 30% and then to 50% in 1982. In 1983, Foreign languages (English in most cases) were taken as a formal subject in the college entrance examination, and 100% of the English score was covered in the total score. From 1985 to 1986, the “College English Syllabus for Science and Technology Students” and the “College English Syllabus for Arts and Social Sciences Students” stipulated that examinations shall be arranged at the end of teaching at all levels in the primary stage, and the unified national examination shall be conducted at the end of level 4 and level 6 (namely CET-4 and CET-6) based on the requirements of this syllabus. CET-4 and CET-6 provide a suitable scale for checking and assessing the English level of college students. [4]

Since 1991, China has adopted a more international stance. Throughout the 1990s, the syllabi and textbooks of English were created or modified for students from almost all stages. [1] This indicates that China has paid more attention to English education.

It can be seen from above that the policies of English education in China in the past few decades mainly show two emphases: English, as a subject, has played a more and more significant role in schools and universities, and the meantime, English exams have also been considered much more

important in school/university admissions and assessments. Students are thus driven to handle better English and strive for higher scores. Two teaching strategies have been proposed to help them with these two aims: PPP (presentation, practice and production) and TBLT (task-based language teaching). The following section will compare the two to show their advantages and drawbacks.

## **2.2. PPP and TBLT**

### **2.2.1. PPP**

PPP is not a native teaching method in China; it first appeared in Britain in the 1950s, which extended from behaviorist theory. [5] PPP contains three parts in teaching: Presentation, Practice and Production, which is based on behaviorist theory that treats language learning just as the learning of any other skills. The first and second stages reflect the high degree of teacher control, which, however, lessens as the class carries on, which will the learners to withdraw from the teacher's support and move on to more spontaneous understanding and production. [6] As foreign language education developed in China, PPP was introduced and prevailed in the 1980s. Peng claims that the traditional PPP teaching method is a classical teaching mode in the order of teaching, practice and output. [7] Generally speaking, under the PPP teaching mode, teachers use textbooks prepared based on a specific curriculum to teach courses in a deductive way. This mode is a "safe" and "reliable" teaching method for teachers since it may accurately reflect the final purpose of instruction. Carless suggests that PPP, as a clear-cut and condensed technique in teaching grammar, can easily help teach crucial grammatical points [8]. Since it is quite common for students to face difficulties in learning grammar, teachers need to apply PPP to help with their grammatical accuracy. China's rigid demand for English examinations makes teachers more inclined to use the traditional PPP teaching methods, since it is suitable for exam-oriented education. Therefore, PPP teaching method has been widely used in foreign language teaching in China.

### **2.2.2. TBLT**

Similar to PPP, TBLT teaching method is not a native teaching method in China, either. In the late 1990s, Xia Jimei and Kong Xianhui published the article Comparison of Theoretical Basis and Model of Difficult Teaching Method and Task Teaching Method, introducing TBLT as a novel teaching method to China. The pattern of TBLT is on the basis of the theory of task-based teaching, which is a frame of practical teaching activities. [9] TBLT allows teachers to guide language learners to complete tasks in classes, which emphasizes doing tasks at the same time to complete the learning, absorbing knowledge. TBLT is seen as a talent training activity that combines teaching and learning.

TBLT enables teachers to organize students to study actively and consciously and accelerate to master the basic knowledge and skills of English. It helps students to improve their English competence and fluency. The significance of the cultivation of learners' ability of applying English roundly is realized by foreign language education in China, which help the practice and research task-based language teaching receives attention. [10]

## **3. A comparison between PPP and TBLT**

TBLT and PPP are two representative teaching models, and they both have their own advantages and disadvantages. In the following part, the authors will compare and discuss the two teaching models from four aspects.

### **3.1. Classroom Size**

Regarding the size of class, PPP can be applied to both large-size classes and small-size classes.

Contrastively, it seems that TBLT is more suitable for small-size classes than large-size classes. It seems that TBLT is not suitable for large classes. According to a survey in China, only 28% of the teachers voted for TBLT, and 72% of the teachers hold the opinion that the large number of students reduces the efficiency of teaching. [11]

In a large-size class, it can be hard for a teacher to pay attention to every student, and the teaching effect will be inevitably impacted in a negative way. Although there are several cases in which TBLT has achieved success in small class teaching, considering the current state that large class teaching is more common in China, the effect of TBLT in China is not as well as it was supposed to be.

### **3.2. Class Design**

In the regard of lesson's design, PPP is more dependent on the content of teaching materials and has lower requirements for teachers. On the contrary, TBLT depends more on how teachers design and organize the class, which is highly flexible and can be a challenge to teachers. To be more specific, PPP only requires teachers to present what is given on the textbooks to students, such as the words, dialogues and grammatical points; TBLT differentiates itself from the traditional PPP method as it demands teachers to choose a certain theme (e.g., travelling, dining, or taking transports) and design scenarios based on it to make students participate in it and learn the relevant language use during this process.

### **3.3. Class Context**

The teaching content of PPP is not practical enough. Sometimes students taught by PPP are not able to communicate fluently with native English speakers, because PPP has little training in real-world communication. Different from PPP, TBLT allows students to obtain practical skills in English communication. In a TBLT class, teachers are not only knowledge providers, but also helpers and facilitators who design appropriate tasks and organize classroom activities based on the needs of students. Such a teaching method bridges the gap between the classroom and real life by simulating real life tasks. By offering tasks that is similar to the contexts in real life, TBLT brings the distance between class and real life closer and teaches students the methods of learning, which helps them learn all life. [12]

## **4. Recommendations for English Education in the Future**

### **4.1. Problems Faced by PPP and TBLT**

The first problem that both involve PPP and TBLT is the scale of classes. For a long time, the large class teaching mode has been used in China. For PPP, the problem with the large class is that students with different needs can be in a same class, and the nature of PPP determines that it cannot meet the needs of all students. For TBLT, the problem is that it is contrary to the way TBLT is carried out, since the design of TBLT determines that it is more suitable for small classes, as pointed out in the previous section. Another problem is the diverse goals of students. For students with high requirements in improving their English competence, PPP can hardly meet their expectations, and for those who only aim to pass exams, the advantages of learning through TBLT cannot be reflected, either. Neither of the two teaching methods can satisfy the needs of every student at the same time.

### **4.2. Problems Faced by PPP**

PPP is widely used in the teaching for beginners. In terms of explaining grammar, PPP is a straightforward method that can easily teach critical points and help students improve grammar accuracy. [8] This is consistent with China's demand for English teaching, which focuses on

improving grammar and writing performance, with less need for oral English fluency and daily use of the language. In addition, PPP is teacher-centered, which is consistent with China's traditional classroom model. All these reasons contribute to the popularity of PPP in English classrooms in China. However, these characteristics of PPP may lead to teacher-centered situation in the classroom. [13] As a result, students have to accept what they are taught in a passive manner and are strictly controlled by teachers. Moreover, many researchers have pointed out that PPP will make students lack practical ability after class. Although teachers have repeatedly taught the language knowledge in class, students can rarely truly grasp and apply what they have learned outside the classroom. Although the teaching results of PPP sometimes seem successful, it can be hard for students to use the knowledge to communicate when the certain situation reappears. This model can thus only lead to the simple transfer of language knowledge from teachers to students and does not affect their minds. [14] Therefore, PPP may well meet the students' needs for simply passing examinations, but it is not helpful enough for students to use their English practically.

### 4.3. Problems Faced by TBLT

It should be admitted that TBLT cannot bring students high grades quickly, since the purpose of TBLT is to use English fluently in the daily scene rather than to get good marks in the paper. The lack of training for teachers and the difficult tasks for the needs of students reflect the problems of TBLT, however PPP has a superiority. Moreover, the diffidence of students when accomplish tasks and the education environment which pays attention to college entrance examination are not beneficial to TBLT. [10] In the current educational environment, the college entrance examination has been placed great importance. Although TBLT can effectively improve students' English literacy, it cannot bring benefits to the college entrance examination with maximum validity. For middle school students, the college entrance examination is clearly a better target, which leads to less use of TBLT.

### 4.4. Countermeasures

In this section, we will attempt to recommend several countermeasures for improving the status quo of English teaching in China, based on the previous discussion on the drawbacks of PPP and TBLT respectively.

First, it can be helpful to implement graded teaching and apply PPP and TBLT where most suitable. From the perspective of improving efficiency, students can be divided into two groups (or more): the practical English group and the exam-oriented group, based on their needs. Small class teaching can be adapted for students with higher needs, and more qualified teaching plans can be developed based on specific needs and in combination with TBLT and other teaching methods. For students with only exam-oriented needs, PPP teaching can be used to improve their exam scores within a certain period. From the perspective of changing exam-oriented education, we can use the PPP method to teach grammar, and other aspects in large classes and further divide the same group of students into small classes for TBLT teaching to help them master practical English.

On the one hand, this suggestion is to give full play to the advantages of PPP in teaching grammar; on the other hand, it also considers some practical application difficulties that may be faced if TBLT is used exclusively in teaching in an over-idealistic manner. For example, TBLT has high requirements for content arrangement, and the density of input content that students can obtain may be small. In the absence of an English language environment in students' daily life, the improvement of their English competence may be solid but relatively slow, and this may not be suitable enough for students who lack interest and foundation in English. Meanwhile, the overall implementation of TBLT is expensive in terms of teacher training and textbook arrangement, and it is not easy to achieve it overnight. If small class TBLT teaching is carried out on a large scale, it will be a big challenge for

schools that are relatively short of teaching resources. Considering these situations, the rational combination of PPP and TBLT will be a better solution.

Second, revise the exam outline. The current English teaching is based on the current exam syllabi, of which the most influential one is the outline of the college entrance examination. The current college entrance examination syllabus requires students to a unified standard. It takes scores as the only reference standard and facilitates the large class English teaching with PPP as the primary method. As far as China's social environment and national conditions are concerned, the subject of English exists in the examination syllabus, and the competition and role of examinations are increasing and enlarging, which will inevitably lead to exam-oriented education; If English subjects are removed from the syllabus, the pressure on English learning will be relieved on the surface, but in fact, the competitive pressure on other subjects will be increased, which will eventually lead to students' English learning time being occupied by other disciplines on the syllabus. At the same time, many people doubt or oppose the proportion of English in the syllabus. Therefore, given this phenomenon, it is possible to consider changing the current exam syllabus. Take the college entrance examination as an example, it can be considered to popularize the model of art examination to other disciplines and set up separate examination subjects for different majors. As for English, for candidates who want to apply for an English major, their comprehensive English ability is investigated and ranked, and their basic subject scores are used as a reference for selection and admission. Students who do not plan to choose English majors can choose whether to study according to their interests. This may be a feasible way to change the phenomenon of examination-oriented education in China and the pressure on students to take examinations.

For the difficulties encountered by teachers in the application of TBLT, the authors also list three solutions. First, since the 21st century, technology has developed rapidly and has been applied to teaching more and more, which is called multimedia teaching. The possibilities of turning traditional tasks into digital ways have been discussed till now, whose operations can be supported. [15] The advantage of combining science and technology with teaching is that it can improve the efficiency of teaching. This can solve one of the difficulties of TBLT mentioned above, which is that it cannot meet the needs of students for the test. The application of multimedia teaching can make students more familiar with the examination system and adapt to the examination state. At the same time, the application of artificial intelligence can also give students more opportunities to practice situational English.

Additionally, in TBLT teaching, the improvement of students' learning experience may also be a way to solve difficulties, which requires teachers to understand students' thoughts and feelings. This further requires teachers to participate in research on TBLT. The co-participation of teachers in TBLT research asks teachers to answer the questions mentioned by themselves, which makes teachers interested in the research. [16] In fact, quite a few schoolteachers have indeed conducted research on the teaching outcomes of TBLT. We believe further communication between teachers and students will lead to better results in teaching with TBLT.

Last but not the least, the TBLT classes in the past may make students pay more attention to the meaning of language than the grammar, but exams generally require students to handle correct grammatical forms. This is one of the reasons why students in the TBLT classes lose marks in the traditional exams. Therefore, guiding students to pay attention to the correctness of language forms may be an excellent method to solve this difficulty. The attention on form has been considered one of the ten principles of TBLT by Rouhalt. [17]

Considering the important role that foreign language education plays nowadays, dealing with the problems in foreign language education must be beneficial, and we thus hope the recommendations above could be inspiring.



## 5. Conclusion

From the perspective of policies, it is not difficult to see that China has been striving to strengthen English education for decades. The advantages and disadvantages of the two teaching methods, namely PPP and TBLT, are discussed through the comparison between them. The PPP teaching method is teacher-centered, with which teachers can easily and efficiently teach grammar, but students may feel rigid in the learning process and lack the ability of using English in daily life. Contrastively, TBLT, namely the task-based teaching method, is student-centered, with which students can more easily apply what they have learned, but its nature limits itself in small class mode inevitably. In addition, it is also a challenge for teachers' curriculum design and preparation. In China, where large-class teaching is widely used, a single teaching method can not meet the needs of different students. In the future, linguists may find another method more suitable for teaching, which can avoid the weaknesses of PPP and TBLT in English teaching and at the same time make full use of their advantages; The designers of the curriculum and system can design more practical teaching models according to the needs of different students. Foreign language education in China is still in a period of continuous development and progress and still faces enormous challenges. It is believed that foreign language education in China can be presented in the perfect form in the future.

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