

# Chinese EFL teachers' understandings and implementation of task-based language teaching

## A multiple case study

Hongyu Li and Nathan Thomas  
UCL (University College London), UK

Across China, English language teaching curricula have advocated for task-based language teaching (TBLT) for more than 20 years. Yet, there is reason to believe that practice varies widely. As such, this multiple case study sheds light on two Chinese teachers' understandings and implementation of TBLT in a public primary school in Chongqing, southwest China. Data collection consisted of eight semi-structured interviews and eight classroom observations. Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The analysis indicated that the teachers had basic understandings of TBLT, but their teaching was incongruent with its principles. Few tasks were observed in their lessons. Three main factors affected the teachers' implementation of TBLT: (1) classroom management issues; (2) preparation and teaching resources; and (3) the teachers' own tacit reluctance.

**Keywords:** TBLT, theory-to-practice, case study, qualitative content analysis, ELT China

## Introduction

Before 2001, English language teaching (ELT) in China had been prescribed as predominantly textbook-oriented, teacher-centered, and memorization-focused (Zheng & Adamson, 2003). ELT pedagogy adopted a “structurally based, transmission-style curriculum” (Ellis, 2021, p.33). Overall, it ignored an important aspect of instructed language teaching and learning: what students do in the classroom needs to resemble the multifaceted ways they may use language outside the classroom (Van den Branden & Van Gorp, 2021).

Due to globalization initiatives, education stakeholders in China gradually realized the importance of communicative competence. As a result, a new, nationwide ELT curriculum for primary and secondary schools was introduced in 2001 (Ministry of Education, 2001). The curriculum strongly advocated for what Byrnes (2015) and Ellis (2021) referred to as a *curricular approach* to task-based language teaching (TBLT). At the time, TBLT was seen as the latest methodological realization of communicative pedagogy (Hu, 2005b). The curriculum asserted that TBLT could enhance students' learning motivation and develop their competence in language use through tasks (Ministry of Education, 2001). However, the official document does not give a clear definition of TBLT or what qualifies as a task – an issue still up for debate among researchers (Loewen & Sato, 2021) and practitioners (Thomas & Brereton, 2019).

Despite its popularity at the policy level, there are still barriers to implementing TBLT in the Chinese English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) context (Butler, 2011; Ellis, 2021; Hu, 2002, 2005a; Littlewood, 2007). Carless (2002, 2003, 2004, 2007, 2009) and Deng and Carless (2009, 2010) explored the issue at the primary level, but their studies were limited to Hong Kong and Guangdong, which are developed coastal cities with different regional policies. More recently, case studies by Chen and Wright (2017) and Zheng and Borg (2014) were conducted at the secondary level in Fujian and Zhejiang. Thus, although some research has explored TBLT in practice, few researchers have investigated TBLT in primary schools, especially in less-developed areas of the Chinese mainland.

To contribute to filling the research gap, the current study sheds light on two EFL teachers' understandings and implementation of TBLT in primary EFL classes in Chongqing, a tier-two city in southwest China (i.e., an urban area that is considered to be of intermediate size and development). In doing so, the study responds to calls for more TBLT research with teachers of young learners, in their actual classrooms, and as part of their day-to-day pedagogical practices (Van den Branden & Van Gorp, 2021). Strictly following Ellis' (2010) theoretical framework and the main criteria of a task (as per Ellis, 2003; Ellis & Shintani, 2014; Skehan, 2003), we analyzed the teachers' understandings, perceptions, and classroom practices. The findings have implications for TBLT researchers, EFL teachers' reflecting on their own pedagogy, and teacher educators looking to improve TBLT implementation.

## Literature review

### The development of TBLT

TBLT evolved from communicative language teaching (CLT). CLT was proposed in the late 1970s to enhance language learners' growing needs for communicative competence (Ellis, 2017). Departing from traditional teaching approaches, CLT advocates that language development happens when learners are immersed in communicative tasks. Although the definition of CLT varies, researchers have reached a general consensus that it is a learner-centered, meaning-based, and fluency-focused approach (Spada, 2007). However, there has been controversy over the issue of whether linguistic forms should be highlighted in CLT. As a result, weak and strong forms developed (Howatt, 1984). The weak form is an extension of traditional teaching approaches, emphasizing the structural properties of the target language. Generally, this takes place via presentation-practice-production (PPP) with communicative activities presented in the production stage. In contrast, the strong form regards communicative activities as the core of language teaching, based on the theoretical underpinning of learning-through-communication. From this perspective, whole classes should revolve around core tasks, creating an appropriate context for learners to communicate in the target language.

Task-supported language teaching (TSLT) developed from the weak form of CLT, while TBLT evolved from the strong form (Ellis, 2017). Thus, TSLT and TBLT can also be regarded as weak and strong versions of CLT (Long, 2015). Like weak forms of CLT, TSLT involves tasks in the final stage of PPP (Ellis, 2013). This is different from the common approach to TBLT that consists of three stages: pre-task, while-task, and post-task (Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 1998) – or a series of pedagogic tasks approximating a target task (Long, 2015).

### The notion of a 'task'

The notion of a 'task' is the key element of TBLT, with various definitions proposed by different researchers (Loewen & Sato, 2021). For example, Willis (1996) defined a task as an activity where learners use the target language for communicative purposes to achieve an outcome. Samuda and Bygate (2008) defined a task as a holistic activity that engages language use to meet a linguistic challenge and achieve a specific non-linguistic outcome. Long (2015) stated that a task is the unit of analysis at every stage in the design, delivery, and evaluation of a language course. It has a clear real-world connection associated directly with the learners' needs. These definitions highlight different characteristics of a task, including its

communicative nature, its attribute of having a non-linguistic outcome, and the basic composition of a class. Bygate et al. (2001) argued that the definition of a task needs to be adapted for different pedagogical purposes. In the current study, four key features are used to qualify a pedagogic task based on the criteria identified by Ellis (2003); Ellis and Shintani (2014), and Skehan (2003):

1. Meaning is prioritized over linguistic form.
2. There should exist certain communicative problems to solve or information gaps to narrow.
3. The task should be authentic, close to real-world activities.
4. The learner can achieve a non-linguistic outcome at the end of the task (i.e., the main goal of the task is to solve communicative problems rather than language learning itself).

According to these criteria, Ellis (2010) proposed a continuum in which *exercise* and *task* are represented at the two extremes. Pedagogical activities only meeting some of the criteria lie on the continuum between them. In the current study, Ellis's continuum and the four criteria above were used to analyze the participants' understandings of TBLT and their teaching practices.

### Uptake of ELT curriculum innovation in the Chinese EFL context

Since the 1980s, the Chinese government has promoted CLT to encourage the cultivation of communicative competence in basic education (Jin & Cortazzi, 2002; Wang, 2007; Zheng & Davison, 2008). The State Education Development Commission introduced an English-teaching syllabus based on CLT in 1992 (Butler, 2011). However, CLT was not widely implemented in China because of complex contextual factors. In 2001, the New National Curriculum Innovation was launched (Wang, 2007). That same year, an English-language curriculum aimed at primary and secondary schools was introduced nationwide. Its corresponding document – National English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory and Senior High Schools – advocates for TBLT under the umbrella of CLT as part of the curriculum (Hu, 2005b). The document provides guidelines for TBLT which have been translated below (Ministry of Education, 2001; see also Zheng & Borg, 2014):

- Activities must have clear and achievable objectives.
- Activities must be authentic, designed based on learners' lives and interests.
- Activities must promote the development of English knowledge, language skills, and improve practical language use.

- Activities should be cross-curricular, contributing to the integrated and holistic development of learners.
- Activities should enhance learners' abilities to collect, process, and use information as well as the ability to solve real problems in English.
- Activities should occur both inside and outside the classroom.

However, despite such guidelines, the curriculum does not precisely explain what a task is or how it might be distinct from other types of activities. "TBLT" appears in the document in the main title and general introduction, while "activity" (活动) rather than "task" (任务) is mentioned in the specific guidelines. These terms have very similar meanings in Chinese and are not distinguished in the document. Even in the most recent curriculum document (Ministry of Education, 2011), no further explanation is provided. As a result, the concept of a task and its related pedagogy are left to teachers' own interpretations. Indeed, there seems to be substantial distance between the curriculum document and actual teaching practices. For instance, Zhang (2005) found that although teachers claimed to have used TBLT, few tasks were observable in their classes. Arguing that certain barriers may be responsible for the lack of implementation, Butler (2011) synthesized three types of constraints hindering the effective implementation of communication-oriented language teaching in Asian EFL contexts (see also Ellis, 2021):

- Conceptual constraints. This type of constraint stems from the differences between the principal concepts of innovative teaching approaches and traditional beliefs of teaching and learning. In China, the Confucian norms that regard learning as the absorption of literary knowledge conflict with the Western premises of CLT and TBLT instruction (Hu, 2002). Moreover, the traditional pedagogic view supports the dominant status of teachers and considers students as the recipient of authoritative knowledge. Thus, traditional, literacy-focused, and teacher-centered pedagogy is commonplace.
- Classroom-level constraints. The second type of constraints is relevant to varied contextual limitations in the classroom and includes the lack of human resources and material, structural restrictions (e.g., large class sizes, limited instruction time), and classroom management challenges.
- Societal-institutional-level constraints. This type mainly includes grammar-translation-oriented exams and limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom.

Considering the complex contextual constraints described above, the current study aims to provide insight into TBLT implementation in a specific context as

well as the mechanism behind it two decades after the new national curriculum was introduced.

### Similar TBLT research in Hong Kong

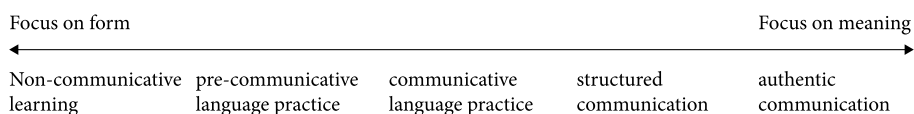
Carless (2003, 2004, 2007, 2009) conducted a series of TBLT studies in Hong Kong. First, he investigated the implementation of TBLT in three Hong Kong primary schools (Carless, 2003, 2004). Three L1 Cantonese EFL teachers participated in six semi-structured interviews, three cycles of classroom observations, and an attitude scale (showing the degree of their orientations to TBLT). Using thematic analysis, Carless (2003) identified six pre-class planning issues: (a) teacher beliefs, (b) teacher understandings, (c) the textbook and teaching topic, (d) available teaching resources, (e) available syllabus time, and (f) student language proficiency. He argued that the complex interplay between these issues impacts the extent of TBLT implementation in class. Through further analyses, Carless (2004) identified classroom management, the excessive use of the mother tongue, and the limited quantity of target language output as the main challenges of using tasks in Chinese EFL classes. Based on this research, Carless (2003) proposed a tentative framework to show how TBLT implementation was shaped. The model indicates that staged implementation – Stage 1 (Pre-class Planning Issues), Stage 2 (Task Characteristics), and Stage 3 (Classroom Implementation Issues) – was cyclical; later stages could provide feedback on earlier stages.

In another research project in Hong Kong, Carless (2007, 2009) interviewed eleven secondary school teachers and ten teacher educators. An overarching finding is the demand for a flexible, situated version of TBLT, which draws on local cultures and settings (Carless, 2007). Carless also suggested highlighting the role of grammar instruction in TBLT, combining tasks with examination requirements, and emphasizing reading and writing tasks. A subsequent article (Carless, 2009) explored the pros and cons of TBLT versus PPP approaches according to participants' perceptions. Based on the findings, Carless advocated for a balance of different pedagogical activities adapted to the demands of a specific student group in a particular setting.

Taken together, Carless provided a detailed picture of how TBLT was implemented in Hong Kong primary and secondary school EFL classes. However, the conclusions drawn might not be transferable to other Chinese regions owing to differences between the pedagogical contexts of Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland. For example, TBLT has been adopted in Hong Kong since the 1990s and is more firmly established than in mainland China (Carless, 2004). Furthermore, they have different English examination systems (Deng & Carless, 2010). As a result, attention to research specific to mainland China is needed.

## Similar TBLT research in mainland China

Deng and Carless (2009, 2010) believed Guangdong – a developed coastal province next to Hong Kong with relatively abundant educational resources – had potential for executing TBLT reform successfully. In their study, four teachers and their students from two primary schools participated in a total of 55 lesson observations and 68 semi-structured interviews. Aiming to analyze the extent of communicative activities in Guangdong EFL classes, the first article (Deng & Carless, 2009) focused on one of the four teacher-participants, Rose. The researchers used Littlewood's (2004, 2011) Communicative Continuum to determine the nature of the teaching activities involved in Rose's classes. The continuum is comprised of five categories with varying degrees of focus on forms and meaning (See Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Littlewood's framework (Adapted from Littlewood, 2004)

Most activities were classified on the left side of the continuum. This indicated that most teaching was incongruent with the principles of TBLT. Interview findings later confirmed that the negative effects of traditional examinations and limited teacher understanding of TBLT were likely obstacles. In exploring the impact of examinations on classroom pedagogy in depth, Deng and Carless (2010) found that washback generally hindered the implementation of innovative pedagogy. However, their use of Littlewood's (2004, 2011) framework only highlighted one dimension of communicative activities (meaning vs form focused). As a result, the researchers did not provide a complete analysis of the participants' teaching activities under the framework. Moreover, although rigorous and conducted in mainland China, even these findings may still not be transferable to less-developed cities with fewer educational resources (e.g., the context of the current study).

## Similar TBLT research in less-developed cities in China

Though still an under-researched area, there are some case studies on TBLT in less-developed cities in China. For example, Zheng and Borg (2014) explored secondary EFL teachers' understandings and implementation of TBLT in Fuzhou. Three teachers from different schools participated in: (a) a pre-lesson interview focused on the teachers' understandings of the new English curriculum and TBLT; (b) classroom observations centered on the types of instructional activities and materials used; and (c) a post-lesson interview to discuss the pedagogy and

factors that shaped instructional decisions. Narrative accounts for each teacher were constructed with the observational and interview data. Consequently, the researchers found that the teachers' understandings of TBLT were narrow, closely associated with oral pair or group work. Three factors shaping instructional decisions were identified: (a) detailed but limited curriculum materials, (b) rigid and conservative teachers' beliefs, and (c) contextual issues such as excessively large class sizes, limited teaching time, and a focus on standardized examinations that rendered TBLT difficult to implement.

In another relevant case study, Chen and Wright (2017) explored teacher understandings and practices of TBLT in a private high school in Zhejiang. The school had established its own English teaching framework called the Culture-Oriented Foreign Language Education framework, which incorporated TBLT. The researchers investigated the extent to which TBLT was perceived as being effectively adopted in the framework through the lens of the teachers' beliefs and practices. Four teachers from different grade/year levels were recruited to participate in two classroom observations and two semi-structured interviews (pre-/post-observation). The researchers also collected classroom materials from each teacher and interviewed the vice principal. The findings revealed the teachers' positive beliefs about TBLT principles and adequate institutional support. However, there still existed a gap between understanding and practice in using tasks, mainly caused by ambiguous definitions of authentic task pedagogy and the teachers' reluctance to relinquish a teacher-centered pedagogical approach. Moreover, most teachers showed a lack of confidence in implementing TBLT, so they designed tasks as communicative activities focusing on language form.

Overall, while there has been some research on TBLT implementation in both Hong Kong and mainland China, there is a paucity of research in primary schools in less-developed cities. Additionally, outside of China, few studies have been conducted on teachers' perceptions of tasks with teachers of younger, school-aged learners (cf. Bryfonski, 2021; Erlam, 2016; Oliver & Bogachenko, 2018; Solares-Altamirano, 2020). The need for such research was the impetus for the current study, which utilized Ellis's (2003, 2010) continuum and the four criteria summarized above to provide insight into primary EFL teachers' understandings and practice of TBLT.

The study was guided by three research questions:

1. To what extent are tasks used in Chinese primary EFL classes?
2. What are Chinese primary EFL teachers' understandings of TBLT?
3. What factors appear to affect teachers' implementation of TBLT in the Chinese EFL context?



## Methods

### Research design

This study used a qualitative, case study design to present a holistic and detailed picture of TBLT implementation in a primary school in a less-developed Chinese city. Case studies shed light on the complexities of phenomena in a specific context and provide rich contextualization (Mackey & Gass, 2015; Rose et al., 2020). Harnessing these advantages, this study focuses on two EFL teachers and their classes, revealing the complexities of teaching innovation at present.

### Research setting

The present study was conducted in a primary school in Chongqing, a municipality in southwest China. Chongqing, unlike more developed cities, has relatively fewer educational resources and slower development in educational reform. The primary school chosen is one of the top public schools in Chongqing. It is an experimental/education-pilot school with official approval to serve as a testing ground for educational reforms and innovative teaching practices such as TBLT (this is the nature of experimental schools in China). The school encourages its students to become independent explorers in learning, which is part of the school's moto. All students take two-to-three 40-minute EFL classes every week. All teaching materials used in class are based on a series of textbooks called *PEP Primary English* published by People's Education Press. There are six units, each of which is organized according to the presentation of new language, practice activities, and a production stage with one or fewer tasks involved (essentially following a PPP teaching approach). Each textbook has varying levels of attention paid to vocabulary, grammar, reading, writing, listening, and speaking development. A cursory look at the textbooks indicates misalignment between innovative teaching practices (i.e., TBLT) that the school and Ministry of Education promote and the materials provided for teachers.

### Participants

Following ethics approval from the authors' university and permission from the target school, the first author issued a call for primary EFL teachers to participate pseudonymously. He selected one middle-aged male teacher in charge of co-managing English teaching in the school (Jiadong) and one junior female teacher who was active in teaching and research activities held by the local bureau of education (Xiaoyu). This mix in gender, age, and education-related responsibili-

ties enabled us to maximize participant variation in a study that would inevitably include only two participants due to feasibility concerns. Another aim was to see what teachers working within a context that actively promotes TBLT via top-down policy (i.e., the National English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory and Senior High Schools) actually knew about TBLT and how, or even *if*, they implemented it in their classrooms. The teachers were provided with an information sheet and a consent form to notify them of the main purpose of the study, the procedures, and potential benefits of participating (e.g., an opportunity to engage in reflective practice). Both teachers agreed and signed the consent forms.

Jiadong had worked as an EFL teacher for almost twenty years. He earned a bachelor's degree in education from a local polytechnic school where there were few courses about teaching theory but an abundance of opportunities for teaching practice. He had heard of TBLT and knew some basic concepts but was not very familiar with the teaching approach, despite being encouraged to use it by the local education bureau and official policy documentation (see above). During data collection, Jiadong was teaching one second-grade class with approximately 45 seven-to-eight-year-old students. He planned his daily teaching according to the textbook. The second-grade textbook mainly focuses on listening and speaking with minimal focus on writing and reading.

Xiaoyu, who was younger than Jiadong, had worked as an EFL teacher in the target primary school for three years. She earned a bachelor's degree in English education and a master's degree in primary education from a local normal university. However, she could not remember whether she had been trained for the theory and practice of TBLT, despite, like Jiadong, being encouraged to use it by the local education bureau and official policy documentation. However, she remembered reading about the approach when she wrote her master's dissertation on another topic. She also admitted that although the current official curriculum regards cultivating students' integration of skills in using English via tasks as the general aim, she still regarded increasing students' exam scores as the main objective of her teaching. At the time of the study, she was teaching two fifth-grade classes with approximately 45 11-to-12-year-old students in each class. She mainly arranged her lessons based on the textbook. In the fifth-grade textbook, the development of reading and writing becomes more important than in Jiadong's second-grade textbook.

## Data collection

The main data collection schedule is shown in Table 1. Owing to the study being conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face data collection was not possible. However, teaching still took place in physical classrooms with teachers

and students present. Thus, data were collected remotely with teachers recording their own classes using various technical supports from the school and authors' university.

**Table 1.** The main data collection schedule

Research stages		Focus
Background interviews (one per teacher; 1 May 2021)		To collect relevant background information about the participants
Cycle 1	Lesson observations (two per teacher; 10–14 May 2021)	To collect information about TBLT implementation in practice
	Post-observation interviews (one per teacher; 15 May 2021)	To seek the teachers' perspectives on relevant issues identified from the observed lessons
Cycle 2	Lesson observations (two per teacher; 14–18 June 2021)	As per Cycle 1
	Post-observation interviews (one per teacher; 19 June 2021)	As per Cycle 1
Summative interviews (one per teacher, 1 July 2021)		To probe the main issues arising from the ongoing data analysis
Transcript-checking sessions (one per teacher, 5 July 2021)		To check the translation of the interview transcripts
Analysis-sharing sessions (one per teacher, 10 August 2021)		To ask for respondents' comments on the data analysis

### Classroom observations

Informed by previous research (e.g., Carless, 2003, 2004), the first author planned two observation cycles within a six-week period. In each cycle, he chose two consecutive EFL lessons and asked the teachers to share their self-recorded lessons. The recordings were gathered via a video camera and microphone at the back of the classroom, facing the board, and which captured the teachers' and students'

actions from the perspective of a researcher sitting in the same position. This meant that audio was limited to major classroom interactions. Eight lessons were recorded in total, four for each teacher. Although previous work has been informative with just two lesson observations per teacher (e.g., An & Thomas, 2021; Pun et al., 2022), four observations could mitigate the lack of sufficient observational data for understanding classroom practice highlighted by Zheng and Borg (2014). Consecutive observations in different cycles could reduce the risk that a one-off snapshot of the teachers' classes might not reflect their everyday teaching practices (Carless, 2003). Additionally, given that the classes were held in person and recorded without the researcher being present, it was likely that the teachers' and students' natural language use and behavior could be observed – mitigating the risk of the observer's paradox (see Mackey & Gass, 2015; Rose et al., 2020). The issue of solely observing recorded lessons rather than their in-person form was unavoidable, however, due to COVID-19-related restrictions.

Students are required to take mid-term and final examinations every term, so the first author chose days between the two tests for observations with the aim to lessen the impact of examinations on normal teaching. To better understand the teachers' classes, the first author examined the textbooks before each observation. At the end of every observation cycle, the teachers submitted their lesson recordings for secure storage and analysis. By watching the recordings repeatedly and carefully, the first author formed a formative analysis of communicative activities used in the lessons, which helped prepare specific questions for the post-observation and summative interviews.

## Interviews

For each teacher, a series of semi-structured interviews was conducted and recorded using Zoom. This included a background interview, a post-observation interview, a summative interview, and a post-analysis interview.

Background interviews were conducted to build an individual profile for each teacher after they returned the signed consent forms. At the end of each observation cycle, post-observation interviews were conducted to probe interviewees' views on TBLT issues observed in the lesson recordings. During these interviews, the first author displayed still images captured from the lesson recordings that signified key moments in activities that were later analyzed by the researcher (described in the text below). For example, a still image of the teacher demonstrating an activity was used to help the teachers recall the context, elaborate on relevant issues, and lessen the risks of selective recall or self-delusion (see Mackey & Gass, 2015; Rose et al., 2020).

After finishing all post-observation interviews, the first author conducted a summative interview with the teachers to explore their general understandings and experiences of TBLT implementation. Since all interviews were conducted in Chinese (to encourage accurate and freer expressions), the first author translated the interview transcripts to English. To ensure the accuracy of his translation, he asked the participants to read and correct (if necessary) each transcript before data analysis. After finishing data analysis, the first author shared the key findings with the participants and had a post-analysis member-checking/sharing session to confirm and/or correct any misunderstandings or distortion of their perceptions. Only minimal corrections were required.

## Data analysis

The study employed qualitative content analysis – a technique for drawing inferences from qualitative material in a systematic way. It can be used deductively or inductively and is capable of handling observation and interview data (Selvi, 2020).

Deductively, we used qualitative content analysis to analyze the observation data based on the Ellis's (2003, 2010) continuum and criteria of a task (see Ellis, 2010, 2017; Skehan, 2003) as well as the framework of communicative-activity analysis used in previous classroom research (see Zheng & Borg, 2014). First, all data were organized and segmented into separate teaching activities with reference to the main composition of a task, including input, roles, settings, actions, monitoring, outcomes, and feedback (Candlin, 1987). We considered these logical teaching moves (i.e., actions) made by the teachers in the observed lessons (e.g., the teacher providing instructions for the activity that would follow and a summary/conclusion for that same activity). Explained for young learners, such moves could be clearly identified and were confirmed with the teachers during the post-observation interviews. Next, according to our adopted framework (see Ellis, 2003; Ellis, 2010; Ellis & Shintani, 2014; Skehan, 2003) described above, we created a coding table to analyze the activities, including their basic information (name, topic, description, and source) and aspects of tasks (focus, outcome, authenticity, information gap/problem, interaction pattern, and skills). Then, we coded the data following the framework. Finally, we organized the findings in tables and included points on a continuum for each activity according to the average score of the four criteria of a task described above. Each criterion was assigned 0 (absent), 0.5 (partially present), or 1 (present). The table assisted us in our interpretations. Following the formative analysis of the teachers' pedagogical decisions and practices, we wrote specific interview questions to investigate their understandings of TBLT as well as the factors affecting their utilization of TBLT.

Inductively, we used qualitative content analysis for the interview data. First, to answer RQ2 and RQ3, the data were organized into two domains: teachers' understandings of TBLT and possible factors affecting TBLT implementation. For each part, we coded textual units and grouped them into different categories. After defining and revising the categories, we presented and elaborated on the findings combined with the illustration of the observation data and the textbooks to shed light on teachers' perspectives of TBLT and its implementation.

## Findings and discussion

In this section, we begin with an overview of how the teachers implemented TBLT in their classes and then move to the participants' general understandings of TBLT and their specific understandings of tasks. We then discuss the factors the teachers believed affected their implementation of TBLT.

### RQ1: Task implementation in observed classes

Table 2 provides a condensed overview of five observed activities in relation to the coding scheme described above. Using fuzzy logic, criteria are labelled as 0 (absent), 0.5 (partially present), or 1 (present). We selected Activities A-C to report on in detail because they most closely resembled a task in Jiadong's observed classes. Since no task-like activities were observed in Xiaoyu's classes, we selected two activities in which interaction patterns were student centric (S-S) as opposed to teacher-student-centric (T-S). Overall, each reported activity features a different degree of task approximation which helps to vary our discussion below.

#### *Jiadong's classes*

Jiadong's classes consisted of a range of different teaching activities, most of which resembled exercises (via PPP), while some were more task oriented. To begin class, he usually taught new vocabulary or helped to consolidate students' target-language knowledge before allowing them to practice together in controlled activities. In the production stage, he usually introduced a task-like activity. Overall, there were three task-like activities in his lessons, but only one activity was completely in accord with the criteria of a task (see above). The lessons seemed loosely organized, without much connection between the activities or links to a communicative context. This likely put the students at a disadvantage since language is context-sensitive, making it difficult to transfer the intended meaning without context during a task (Thornbury, 1999). Below, we describe three communicative

**Table 2.** Condensed coding scheme for five activities from Jiadong's (J) and Xiaoyu's (X) classes

Criterion	Activity A (J)	Activity B (J)	Activity C (J)	Activity D (X)	Activity E (X)
Focus on meaning	0.5	0.5	0	0	0
Non-linguistic outcome	1	0	0	0	0
Authentic	1	1	0.5	0	0
Involves information gap or problem solving	1	<0	0.5	0	0.5
Ellis's continuum	Exercise ● Task	Exercise ● Task	Exercise ● Task	Exercise ● Task	Exercise ● Task

activities with degressive degrees of task alignment in Jiadong's observed lessons as examples.

**Activity A (Observation Cycle 1, Lesson 1).** This activity involved completing a daily routine survey. It is the only near-standard task in his observed lessons. To start, Jiadong spent five minutes to drill sentence structures for asking and answering questions. Then, he spent five minutes giving the instructions for the task and providing examples. After being instructed, students were allocated four minutes to gather information about two classmates' daily routines and complete the survey. Finally, students were required to write their findings in a table/matrix. Jiadong walked around the classroom to monitor their progress. In the final four minutes, he invited volunteers to share their findings. Since the activity is designed to promote communication between students, language meaning is at its core. It resembles a situation that might happen outside of class. Additionally, the information gap asking about daily routines between students could increase their motivation to interact with each other (see Doughty & Pica, 1986).

As discussed above, Activity A is a near-standard task in the form of an authentic information-gap activity of surveying with a nonlinguistic outcome. However, in actual implementation, Jiadong spent the most time on sentence drilling and grammatical rules, causing a lack of adequate time for students'

meaningful communication. This time allocation might transfer the focus of Activity A from language meaning to language form.

**Activity B (Observation Cycle 2, Lesson 2).** This was a role play from the textbook consisting of four substages. The first substage lasted for one minute, in which students were required to read a dialogue between a boy and his mother about typical weekday activities. In the second substage, Jiadong spent three minutes introducing the basic rules of the activity and presenting an example showing how to conduct the dialogue. Jiadong also suggested that students not just use the example sentences from the textbook but also use additional language to adapt the textbook's example sentences when performing their own dialogues as either the boy or his mother. Thus, Jiadong elicited freer communication from students, focusing the activity on meaning exchange. Students worked in pairs to do the role-play for two minutes. Finally, they used three minutes to share their conversations and received feedback.

Activity B is at the middle of Ellis's theoretical continuum, halfway between an exercise and a task. Jiadong expected language meaning to be at the core of this activity, although there was no information gap or preset problem. The role play is authentic in that students may ask their friends or families about the weekday activities with the genuine intention of information exchange outside of class, but the final conversation display resulted in an immediate linguistic evaluation rather than a practical outcome. Like Activity A, Activity B did not seem to provide enough time for learners to communicate meaningfully.

**Activity C (Observation Cycle 2, Lesson 1).** Jiadong hid a flashcard with a target word on it and invited one student to find the card according to other students' auditory hints. While one student searched for the card, the other students said the word on the flashcard aloud. The closer the student got to the card, the louder the other students spoke. The whole process lasted for about twelve minutes, consisting of a four-minute introduction/explanation and eight minutes of activity. Though providing verbal instructions would have been authentic, and would have bridged the information gap in the activity, simply repeating the target word made the activity appear more like a pronunciation drill; no practical outcome could be achieved.

### *Xiaoyu's classes*

Xiaoyu's classes were mostly teacher-centered, with few task-like activities. The lack of activities may have been influenced by her fifth-grade students being three years older than Jiadong's second-grade students, however, we believe that having slightly older/more capable students would have enabled her to incorporate more tasks rather than fewer. Nevertheless, Xiaoyu usually set the context by showing pictures or initiating a simple activity. Within this context, she taught new vocab-



ulary and grammar, during or after which she assigned controlled-practice activities. For example, after introducing new material, Xiaoyu asked students to read or listen to a relatively long conversation and to complete the corresponding textbook exercise. Xiaoyu then gave the answers and explained the dialogue. Overall, Xiaoyu's observed classes could be divided into two parts: language knowledge and skill development. The former was mainly designed by her, while the latter mainly followed the textbook. Below, we describe two teaching activities that Xiaoyu designed to deviate from the textbook exercises.

**Activity D (Observation Cycle 1, Lesson 2).** This was a story-completion activity. Xiaoyu used it to introduce the present participle and present continuous tense, highlighting language form. The activity started with the introduction of the story context and storyline, which took four minutes. Then, Xiaoyu allocated two minutes for students in pairs to create a conversation between a cat and other animal mothers according to pictures and present participle rules on a PowerPoint slide (no authenticity or problem solving). Finally, it took one minute for two pairs to perform their conversations in front of the class, which resulted in a linguistic outcome. Activity D was an exercise. It did not conform to any criterion of a task.

**Activity E (Observation Cycle 1, Lesson 2).** This was a structured role-play in which students needed to play the roles of parents and complete scripted conversations by using words from a PowerPoint slide. The activity lasted five minutes, involving three minutes for preparation and two minutes of activity. Although students sometimes chose different words making minor changes to create a little information exchange in the dialogue, the activity still focused on practicing the language form (present continuous tense). The activity was unlike real-life interactions, and it lacked a non-linguistic problem to solve. Thus, Activity B was akin to an exercise. The requirement to use provided vocabulary goes against Ellis and Shintani's (2014) belief that tasks should require learners to rely on their own linguistic resources.

To summarize, Jiadong was observed to adopt TSLT, a weak form of TBLT, in one of his observed lessons, successfully assigning a task/task-like activity in the production stage of PPP. Most task-like activities in his class were influenced by the textbook. Although most activities resembled real-world situations and had information gaps, some still lacked a practical outcome, and they overemphasized language form. As for Xiaoyu, there is no evidence that she implemented TBLT in her observed classes. Nearly all of her activities were controlled. Some observed activities had one characteristic of a task, but none could be considered tasks.

## RQ2: Understandings of TBLT and tasks

This section is organized around five themes identified during data analysis: (a) general understandings of TBLT, (b) tasks should be feasible and effective, (c) tasks should involve communication and problem solving, (d) tasks should be authentic, and (e) tasks should not be limited in language form.

### *General understandings of TBLT*

According to Jiadong, TBLT is a teaching method that is reflected in teaching activities. He said that

In task-based language teaching, teachers may aim at a certain language point. Then, teachers may have to design some specific, feasible tasks for students to practice the language point. (Jiadong, Summative Interview)

He stated that language learners can achieve preset teaching objectives through pedagogical tasks that provide opportunities for communication, which reveals that he recognized the significance of tasks in contributing to communication and language acquisition. However, he believed that tasks must serve the current teaching objective, especially a certain language point, which is unrelated to TBLT. Generally speaking, his view only corresponds to a few principles of TSLT, which cater to intentional learning with the primary focus on the accurate use of the target form rather than communicative use of language (see Ellis, 2017; Loewen & Sato, 2021).

In Xiaoyu's view, tasks should be at a superordinate position of the class – a transformation of teaching objectives in lesson design. She explained that

This kind of task will be divided into several small tasks ... Completing the last task is the most superordinate teaching objective, and the previous tasks pave the way for it. (Xiaoyu, Summative Interview)

Xiaoyu's words reveal that she recognized the core status of tasks in language teaching; she thought entire classes should be task driven. In her opinion, a task can be divided into subtasks assigned sequentially, and there exists some logical relationships between those tasks. Xiaoyu added that

If your goal is to let the children complete a task, the class will be more targeted. (Xiaoyu, Summative Interview)

In Xiaoyu's interpretation, completing a pedagogical task is more specific and practical than abstract teaching aims (e.g., to develop a skill). To achieve a task's aim, attention should be paid to meaningful communication. As per Long's (2015) interaction hypothesis, communication helps L2 learners access comprehensible

input and pushes them to modify their own output. The modification is based on iterative feedback through which learners can acquire the linguistic knowledge necessary for engaging in interaction. Generally, Xiaoyu's understanding of TBLT resonates with the strong version of TBLT, which advocates that the whole class should revolve around a core task and communicative exchanges (Ellis, 2021).

### *Tasks should be feasible and effective*

Jiadong thought the most important thing for a task is to be “workable”, which, to him, consists of two aspects: the feasibility of the task and the effectiveness of the task. He argued that

It should be workable. We should try our best to create conditions for students in limited time and space to learn English. Teachers cannot only pay attention to its form without considering its effect. (Jiadong, Summative Interview)

In terms of feasibility, he mentioned the limited time and space in EFL classes, which might hinder the implementation of tasks (see Carless, 2003). Although this issue originates from Jiadong's own teaching experience, reflecting a negative situation in task implementation, it is only related to the limited external conditions rather than the task itself. Thus, feasibility cannot be regarded as an inherent attribute of tasks. He stated:

I mean, a task must serve teaching and preset teaching objectives, such as learning a language point. (Jiadong, Summative Interview)

As for the effectiveness of tasks, this idea conforms to Jiadong's general belief that tasks enable the achievement of teaching objectives. However, the effectiveness of tasks is an external characteristic that depends on how teachers design and combine tasks with other practices. Jiadong might believe that it is difficult to design a feasible and effective task in his context, so he emphasized this point. Xiaoyu did not describe tasks as needing to be feasible and effective.

### *Tasks should involve communication and problem solving*

Jiadong and Xiaoyu both felt that tasks could provide opportunities for students to communicate with peers in English and solve specific problems together. When Jiadong explained why he viewed one of his activities as a task (see Activity A below), he gave the following reason:

...because the activity is designed for students to complete an investigation related to the daily routine, students interact with each other to solve the problem.

(Jiadong, Post-observation 1)

In his explanation, Jiadong regards interaction and problem-solving as important characteristics of tasks. Furthermore, he explained that interaction and cooperation are necessary for problem-solving, and, conversely, problem-solving can also promote interaction through which students can develop new knowledge. However, he did not illustrate the deeper mechanism, information-gap bridging, behind the motive of interaction required by tasks.

Xiaoyu mentioned this mechanism when she discussed a jigsaw-reading activity she had used previously though not in her observed lessons. She stated that the segmented information caused by jigsaw reading becomes an obstacle for students, so they must share information and work together. She commented that

Students can't finish it just by themselves or their own previous knowledge. There must be some interaction. (Xiaoyu, Post-observation 2)

According to Xiaoyu, to complete the task, learners must engage in active information exchange and meaning negotiation, during which learners can improve their output, which facilitates language development (see Doughty & Pica, 1986). Thus, Xiaoyu was able to articulate how learners are encouraged to communicate and cooperate during tasks, even though this strategy was not observed in the lessons she provided as part of data collection in the current study.

### *Tasks should be authentic*

Numerous scholars have stated that authenticity should be a core component of tasks in TBLT (e.g., Bruton, 2005; González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014; Swan, 2005; Widdowson, 2003). In most cases, task authenticity requires teaching materials and activities that reflect actual language use among L1 users. However, this interpretation of authenticity might not be appropriate for L2 users who have different communicative contexts (Butler, 2011). When describing one of his own activities (Activity A above), Jiadong said that

The topic of the activity itself is relatively close to children's real life. (Jiadong, Post-observation 1)

His words only recognize the topic of Activity A determined by the textbook. However, the choice of real-world language materials and the design of actual-activity forms, which he did not address, can greatly influence task authenticity (Ciornei & Dina, 2015; Kessler et al., 2021). Jiadong had claimed earlier in the same interview that

Children are familiar with their daily schedule and with each other. I think if students are more familiar with each other in the task, they may find it more interesting. Moreover, the more information they know, the more feasible the task is. (Jiadong, Post-observation 1)

However, Jiadong's opinion that tasks should be familiar to students may be problematic. First, in real-world interactions, there usually exists some information gap, and further communication is required. Second, the lack of information gap in a task does not necessarily make the task more interesting. Conversely, the task may become boring/unchallenging. If students already know the relevant information, they might lose motivation to discuss it. Generally, Jiadong's view of task authenticity conflicts with the principles of TBLT. Xiaoyu did not discuss task authenticity.

### *Tasks should not be limited in language form*

There is general consensus that tasks should not be confined to language form (see Ellis, 2017; Littlewood, 2004; Loewen & Sato, 2021; Stern, 1992). Jiadong and Xiaoyu both discussed this issue when they explained their own teaching activities. For example, Jiadong gave the following reason for why he thought one of his activities (Activity C below) was more like an exercise:

Through such a process, we could train other students in the pronunciation and proficiency of the word. That is the aim. (Jiadong, Post-observation 2)

In this way, Jiadong reasoned that this activity had a limited aim that focused on language form (pronunciation). However, Jiadong's belief appears inconsistent. When he explained why he thought another activity observed in his class (but not included in the activities described above) is akin to a task, he said:

The activity is relatively feasible. They only need to add a time phrase to make a complete sentence and connect the sentences to form a short passage to introduce their day. (Jiadong, Post-observation 1)

In his description, the mechanical practice of language forms, such as sentence completion, is a sign of a feasible activity. Due to his belief that being feasible is a key attribute of a task, he considered the activity more task-like, seeming to highlight the important status of language form in a task, contradicting his previous judgment of Activity C, which he criticized on account of its overemphasis on pronunciation.

Xiaoyu had a clearer understanding of this issue. She narrowed the scope to an activity's outcome. When comparing an exercise and a task, she stated:

For the form of the final outcome, unlike exercises, which students might just hand in to let the teacher check, the current activity required students to finish the report and give a presentation. (Xiaoyu, Post-observation 2)

Here, the outcome of an exercise is still restricted to linguistic form with a fixed standard answer, which is evaluated by teachers. As for tasks, there are various forms of achievement in which language use is a medium rather than an outcome. Task success depends more on whether the practical problem has been solved instead of the accuracy or fluency of the target language. Xiaoyu also suggested that to perform a task, learners not only need the language knowledge learned in the current class but also knowledge from previous classes or from other subjects. This reveals that Xiaoyu regards a task as an activity that requires integrated knowledge.

Based on Xiaoyu's justifications of her own activities, we can conclude that Xiaoyu had a basic but incomplete grasp of TBLT. She demonstrated some relevant theoretical knowledge that could be used to partially reveal the mechanisms behind TBLT, though this was not observable in her teaching. Conversely, Jiadong appeared to have an incomplete and sometimes inconsistent understanding of TBLT. Moreover, the teachers' understandings of TBLT did not often materialize in their observed classes.

### RQ3: Three main factors affecting TBLT implementation

This section is divided into three parts that represent factors that we identified in our analyses that appeared to affect the teachers' TBLT implementation: (a) classroom management, (b) preparation and teaching resources, and (c) tacit reluctance to implement TBLT.

#### *Classroom management*

Both Jiadong and Xiaoyu viewed classroom management as the biggest challenge in TBLT implementation. Another explanation could be traced back to the traditional Confucian norms of teaching and learning that regard learners as quiet recipients rather than noisy explorers (Hu, 2002). Tensions seemed to arise when the teachers' role as a facilitator in TBLT conflicted with prevailing teacher-centered cultural norms (see also Carless, 1999; Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996; Littlewood, 2007). As Xiaoyu stated:

In the daily learning atmosphere, if I introduce a task involving too many trivial things, students' will be easily distracted. But if I just involve exercises as a way to check their understanding of what I taught just now, it will be more effective to keep their attention. As a new teacher, I always require strict class discipline. I always try my best to make the children listen to me.

(Xiaoyu, Summative Interview)

Xiaoyu also expressed concern that students might become distracted in a communicative activity, which might cause ineffective learning (see Olney et al., 2015). This concern contrasts with researchers' claims that more interactive activities could improve student attention (e.g., Young et al., 2009). Cameron (2001) noted that managing group activities requires skillful teachers, especially with young learners. For novice teachers like Xiaoyu, controlled exercises may seem more manageable. Indeed, she attempted to guarantee learning by maintaining control in her classes. Xiaoyu's Activity D and E are both in the form of completing a conversation only requiring two students to take part, which illustrated Xiaoyu's worry expressed in a post-observation interview that the more students are assigned into one activity group, the more difficult it will be to monitor and control the class. Jiadong also expressed a similar concern when asked what problems he has encountered in implementing TBLT:

The biggest problem is that sometimes children are really uncontrollable, because children are very curious, and their attention is easily diverted by some external thing. (Jiadong, Summative Interview)

Jiadong used Activity C as an example and stated that although students appeared to understand the instructions, some still used gestures rather than their voices to suggest the place of the flashcard, rendering the activity's language-related purpose meaningless. In class, Jiadong seemed more tolerant of individual distractions or noise than Xiaoyu, but he still spent considerable time on classroom management, which reduced students' communication time. Butler's (2011) discussion of conceptual and classroom-level constraints is relevant, as well as Carless' (2002) finding that noise and behavioral concerns are common issues among young L2 learners, often making it difficult for teachers to carry out pedagogic tasks (see also Li, 1998). In the current study, both Jiadong and Xiaoyu believed behavioral challenges were the biggest obstacles to their implementation of TBLT, with Jiadong especially affected by his second-grade students' behavior compared to Xiaoyu's slightly older fifth-grade students.

### *Preparation and teaching resources*

Chinese English teachers have heavy workloads that might reduce the available time for lesson preparation (Cheng, 2010; Liu & Onwuegbuzie, 2012; Zhang & Yu, 2007). Moreover, TBLT sometimes demands more time and energy to create tasks and prepare materials (Carless, 2003). As a result, language teachers might prefer following the textbook rather than designing tasks by themselves, which implies that textbook use plays a major role in accounting for classroom practices. In the current study, this seemed accurate since 17 out of 20 observed activities in Jiadong's classes and 12 out of 21 activities in Xiaoyu's classes were from

the textbook. Since the National English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory and Senior High Schools was promulgated, numerous textbook series and corresponding teaching resources have been approved by the government (Butler, 2015). However, Jiadong and Xiaoyu both claimed that there still is not enough TBLT elements in their current textbooks and teaching resources, despite the top-down policy advocating for TBLT. Jiadong claimed that

the current teaching material has nothing to do with task-based language teaching. (Jiadong, Summative Interview)

His words seem extreme, but in the second-grade textbook, there are only three tasks that are in the form of an information gap. The organization of every unit is mainly based on PPP. Unlike the second-grade textbook, there is a more complex structure in each section of the fifth-grade book, where the focus shifts from speaking and listening to reading and writing. Section one and two mainly follow the Production-Presentation-Practice procedure, a variation on PPP (see Byrne, 1986; Harmer, 2015), while section three focuses on a short passage. To implement tasks, additional work is required. This might be one of the reasons why Xiaoyu used fewer tasks/task-like activities in her lessons than Jiadong.

Overall, as both Jiadong and Xiaoyu mentioned, the limited teaching resources, especially the lack of TBLT-friendly textbooks, and subsequent increased preparation time seemed to be major impediments to TBLT implementation. This contrasts with Carless's (2003) finding that all three of his participants held different views on the additional workload required by TBLT. Nevertheless, increasing teachers' workloads must be taken into account.

### *Teachers' tacit reluctance to implement TBLT*

Understanding TBLT is the ability to articulate its principles and an awareness of its implications for classroom practice. Previous studies (e.g., Carless, 2003; Li, 1998) have shown that teachers' incomplete understandings of TBLT could hinder its implementation. However, the current study found that the teachers' tacit reluctance to implement TBLT seemed to be more inhibitory than their understandings of the approach. We define tacit reluctance as a subtle resistance or hesitation towards engaging in TBLT, often without being overtly stated (cf. explicit reluctance). For example, in Activity A, even when presented with a near-standard task within the textbook and detailed teaching guidance, Jiadong still chose to focus on sentence drilling and grammatical rule instruction, indicating a tacit reluctance to implement TBLT, despite having the necessary knowledge and materials. Xiaoyu's tacit reluctance was similar. For instance, in Activity E, she had the opportunity to enable students to perform flexible conversations with clear information gaps, yet still adopted a highly controlled approach that did



not align with the principles of TBLT. Both Jiadong's and Xiaoyu's tacit reluctance may be linked to a lack of confidence in their mastery of TBLT implementation (see Chen & Wright, 2017), reasons surrounding classroom management (see above), or some other latent factor. However, this was difficult to pin down in their interview data despite both teachers being able to accurately estimate the degree of how task-like most of their own activities were in their interviews (see also Oliver & Bogachenko, 2018). Moreover, Xiaoyu could explain some deeper mechanisms behind TBLT yet used fewer tasks in her observed classes than Jiadong. In the background interview, Xiaoyu acknowledged the current official policy regarding the use of tasks to cultivate students' integrated English skills, while still admitting that:

As a new teacher, maybe now I still can't involve these [innovative teaching theories and approaches] into my teaching. I really can't help students improve their core competence in English. (Xiaoyu, Background Interview)

Her self-negation of her ability to implement relatively advanced teaching theory and approaches such as TBLT might account for the reason why she rarely brings TBLT into her classes. In the post-observation and summative interviews, Xiaoyu repeatedly used hedges and cautioned that she was unsure about her own understanding. When asked about whether TBLT helped benefit her teaching, she said that

Because I have not received specific training about it, the concept is completely vague to me. I hope that through communicating with you, I can understand how to use it. And then I want to use it in my daily teaching. (Xiaoyu, Summative Interview)

Xiaoyu mentioned that if she could understand TBLT better, she would use it more, and viewed specific training as a prerequisite for a good grasp of TBLT. Unfortunately, she did not realize she had already developed accurate knowledge of its principles. It is clear that teacher education in China could be beneficial for both Jiadong and Xiaoyu to overcome their tacit reluctance towards implementing TBLT and, thus, their ability to implement it successfully (see also Chen & Wright, 2017; Zheng & Borg, 2014). Erlam (2016) suggests a client-centered approach in which TBLT practitioners are encouraged to adjust the new practices to their realistic conditions and environment, rather than adopt them directly, which could boost teachers' confidence to implement the approach. As EFL curriculum reform continues in China, it will be beneficial to target the reasons behind teachers' tacit reluctance, whether it stems from a lack of confidence or some other reason. In the current study, this tacit reluctance appeared to be more inhibitory in the process of TBLT implementation than simply a lack of knowledge of the approach.

## Concluding discussion

This study used an in-depth, qualitative case study design consisting of semi-structured interviews and classroom observations to investigate the actual implementation of TBLT in a public primary school in Chongqing, China. It focused on two EFL teachers' perceptions and practices 20+ years after nationwide curriculum reforms advocated for the use of TBLT. The findings illustrated how both teachers had basic but incomplete understandings of TBLT. Initially, this seemed to account for the few tasks/task-like activities observed in their classes. However, further analyses identified three additional factors affecting TBLT implementation: (a) classroom management issues; (b) the absence of appropriate teaching resources, which forces teachers to spend considerably more time on lesson preparation if they implement TBLT; and (c) the teachers' tacit reluctance to implement TBLT, which may stem from a lack of confidence in their own understandings of the approach or other latent factors.

Based on these findings, there are important implications for teachers, teacher educators, and policy makers. Namely, teachers need more than fundamental knowledge of TBLT or to know that the nationwide curriculum calls for it. Teachers need support in identifying sources of tacit reluctance and guidance for working through it. Furthermore, TBLT-friendly textbooks are sorely needed to support busy teachers who want to implement TBLT but may be unable to devote additional time to lesson preparation. Ideally, textbooks for a context in which TBLT is promoted would be equipped with chapter content centered on activities that meet the four criteria of a task used in this study, clear suggestions for task implementation, auxiliary audio-visual resources, and supportive online video content for teachers' professional development. Professional development could be aimed at equipping teachers with the skills to make simple adaptations to lessons to strengthen their alignment with the unique needs of teachers in different contexts.

In general, we believe that support for teachers would be most effective in the form of participant-centered, data-driven teacher development (Borg, 1998) that serves as reflective practice (Farrell, 2015). This could begin in pre-service teacher education programs through awareness-raising activities and basic training on how to undertake reflective analyses of classroom practices such as those in the current study (see also Zheng & Borg, 2014). With in-service teachers, similar training could be provided with more attention paid to adjusting general TBLT recommendations to the local context (see Chen & Wright, 2017). Adjustments could be made with respect to in-service teachers' reflections on their experiences in their own contexts so that support is seen as integrated rather than imposed

by stakeholders unfamiliar or disassociated with on-the-ground issues and constraints.



Furthermore, both teachers in the current study responded well to observational feedback and reported resonating with the discussions they had regarding the analyses. As such, if similar studies are conducted with outside researchers, it is important for them to be familiar with the local context and engage teachers in dialogic sessions that serve to deepen the teachers' understandings of the research and implications as opposed to treating them as subjects from which data can be extracted. In the current study, both teachers had multiple opportunities to reflect on and add to the interviews as ongoing discussions. They also participated in transcript-checking and analysis-sharing sessions. Students' perceptions and, of course, the effectiveness of TBLT in relation to language development are also topics for future research.

This study is not without limitations. With only four observed classes per teacher, our interpretations of their pedagogical practices were limited. We also relied on self-report data in the form of interviews with just two teachers' who may have felt under pressure from being recorded. This is the nature of case study research, though, and we took every precaution to ensure the teachers were comfortable and could benefit from the participating. Furthermore, this study was conducted in an education-pilot school that is viewed as a leader of the reform of primary education in southwest China. Thus, we expected it to showcase TBLT innovation in practice (as per the nationwide policy). What we found, however, was that similar issues were present that we would expect to see in less-well-off schools, despite Chongqing itself being considered a second-tier city in China. Thus, while the findings are not generalizable, the depth of our analysis and detailed reporting aid in the potential for the findings to be transferable to other primary schools across China and elsewhere.

## Funding

Open Access publication of this article was funded through a Transformative Agreement with University College London.

## References


-  An, J., & Thomas, N. (2021). Students' beliefs about the role of interaction for science learning and language learning in EMI science classes: Evidence from high schools in China. *Linguistics and Education*, 65, 100972.
-  Borg, S. (1998). Data-based teacher development. *ELT Journal*, 52, 273–281.


- doi Bruton, A. (2005). Task-based language teaching: For the state secondary FL classroom? *Language Learning Journal*, 31(1), 55–68.
- doi Bryfonski, L. (2021). From task-based training to task-based instruction: Novice language teachers' experiences and perspectives. *Language Teaching Research*.
- doi Butler, Y. (2011). The implementation of communicative and Task-Based Language Teaching in the Asia-Pacific region. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 31, 36–57.
- doi Butler, Y. (2015). English language education among young learners in East Asia: A review of current research (2004–2014). *Language Teaching*, 48(3), 303–342.
- Bygate, M., Skehan, P., & Swain, M. (Eds.). (2001). *Researching pedagogic tasks: Second language learning, teaching and testing*. Longman.
- Byrne, D. (1986). *Teaching oral English* (new ed.). Longman.
- doi Byrnes, H. (2015). Linking 'tasks' and curricular thinking: An affirmation of the TBLT educational agenda. In M. Bygate (Ed.), *Domains and directions in the development of TBLT* (pp. 193–224). John Benjamins.
- doi Cameron, L. (2001). *Teaching languages to young learners*. Cambridge University Press.
- Candlin, C. (1987). Towards task-based language learning. In C. Candlin & D. Murphy (Eds.), *Language learning tasks* (pp. 5–22). London: Prentice Hall.
- doi Carless, D. (1999). Factors affecting classroom implementation: Task-based curriculum renewal in Hong Kong. *International Journal of Educational Reform*, 8(4), 374–382.
- doi Carless, D. (2002). Implementing task-based learning with young learners. *ELT Journal*, 56(4), 389–396.
- doi Carless, D. (2003). Factors in the implementation of task-based teaching in primary schools. *System*, 31(4), 485–500.
- doi Carless, D. (2004). Issues in teachers' re-interpretation of a task-based innovation in primary schools. *TESOL Quarterly*, 38(4), 639–662.
- doi Carless, D. (2007). The suitability of task-based approaches for secondary schools: Perspectives from Hong Kong. *System*, 35(4), 595–608.
- Carless, D. (2009). Revisiting the TBLT versus P-P-P debate: Voices from Hong Kong. *Asian Journal of English Language Teaching*, 19, 49–66.
- doi Chen, Q., & Wright, C. (2017). Contextualization and authenticity in TBLT: Voices from Chinese classrooms. *Language Teaching Research*, 21(4), 517–538.
- doi Cheng, V.M.Y. (2010). Tensions and dilemmas of teachers in creativity reform in a Chinese context. *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, 5(3), 120–137.
- doi Ciornei, S.I., & Dina, T.A. (2015). Authentic texts in teaching English. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 180, 274–279.
- Deng, C., & Carless, D.R. (2009). The communicativeness of activities in a task-based innovation in Guangdong, China. *Asian Journal of English Language Teaching*, 19, 113–134.
- doi Deng, C., & Carless, D.R. (2010). Examination preparation or effective teaching: Conflicting priorities in the implementation of a pedagogic innovation. *Language Assessment Quarterly*, 7(4), 285–302.
- doi Doughty, C., & Pica, T. (1986). "Information gap" tasks: Do they facilitate second language acquisition? *TESOL Quarterly*, 20, 305–325.
- Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford University Press.


- Ellis, R. (2010). Second language acquisition and language teaching materials. In N. Harwood (Ed.), *English language teaching materials: Theory and practice* (pp. 33–57). Cambridge University Press.
- Ellis, R. (2013). Task-based language teaching: responding to the critics. *University of Sydney Papers in TESOL*, 8, 1–27.
- [doi](#) Ellis, R. (2017). Task-based language teaching. In S. Loewen & M. Sato (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of instructed second language acquisition* (pp. 108–125). Routledge.
- [doi](#) Ellis, R. (2021). Options in a task-based language-teaching curriculum: An educational perspective. *TASK: Journal on Task-Based Language Teaching and Learning*, 1(1), 11–46.
- Ellis, R., & Shintani, N. (2014). *Exploring language pedagogy through second language acquisition research*. Routledge.
- [doi](#) Erlam, R. (2016). 'I'm still not sure what a task is': Teachers designing language tasks. *Language Teaching Research*, 20, 279–299.
- Farrell, T.S. (2015). *Reflective language teaching: From research to practice*. Bloomsbury.
- [doi](#) González-Lloret, M., & Ortega, L. (Eds.). (2014). *Technology-mediated TBLT: Researching technology and tasks*. John Benjamins.
- Harmer, J. (2015). *The practice of English language teaching* (5th ed). Pearson Education.
- Howatt, A. P.R. (1984). *A history of English language teaching*. Oxford University Press.
- [doi](#) Hu, G. W. (2002). Potential cultural resistance to pedagogical imports: The case of CLT in China. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 15(2), 93–105.
- [doi](#) Hu, G. W. (2005a). Contextual influences on instructional practices: A Chinese case for an ecological approach to ELT. *TESOL Quarterly*, 39(4), 635–660.
- [doi](#) Hu, G. W. (2005b). English language education in China: Policies, progress, and problems. *Language Policy*, 4(1), 5–24.
- [doi](#) Jin, L., & Cortazzi, M. (2002). English language teaching in China: A bridge to the future. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 22(2), 53–64.
- [doi](#) Kessler, M., Solheim, I., & Zhao, M. (2021). Can task-based language teaching be “authentic” in foreign language contexts? Exploring the case of China. *TESOL Journal*, 12(1), e00534.
- [doi](#) Kramsch, C., & Sullivan, P. (1996). Appropriate pedagogy. *ELT Journal*, 50(3), 199–212.
- [doi](#) Li, D. (1998). “It’s always more difficult than you plan and imagine”: Teachers’ perceived difficulties in introducing the communicative approach in South Korea. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32(4), 677–703.
- [doi](#) Littlewood, W. (2004). The task-based approach: Some questions and suggestions. *ELT Journal*, 58(4), 319–326.
- [doi](#) Littlewood, W. (2007). Communicative and task-based language teaching in East Asian classrooms. *Language Teaching*, 40(2), 243–249.
- Littlewood, W. (2011). Communicative language teaching: An expanding concept for a changing world. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning* (Vol. 2, pp. 541–557). Routledge.
- [doi](#) Liu, S., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2012). Chinese teachers’ work stress and their turnover intention. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 53, 160–170.
- [doi](#) Loewen, S., & Sato, M. (2021). Exploring the relationship between TBLT and ISLA. *TASK: Journal on Task-Based Language Teaching and Learning*, 1(1), 47–70.


- Long, M. (2015). *Second language acquisition and task-based language teaching*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- [doi](#) Mackey, A., & Gass, S. (2015). *Second language research: Methodology and design*. Routledge.
- Ministry of Education. (2001). *National English curriculum standards for nine-year compulsory education and senior high school education*. People's Education Press.
- Ministry of Education. (2011). *National English curriculum standards for nine-year compulsory education and senior high school education*. People's Education Press.
- [doi](#) Oliver, R., & Bogachenko, T. (2018). Teacher perceptions and use of tasks in school. In V. Samuda, K. Van den Branden, & M. Bygate (Eds.), *TBLT as a Researched Pedagogy*. (pp. 72–95). John Benjamins.
- Olney, A., Risko, E. F., D'Mello, S. K., & Graesser, A. C. (2015). Attention in educational contexts: The role of the learning task in guiding attention. In J. Fawcett, E. F. Risko, & A. Kingstone (Eds.), *The handbook of attention* (pp. 623–642). The MIT Press.
- [doi](#) Pun, J., Thomas, N., & Bowen, N. E. J. A. (2022). Questioning the sustainability of English-medium instruction policy in science classrooms: Teachers' and students' experiences at a Hong Kong secondary school. *Sustainability*, 14(2), 2168.
- Rose, H., McKinley, J., & Briggs Baffoe-Djan, J. (2020). *Data collection research methods in applied linguistics*. Bloomsbury.
- [doi](#) Samuda, V., & Bygate, M. (2008). *Tasks in second language learning*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Selvi, A. F. (2020). Qualitative content analysis. In J. McKinley & H. Rose (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of research methods in applied linguistics* (pp. 440–452). Routledge.
- Skehan, P. (1998). *A cognitive approach to language learning*. Oxford University Press.
- [doi](#) Skehan, P. (2003). Task based instruction. *Language Teaching*, 36(1), 1–14.
- Solares-Altamirano, M. (2020). Teachers' responses to an online course on task-based language teaching in Mexico. In C. Lambert & R. Oliver (Eds.), *Using tasks in second language teaching: Practice in diverse contexts* (pp. 193–214). Multilingual Matters.
- Spada, N. (2007). Communicative language teaching: Current status and future prospects. In J. Cummins & C. Davis (Eds.), *The international handbook of English* (pp. 271–288). Springer.
- Stern, J. (1992). *Task's role in learning* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- [doi](#) Swan, M. (2005). Legislation by hypothesis: The case of task-based instruction. *Applied Linguistics*, 26(3), 376–401.
- [doi](#) Thomas, N., & Brereton, P. (2019). Practitioners respond to Michael Swan's 'Applied linguistics: A consumer's view'. *Language Teaching*, 52(2), 275–278.
- Thornbury, S. (1999). *How to teach grammar*. Pearson Education.
- [doi](#) Van den Branden, K., & Van Gorp, K. (2021). Introducing TASK: Editors' preface to the first edition of TASK. *TASK: Journal on Task-Based Language Teaching and Learning*, 1(1), 1–10.
- [doi](#) Wang, Q. (2007). The National Curriculum changes and their effects on English language teaching in the People's Republic of China. In J. Cummins & C. Davison (Eds.), *International handbook of English language teaching* (pp. 87–105). Springer Science & Business.
- Widdowson, H. G. (2003). *Defining issues in English language teaching*. Oxford University Press.


Willis, J. (1996). *A framework for task-based learning*. Longman.


 Young, M. S., Robinson, S., & Alberts, P. (2009). Students pay attention! Combating the vigilance decrement to improve learning during lectures. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 10(1), 44–55.

 Zhang, Y. E. (2005). The implementation of the task-based approach in primary school English language teaching in mainland China (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China.

 Zhang, Y., & Yu, Y. (2007). Causes for burnout among secondary and elementary school teachers and preventive strategies. *Chinese Education & Society*, 40(5), 78–85.

 Zheng, X., & Adamson, B. (2003). The pedagogy of a secondary school teacher of English in the People's Republic of China: Changing the stereotypes. *REL C Journal*, 34, 323–337.

 Zheng, X., & Borg, S. (2014). Task-based learning and teaching in China: Secondary school teachers' beliefs and practices. *Language Teaching Research*, 18(2), 205–221.


 Zheng, X., & Davison, C. (2008). *Changing pedagogy: Analyzing ELT teachers in China*. Bloomsbury.

## Address for correspondence

Nathan Thomas  
Institute of Education  
University College London  
20 Bedford Way  
London, WC1H 0AL  
United Kingdom

nathan-thomas@ucl.ac.uk

nathan.thomas.19@ucl.ac.uk

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3245-8572>

## Co-author information

Hongyu Li  
Institute of Education  
University College London  
hongyu.li.20@alumni.ucl.ac.uk

## Publication history

Date received: 4 October 2022

Date revised: 23 September 2023

Date accepted: 11 October 2023