An Empirical Study on the Effects of Grammar-Translation Method and Task-Based Language Teaching on Chinese College Students' Reading Comprehension

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Abstract

Developing reading comprehension ability is an important research aspect in the acquisition of a foreign language. The present study focuses on the effects of grammar-translation method (GTM) and task-based language teaching (TBLT) on Chinese college students' reading comprehension. Two classes of students taught by the teacher researcher in China West Normal University participated in the current study with GTM class as the control group and TBLT class as the experimental group. The subjects in the control group were taught through GTM with a bottom-up model and those in the experimental group exposed to TBLT with the three-stage model proposed by Willis (1996). The two groups of subjects received the treatment of a pre-test, reading instruction by using the two teaching methods for twelve weeks and a post-test. The subjects were first given a pre-test (the reading section of a College English Test-Band 4) in order to ensure that they were homogeneous regarding reading comprehension at the outset. Then, reading comprehension was taught to the subjects in the two classes by using the two different teaching methods. Independent Samples T-test and Paired Sample T-test were used to analyze the collected data. The data analysis using Paired Sample T-test showed that both classes improved their reading comprehension. The data analysis using Independent Samples T-test revealed that the subjects in TBLT class outperformed those in GTM class in the post-test, which means that TBLT has been more effective than GTM in teaching reading comprehension to Chinese college students. This study can have pedagogical implications for teachers and researchers in teaching reading to college students in China.

Key words: grammar-translation method, task-based language teaching, reading comprehension.

1. Introduction

Reading is defined as "the process of receiving and interpreting information encoded in language form via the medium of print" (Urquhart & Weir, 1998:22). Scholars and language teachers now generally hold that reading is a social, cognitive and interactive process (Aebersold & Field, 2006; Day & Bamfold, 1998; Urquhart & Weir, 1998; Wallace, 2005), during which the reader interacts with the text and the text writer by bringing with his or her own personal and social experience and resources to a reading task. So reading is a complex process and is seen as an interactive process between a reader and a text in which the reader interacts dynamically with the text as the reader tries to elicit the meaning from the printed text. In English as a foreign language (EFL) context, people believe that reading comprehension is the central means for obtaining new information and it is the most important language skill needed for language learners' success. People often recognize the importance and position of reading comprehension skill in Chinese academic context, like in other EFL contexts, in a way that it is often regarded as the main goal of English language learning. Therefore, it has attracted keen attention of English language teaching (ELT) teachers and researchers who are always concerned with finding more effective ways to teach foreign language learners' reading comprehension.

For quite a long time, language teaching in China was dominated by theories and practices that put grammar in the center of language learning by using the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM). The main characteristics of GTM include explicit teaching of grammatical rules, memorization of vocabulary lists, and translation of passages from one language to the other, which produced students with extensive knowledge of grammatical rules but little communicative competence. Chen (2006) points out that the traditional English reading teaching in China, influenced and guided by GTM, mainly focused on language points and the literal meanings of language forms. Consequently, students taught by GTM in the reading class tended to pay much attention to sentence structures, grammatical points, and new words in the texts they were reading. In the last two decades, theories and practices of reading have changed from seeing reading as primarily a receptive process from text to reader to an interactive process between the reader and the text (cf., Adams, 1990; Samuels, 1994; Stanovich, 1992). Approaches to the teaching of foreign language reading have attempted to reflect this development through interactive exercises and tasks. The task-based language teaching (TBLT), which develops from and is therefore, a realization form of communicative language teaching, becomes a natural candidate for that call of changes in teaching methods in terms of its characteristics.

2. Defining task and a TBLT framework to teaching reading

As the central component of TBLT, the definition of task has received much attention in the literature (e.g. Bygate, 2000; Candlin, 1987; Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 1998). Skehan (1998) defines tasks using four criteria: Meaning is primary, it works toward a goal, it is outcome-evaluated, and it is related to the world outside the classroom. These criteria are reflected by what Willis (1996: 28) has defined the term that task as those "activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose in order to achieve an outcome".

Lightbown and Spada (2006) define task-based instruction as "instruction in which classroom activities are tasks similar to those learners might engage in outside the second or foreign language classroom". Therefore,

TBLT refers to an approach based on the use of tasks as the core unit of planning and instruction in language teaching, which focuses on the use of authentic language and on asking students to do meaningful tasks using the target language. Assessment is primarily based on task outcome rather than on accuracy of language forms. This makes task-based teaching method especially popular for developing target language fluency and student confidence. Nunan (1991) outlines five characteristics of a task-based approach to language learning: 1) an emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language; 2) the introduction of authentic texts (teaching materials) into the learning situation; 3) the provision of opportunities for learners to focus not only on language, but also on the learning process itself; 4) an enhancement of the learner's own personal experience as important contributing elements to classroom learning; and 5) an attempt to link classroom language learning with language activities outside the classroom. Willis (1996: 101) claims that "within the TBLT framework, tasks and texts combine to give students a rich exposure to language and also opportunities to use it themselves".

Ellis (2006) provides a TBLT framework that can be used in teaching practice and this framework mainly consists of three main phases. The first phase is the "pre-task" that includes the various activities that teachers and students can undertake before beginning the task. Some of these activities may be asking and answering questions or reading a passage related to the topic, so that learners can be exposed to real language environment. The second phase, i.e. task cycle or "during-task", takes place when the task is selected and learners engage in fulfilling the goals of the task mainly by the form of report in small groups. The final phase is "post-task" and involves mainly language focus, that is to say, language points are mainly dealt with in this phase. Only the "during-task" phase is obligatory in TBLT. Options selected from the "pre-task" or post-task" phases are non-obligatory, but can acts as a crucial role in ensuring that the task performance is maximally effective for language development for language learners.

3. Statement of the problems

Reading course receives a great deal of attention and emphasis among the EFL teachers and learners, especially at the tertiary level in China now. Richards and Rodgers (2001) claim that when it comes to the reading comprehension in a foreign language, the ample research shows it is gaining increasing importance. Considering the problems with GTM applied in traditional college English reading class as well as the importance of reading comprehension for language learners, the present study aims to investigate whether GTM and TBLT can improve Chinese college students' reading comprehension by teaching them with the two methods for a certain period of time; if so, which of the two methods can be more effective in teaching reading comprehension.

4. Research design

4.1 Research questions

This study tries to answer the following three research questions:

1). Does teaching reading comprehension through GTM have a significant effect on Chinese college students' reading comprehension?

2). Does teaching reading comprehension through TBLT have a significant effect on Chinese college students' reading comprehension?

3). Which method is more effective to teach Chinese college students' reading comprehension, GTM or TBLT?

4.2 Participants and treatment of the study

Two classes of students taught by the teacher researcher in China West Normal University were chosen for the current study. In GTM class with 48 students, the teacher introduced the new words and phrases, and students began to translate the passages into Chinese and answer the traditional comprehension questions and do exercises that followed. Much time was spent on explaining important words, difficult sentences and grammar points. In TBLT class with 55 students, the same reading passages were redesigned by the researcher based on Ellis's three-staged task-based framework. Thus, for them the class time was divided into three phases, namely, pre-task, task cycle and post-task. In pre-task phase, the researcher tried to activate the students' prior knowledge related to the reading passage and motivated them to read the passage. In task-cycle phase, the students were engaged in completing different kinds of tasks, and in post-task phase, they gave a report through, for instance, repeating the tasks and practicing some formal and linguistic features of the text.

4.3 Procedure and data sets

The present study experienced three stages including a pre-test, treatment and a post-test. Pre-test data and post-test data were collected. It began from early September 2015 and ended in January 2016. Four reading passages were selected from the reading comprehension part in College English Test-Band 4 (CET-4) for the pre-test and post-test each time. CET-4 is a very standard and authoritative English proficiency test designed especially for college students and the test results can guarantee the validity and reliability in this way. The total score for a CET-4 is 710 and the reading comprehension part is 290.The data obtained in the pre-test and post-post were analyzed through SPSS. 19.

4.3.1 Pre-test data

First, a pre-test was carried out in early September, 2015 before the study was carried out in order to see if the control group and the experimental group were homogeneous in reading comprehension. Tests were scored according to answers offered by CET-4. The results showed that they were not significantly different in terms proficiency level of reading comprehension.

4.3.2 Treatment procedure

After the pre-test, GTM was applied to control group while TBLT was applied to experimental group by using the same teaching materials. Finally in January 2016, each group received a post-test.

The treatment procedure of the present study is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: The treatment procedure of the present study

Group	Test 1	Treatment	Test 2	N
Control group	Pre-test	GTM	Post-test	48
Experimental group	Pre-test	TBLT	Post-test	55

4.3.3 Post-test data

Post-test was given to both the experimental group and the control group in January 2016. Post-test determines the degree of changes in the dependent variable, namely, students' reading comprehension scores, in comparison with the pre-test.

5. Results and discussion

5.1 *Pre-test results for the two groups to check the homogeneity*

The reading comprehension part of the ECT-4 examination paper in June 2015 was given to both the control and the experimental groups as a pre-test in order to check the homogeneity of their reading comprehension at the very beginning of the study. Independent Samples T-test was used to analyze the data collected and the statistics results were shown in Table 2 and 3 below.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of pre-test by using Independent Samples T-test

Post-test	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experi.	55	132.5582	9.2764	2.8838
Cont.	48	128.9811	8.6552	3.0188

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of pre-test by using Independent Samples T-test

	Levene's Test for Equaliy of variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-detailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Pretest Equal variences Assumed	.004	.947	-.426	58	.671	3.5771	2.3478
Equal variances not assumed			-.426	57.998	.671	3.5771	2.3478

As the results of table 2 shows, the mean scores of the two groups are very close to each other (132.5582 and 128.9811). According to Table 3, as the P-value (.67) is bigger than the standard error (0.05), therefore, the two groups were homogeneous and there was no significant difference between the two groups in terms of their reading comprehension before the study was carried out.

5.2 *Pre-test and post-test results for the two classes*

This part is to answer the first and the second research questions.

After the two different treatments were given to the control and experimental groups of the study, the two groups received a reading comprehension post-test. In order to find if teaching reading through each of the two methods had any improvements on the subjects, their scores on both pre-test and post-test were compared for each group by using Paired Sample T-test.

5.2.1 Pre-test and post-test results for GTM class

The descriptive statistics of pre-test and post-test results for the performances of the control group by using a Paired Sample T-test is given in table 4 below. It can be found out that the mean score for the pre-test is 128.9811 with a standard deviation of 8.6552, but the mean score for the post-test is158.3822 with a standard deviation of 7.9947. Therefore, an observed difference of the control group between the performances from the pre-test to the post-test can be noticed. One more question to answer is if such a difference is statistically significant or not?

Table 4: Descriptive statistics of pre-test and post-test results for GTM class using Paired Sample T-test

GTM	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	Sig.
Pre-test	48	128.9811	8.6552	3.0188	6.76*	.000
Pots-test	48	158.3822	7.9947	3.3361		

Note: *P<.05

The obtained value for T with 29 degrees of freedom at p<.05 level of significance is 6.76 as shown in Table 4. Because this obtained value is greater than the critical value, therefore, such a difference between the performances of the GTM group on the post-test and on the pre-test is statistically significant. This shows that the control group's reading comprehension has improved due to the method GTM applied to teach reading comprehension.

5.2.2 Pre-test and post-test results for TBLT class

The descriptive statistics of pre-test and post-test results for the performances of the experimental group by using a Paired Sample T-test is given in table 5 below. It can also be found out that the mean score for the pre-test is 132.5582 with a standard deviation of 9.2764, but the mean score for the post-test is 175.5525 with a standard deviation of 8.2265. Therefore, an observed difference of the experimental group between the performances from the pre-test to the post-test can be seen. What's more, the obtained value for T is 3.16 (Sig.004, p<.05). Consequently, it is effective to use TBLT to teach Chinese college students' reading comprehension and students' reading ability has improved greatly because of this teaching method.

Table 5: Descriptive statistics of pre-test and post-test results for TBLT class using Paired Sample T-test

TBLT	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	Sig.
Pre-test	55	132.5582	9.2764	2.8838	3.16*	.004
Pots-test	55	175.5525	8.2265	3.6578		

Note: *P<.05

5.3 Post-test results for the two groups

The reading comprehension part of the ECT-4 examination paper in December 2015 was given to both the control and the experimental groups as a post-test. In order to answer the third research question, the post-test scores for the two groups were compared using Independent Samples T-test. The descriptive statistics for performances of the two groups in the post-test are shown in Table 6 and 7 below. In the post-test, the mean score for the TBLT group is 175.5525 while the mean score for the GTM group is 158.3822. Therefore, there is an observed difference of Mean scores between the performances of the two groups. Table 7 indicates that the P-value (.000) is bigger than the standard error (0.05), which means that there is a significant difference between the control and the experimental groups' performances in the posttest. Therefore, TBLT group outperformed GTM group in the post-test. Accordingly, it can be concluded that TBLT has been more effective than GTM in teaching reading comprehension to Chinese college students.

Table 6: Descriptive data of post-test by using Independent Samples T-test

Post-test	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experi.	55	175.5525	8.2265	3.6578
Cont.	48	158.3822	7.9947	3.3361

Table 7: Descriptive data of post-test by using Independent Samples T-test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-detailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Post-test Equal variances assumed	.293	.59	5.926	58	.000	17.1703	1.9855
Equal variances not assumed			5.926	57.998	.000	17.1703	1.9855

6. Conclusions and implications

The present study experienced the procedure of a pre-test, treatment and a post-test. The pre-test primarily aimed at measuring students' initial level of the English language reading comprehension and checking homogeneity. Pre-test scores showed that there were no statistically significant differences between the experimental group (students taught by the TBLT method) and the control group (students taught by the GTM method) suggesting that the two groups' initial level of the English language reading comprehension before applying the treatment was about the same. The finding of equivalence between the control and treatment groups prior to the application of the experiment validates attributing any changes that occur on

the students' reading comprehension achievement, namely, the post-test scores, to the effect of the two different teaching methods, namely, TBLT and GTM, under similar teaching conditions. The post-test aimed at testing students' changes in reading comprehension achievement over time after using the two methods of teaching (TBLT vs. GTM), especially when known that similar learning conditions were ensured for both of the experimental and control groups.

According to the results of the study, the answers for the first and the second research questions are that TBLT and GTM were two effective teaching methods in reading and they did improve Chinese college students' reading comprehension over a certain period of time. For the third research question, the results obtained from post-test data suggest that students taught by TBLT outperformed those by GTM in reading comprehension; therefore, TBLT is more effective than GTM in teaching reading comprehension to Chinese college students.

This study proves the effectiveness of GTM which centers on grammar in English language teaching. Although GTM is receiving more and more criticisms nowadays in academic field, it is still a very effective teaching method for teaching especially those students in EFL contexts. Chinese scholars Zhu & Zhang (2003) argue that GTM can be quite effective in helping Chinese people to learn from the Western people and improving students' abilities to use English language. According to them, it is sometimes very necessary and even more effective to use GTM because there can be no teaching methods that fit all conditions.

This study also indicates that TBLT can be more effective in reading comprehension teaching. Such a conclusion can be justified by considering the characteristics about the nature of TBLT. Ogilvie and Dunn (2010) claim that TBLT represents innovation at both a philosophical and methodological level. At the philosophical level, TBLT views second language acquisition as a process not directly influenced by formal instruction but which is fostered through the meaningful use of language. At the methodological level, TBLT invites students to act as language users rather than learners, with the explicit analysis of language structures and forms emerging from difficulties experienced during the completion of tasks.

First, unlike GTM, TBLT mainly focused on meaning. TBLT encourages the learner to understand the written text with an unconscious and peripheral focus on the form of the language. According to Ellis (2003), such meaningfulness in TBLT provides an authentic, purposeful and intentional background for comprehending and using language which is encouraging for those EFL learners.

Secondly, focus on meaning doesn't mean that there is no place for grammar in TBLT. People also realize and accept the importance of grammar in TBLT as suggested in the final phase of Ellis's three-staged task-based framework. TBLT can help students know far more language through activities (tasks) than what they exhibit in response to classroom drills. Teaching students via TBLT helps them increase their knowledge of advanced grammatical rules. The application of TBLT has motivated students, improved their speaking skills and helped them use grammar and pronunciation correctly (Aljarf, 2007). TBLT in this way can promote a full development of language abilities for learners.

Thirdly, in TBLT class, learners are actively involved in the learning process during which the teacher is not the source of knowledge in classroom, but a participant who facilitates students' learning by providing feedback or giving advice. It is of importance that teachers understand that their primary job in classroom is not to make students learn but help them learn. Learning should not be considered an outcome package to obtain but a process run through, which is well illustrated by the principles of TBLT. Instead, in GTM class,

learners are usually passive receptors of language knowledge transmitted to them by the teachers. It is very easy for language learners to lose their interest in learning a language.

Last but not least, the design of TBLT framework with three stages in a class is consistent with the implications of Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the Zone Proximal Development (ZPD). In essence, ZPD refers to what the learner can do without the help of others and what the learner cannot do alone, but with the help of others. TBLT is mostly carried out in the form of small groups in the class with the language learners' active involvement. There could be more knowledgeable peers in the groups or learners can receive the teacher's timely feedback when they are performing their tasks during the report stage. GTM provides less chance for language learners to do so.

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