Exploring Task-Based Curriculum Development in a Blended-Learning Conversational Chinese Program

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ABSTRACT

This paper brings task-based language teaching (TBLT) curriculum development principles into the blended learning context, presenting processes and outcomes from a project to develop a task-based thematic unit—asking and giving directions—in a hybrid web-based university-level class focused on listening and speaking skills in Mandarin Chinese. The authors follow the principled task-based curriculum design phases informed by Long and Crookes (1993) and Long and Norris (2000). Unit-based development made the workload manageable and provided an important experimental space for the instructors to best align task-based principles with online language instruction. First, the context of the project and its theoretical TBLT curriculum development framework are established. The distinct processes of needs analysis, materials development, task sequencing and teaching methods, and assessment methods adopted to meet the special requirements of the class are presented, along with a preliminary formative and summative evaluation of the teaching model. The conclusion discusses the theoretical and practical implications of the project.

Keywords: Blended Learning, CALL, Curriculum Development, Discourse Analysis, Mandarin Chinese, Needs Analysis, Task-Based Language Teaching, Thematic Module

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the processes and outcomes of an ongoing task-based language teaching (TBLT) curriculum development project that focused on the development of one thematic unit: asking and giving directions. This project was implemented in a conversational Chinese program at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa and it was delivered in a blended learning format combining asynchronous web-based and face-to-face elements. First, the context of the project and its theoretical TBLT curriculum development framework are established. Then the distinct processes of needs analysis, materials development, task sequencing and teaching methods adopted to meet the special requirements of the class are presented, along with a preliminary evaluation of our teaching model. The conclusion discusses the theoretical and practical implications of the project.

DOI: 10.4018/jvple.2011010102
THE CONTEXT OF THE PROJECT

In the Fall 2005 academic semester, the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures (EALL) at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa (UHM) started offering Conversational Mandarin classes in a blended learning format (web + live meetings): Chinese 111 (CHN 111) and Chinese 112 (CHN 112) for the beginning level, and Chinese 211 (CHN 211) and Chinese 212 (CHN 212) for the intermediate level. These blended-learning conversational classes required students’ daily asynchronous online participation, as well as attendance at a once-a-week 50-minute face-to-face group tutoring session (for a discussion of blended learning, see Bonk & Graham, 2006). The majority of the students were UHM undergraduate students; there were also several graduate students and UHM faculty members. By Fall 2006, CHN 111 had fifteen students, double the size of the previous cohort (7 students); in Spring 2007, CHN 112 had eleven students.

The TBLT curriculum development project was motivated by a formative utilization-focused evaluation that was carried out by the authors in their capacity as instructors of CHN 111 and 112 in the Spring 2006 semester. The results showed that students were satisfied overall with various aspects of the program: the instructors, the material, the online instruction and exercises, and the tutoring sessions. However, several concerns emerged from the students’ feedback and the instructors’ observations, including: (1) not all thematic topics covered in the textbook were perceived as useful by the students; (2) students seemed to have a greater desire to develop fluency in listening and speaking than to develop accuracy in grammar; (3) students expressed a strong need to practice conversational abilities to deal with real-life situations (Hill & Tschudi, 2008). The instructors’ strategy for meeting students’ expressed language learning and development needs was to embark on TBLT curriculum development, because it provides language teaching principles that are based on second language acquisition theories and empirical evidence and it has systematic principles for program development.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF TBLT CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT PRINCIPLES

TBLT is a principled language teaching, learning, and program development approach. It utilizes an analytical syllabus, in which learners are presented with authentic input from a real-world task (e.g., purchasing a ticket, finding directions, etc.) as a whole. The learners need to analyze the language themselves by connecting meaning, form, and context, and produce language similar to the input in a simulated authentic context. The learning process is facilitated by pedagogical tasks that are sequenced by task complexity, not by linguistic criteria (Long & Crookes, 1993). TBLT has been actively proposed due to the relative ineffectiveness of the traditional synthetic syllabus, or Type A syllabus, in which language forms are taught piecemeal to students in the belief that they can develop native-like mastery of the language structure or the function taught, even if they are arguably not ready to integrate the language forms taught into their interlanguage system (Long & Crookes, 1993).

Definitions of task are very diverse (for overviews of different definitions that exist in the literature, see Edwards & Willis, 2005; Norris et al., 1998). In this chapter, tasks are classified into three types: real world target tasks, pedagogical tasks, and test tasks. The real world target tasks are those that learners need to carry out in real world communication situations. Pedagogical tasks may have differing degrees of authenticity. The difficulty of tasks in a specific sequence may be purposefully manipulated to promote learners’ accuracy, fluency, and complexity in language performance. Pedagogical tasks are scaffolded or supported to various degrees to help learners develop the
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