A Study on Students' Perceptions of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) Approach in English Classes, a Case of Kunming Guandu No.1 Middle School

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Abstract
This study explores the perceptions of students regarding their engagement, performance, and overall experience with the Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) approach in the English classes at Kunming Guandu No.1 Middle School, located in Kunming, China. A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was employed for data collection and analysis. A questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews were used to gather information from the students, with SPSS software employed to process and analyze the data. Descriptive analysis was applied to examine students' responses to the questionnaire, while interview transcripts were analyzed to identify and categorize key themes. The study has three main objectives: 1) To assess students' level of engagement with TBLT in the English classes; 2) To evaluate students' perceptions of their performance with TBLT in the English classes; 3) To investigate students' overall views on the TBLT approach in the English classes. The findings indicate that students at Kunming Guandu No.1 Middle School have a moderate perceptions of their engagement, performance, and overall experience with TBLT. They perceive TBLT as a practical method that brings benefits such as increased motivation, improved communication skills, and better listening and speaking abilities. Additionally, students appreciate the opportunity to apply their learning in real-life contexts. However, some students express concerns about the approach, particularly regarding the time-consuming nature of tasks, challenges with group work, and the limited emphasis on grammar. To enhance the effectiveness of TBLT in English classes, it is essential to capitalize on its strengths while addressing the weaknesses and concerns identified by students. This study underscores the importance of tailoring teaching methods to meet the needs and preferences of middle school students, ultimately improving their language proficiency and offering a more enriching and comprehensive language learning experience.

Keywords: Task-Based Language Teaching; Middle School English Classes; Guandu No.1 Middle School; Kunming

I. Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century, China initiated a new round of curriculum reform for national compulsory education, which led to the issuance of the National English Curriculum Standard by the Ministry of Education (Chen, 2016). This curriculum standard outlines several key objectives for English courses during compulsory education. It aims to stimulate and nurture students' interest in English, help them develop good learning habits and effective strategies, and emphasize their central role and individual needs in the learning process. Additionally, it seeks to foster students' autonomous learning abilities, encourage collaboration, and promote the comprehensive development of their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, as well as their overall English communicative competence. The standard also encourages students to broaden their horizons, gain global awareness, and develop a positive outlook on life, values, and the world (Huang, 2015). Furthermore, it advocates for the use of task-based language teaching (TBLT) in English instruction, sparking interest and research among scholars and English teachers in China.

In China, middle school forms part of the national compulsory education system, and students typically transition to middle school after completing primary education. Middle schools are categorized into two types: key middle schools and regular middle schools. While some students opt for regular middle schools near their

homes, others aim for key middle schools, which are known for their high-quality education. However, to attend a key school, students must pass an entrance examination. Middle school education in China lasts three years, covering grades 7 through 9, for students aged 13 to 15. The English proficiency levels of students entering middle school vary, but by the end of grade 9, they are expected to reach an intermediate level to pass the high school entrance exam.

In terms of teacher qualifications, the Ministry of Education mandates that middle school teachers must hold a bachelor's degree or higher from a full-time regular university, major in an education-related field, have standard Mandarin pronunciation, and possess a teaching certification. As a result, most teachers in key middle schools graduate from well-regarded universities and typically have more teaching experience and higher teaching standards. Additionally, the Ministry of Education regularly organizes professional development seminars and training sessions for teachers across the country, aiming to enhance teaching quality, foster innovation, and promote communication (Xu, 2021).

As the curriculum reform continues, English teachers in Chinese middle schools have begun implementing task-based language teaching in accordance with the National English Curriculum Standard. However, there is often a significant gap between the theoretical requirements outlined in the standard and the actual application of TBLT in classrooms (Huang, 2015). Furthermore, as a relatively new teaching approach, many teachers may require additional time to explore its feasibility and impact.

Thus, studying students' perceptions of their engagement, performance, and overall experience with the TBLT approach in English classes can provide valuable insights into the method's effectiveness. Such research could inform recommendations for the successful implementation of TBLT in Kunming Guandu No.1 Middle School, China.

Research Objectives
1. To identify the level of Kunming Guandu No.1 Middle School students' perceptions on their engagement using TBLT approach in the English classes.
2. To identify the level of Kunming Guandu No.1 Middle School students' perception on their performance using TBLT Approach in the English classes.
3. To determine the Kunming Guandu No.1 Middle School students' perception on the TBLT approach in the English classes.

Conceptual Framework
Task-based language teaching (TBLT) has evolved from communicative language teaching (CLT) and shares its foundational theoretical principles. According to Panahi (2012), TBLT is extensively supported by various linguistic and psychological theories, with constructivist theory being particularly influential. Developed by Piaget in the 1920s, constructivist theory posits that learners process new information by integrating it with their existing knowledge and experiences, thereby internalizing it into their own understanding (Wang, 2011). This approach emphasizes that learners actively construct their knowledge through interactions with their environment.

In the context of TBLT, learners participate in meaningful tasks that mirror real-world language use. These tasks allow them to apply their existing linguistic skills and experiences to develop their language proficiency. Panahi (2012) highlights that tasks provide learners with a purposeful context for language use, which is crucial for meaningful learning and motivation. As learners engage in tasks, they connect new language input with their prior knowledge and experiences, aligning with constructivist principles as they build their understanding through active participation.

Moreover, TBLT aligns with constructivism regarding the teacher's role. In a TBLT framework, the teacher acts as a facilitator, guiding learners through tasks and offering support when necessary. This method emphasizes learner autonomy and encourages students to take charge of their own learning. By engaging learners in the active construction of their language understanding, TBLT effectively supports the principles of constructivism.
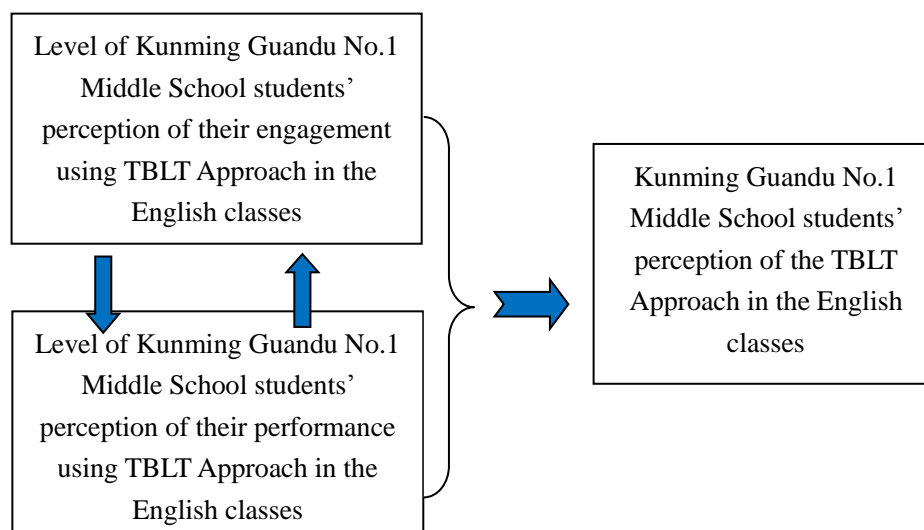
Population and Sample

The study is conducted at Kunming Guandu No.1 Middle School. The school is known for its high-quality education, employing teachers who have graduated from reputable universities and possess substantial teaching experience.

In research terms, Brown (2006) defines a population as "the entire group of people that a particular study is interested in." Among various factors affecting the precision of a parameter estimate, sample size is particularly significant. For this study, the population included all Grade 7 students at Kunming Guandu No.1 Middle School, approximately 800 students.

Grade 7 students are considered representative of English learning levels due to their extended exposure to the language, typically spanning several years from primary school onward. By this stage, students have covered substantial portions of the English syllabus, including grammar, vocabulary, and the four key language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. As a result, their proficiency reflects their cumulative learning experiences. Furthermore, Grade 7 serves as a critical transition phase between elementary school and middle school, where students are expected to demonstrate a certain level of English competency to progress in their education. Thus, evaluating their English proficiency at this stage provides valuable insights into their readiness for further language learning and academic advancement.

The study specifically focused on a sample of 61 students from an experimental class who were exposed to the task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach. These students were selected to explore their perceptions of engagement, performance, and overall experience with TBLT in the English classes.

Research Instrument

This study employed quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. To answer research questions 1-3, the questionnaire survey and semi-structured interview were used to gather data from the students, which aimed to investigate Kunming Guandu No.1 Middle School students' perceptions of their engagement, performance, and overall experience with the task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach in the English classes.

There are three parts included in the questionnaire survey. The first part is the level of students' perception of their engagement using TBLT approach in the English classes, which adopted from Qin (2021) and consisted of 6 question items. The second part is the level of students' perceptions of their performance using TBLT approach in the English classes, consisting of 8 question items. The third part is students' perceptions of the TBLT approach in the English classes, which consisted of 9 question items. The second and third parts adopted some items from the "Task-Based Language Teaching Questionnaire" developed by Zheng & Borg (2014). As for the semi-structured interview, the four interview questions adopted from Ellis (2021).

II. Research Findings

The findings related to research question 1 indicate that students' perception of their engagement with the TBLT approach in the English classes was moderate. While most students expressed a positive response to their engagement after six weeks of TBLT instruction, aspects related to motivation and communication skills received higher ratings, indicating that the TBLT approach significantly motivated students and improved their

communication through activities like group discussions and presentations. However, other areas showed more moderate perceptions, suggesting that the TBLT approach had a less significant impact on overall engagement. Specifically, the item related to exchanging ideas had the lowest rating, signaling a need for improvement in facilitating student interaction during discussions. To enhance this, teachers should adjust task difficulty and offer more support to ensure better collaboration and idea exchange.

Regarding research question 2, the findings suggested that students' perception of their performance with TBLT was also moderate. Most students reported positive feelings about their performance after the six-week period, with listening and speaking abilities receiving the highest ratings, indicating that TBLT helped them focus and improve in these areas. However, other aspects, such as reading abilities, were rated more moderately. This suggests that the TBLT approach may not have had as significant an impact on reading performance. Teachers could address this by integrating more reading tasks and helping students apply effective reading strategies to better engage with the tasks and improve their reading skills.

In relation to research question 3, the study found that students' overall perception of the TBLT approach was moderate. While many students appreciated the TBLT approach for encouraging bold attempts and applying learned content to real-life situations, other areas showed more moderate perceptions, suggesting that TBLT had a less noticeable impact on their overall experience. Notably, students rated their use of learning strategies the lowest, indicating that more support is needed in guiding students to use strategies effectively. Teachers could enhance this by offering more direct guidance and examples to help students apply learning strategies for better task comprehension.

In conclusion, the study found that students at Kunming Guandu No.1 Middle School had a moderate perception of their engagement, performance, and overall experience with TBLT in their English classes. While students generally viewed TBLT positively—recognizing its benefits in motivation, communication, and real-life application—there were concerns about its impact on areas like idea exchange, reading abilities, and the use of learning strategies. To optimize TBLT effectiveness, it is crucial to build on the strengths identified by students and address the areas for improvement. This can lead to a more comprehensive and valuable language learning experience for middle school students.

These findings align with the research of scholars such as Smith (2010) and Johnson (2012), who also noted that TBLT positively impacted students' language learning outcomes and motivation. Additionally, the study echoed concerns about the time-consuming nature of tasks, challenges in group work, and the limited focus on grammar, which have also been identified in previous research (Johnson, 2012; Brown, 2015). These challenges suggest that incorporating more grammar instruction alongside task-based activities and addressing time management issues is essential for maximizing TBLT's potential.

The findings also support the learner-centered and task-authenticity principles of TBLT, emphasizing the importance of considering students' needs and real-world contexts when designing tasks. Furthermore, previous research highlights the significance of timely feedback and teacher support in TBLT, which help students with self-assessment, error correction, and language development. Incorporating effective feedback mechanisms—such as peer feedback or teacher guidance—can further enhance students' language accuracy and proficiency, underscoring the essential role of teachers in guiding and scaffolding TBLT activities.

III.   Recommendations

To optimize the effectiveness of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in English classes, it is essential to build on its strengths while addressing areas for improvement. One key concern from students is the perceived lack of explicit language instruction within the TBLT framework. Although task completion and communication are central, providing clear language input and targeted explanations can significantly enhance students' understanding of language structures. By incorporating more explicit instruction, teachers can help students better grasp language rules and patterns, leading to more accurate and confident language use during tasks.

Another way to improve TBLT is by tailoring tasks to students' proficiency levels and employing scaffolding techniques. Differentiating tasks allows for more targeted support, promoting steady progress. Scaffolding strategies, such as providing models, linguistic cues, and opportunities for collaboration, further assist students in completing tasks successfully.

In addition, actively seeking student feedback and regularly assessing their progress can help teachers make timely adjustments to their approach. Identifying areas where students struggle enables teachers to offer focused instruction, individualized feedback, and relevant language activities to reinforce learning.

For middle school students at Kunming Guandu No.1 Middle School, creating an engaging and effective language learning experience is crucial. By combining TBLT with reading strategies, teachers can offer a variety of tasks that practice reading skills and encourage the use of language in authentic contexts. This approach, tailored to the diverse needs and learning styles of students, ensures a well-rounded language learning

experience.

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