Spring 5-2011

Using Tasks Effectively to Teach Chinese as a Foreign Language to College Students in the U.S.A.

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USING TASKS EFFECTIVELY TO TEACH CHINESE AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE TO

COLLEGE STUDENTS IN THE U.S.A.

By

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APPROVED: MONTH, DAY, YEAR

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THIS THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN THE DEPARTMENT OF LANGUAGES,
LITERATURES AND CULTURES AT SETON HALL UNIVERSITY, SOUTH ORAGE,
NEW JERSEY

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PREFACE

This research and thesis stem from my five-year experience with teaching

Chinese at the college level in the U.S. I studied teaching Chinese as a foreign language

in college in China. After completing my undergraduate education in 2003 in Beijing,

China, I was recruited into the Associated Colleges in China (ACC) Program, which is an

intensive Chinese language program established by Hamilton College and other six

colleges in America. When I was at the ACC program, I was provided teacher training

based on communicative drills and the audiolingual approach, and was cultivated to be a

head teacher. As a result of my standout teaching performance at ACC, I was

recommended and sent to the headquarters of the ACC, Hamilton College, to teach and to

receive more systematic training in 2006. Through three-year working with William R.

Kenan, Professor of Chinese and Director of the ACC Program, Hong-gang Jin, my

teaching skills became increasingly more mature.

As my teaching experience progressed, I gradually discovered that the teaching of

Chinese in the U.S. was distinctly different compared to how it was taught in China,

particularly in an intensive program such as ACC. Even if my teaching subjects are all

college students, the students who learn Chinese in China and the students who learn in

America may have different learning motivation and goals. Apart from the different

learning motivation and goals, another manifested difference between the Chinese

language learners in China and in America is their language proficiency. The students in

the same class at ACC in Beijing may have similar language proficiency, which allows

the teacher to easily use the teaching method of drills. Unlike the students in the same

class in China, the students in America may have various language proficiencies, which

makes it hard for teachers to utilize drills. In my teaching experience and observation, this not only happened at Hamilton College, but also happened at Seton Hall University, where I have been working on my Master of Arts degree since I left Hamilton College in 2009. At Seton Hall University, I have been a teaching assistant of Chinese and taught several Chinese language courses.

Those differences between students in the U.S. and China drove me to ponder how to effectively teach Chinese language to the students in classes with different language proficiencies, which is an increasingly salient issue in the field of teaching Chinese as a foreign language in U.S. Through assisting with certain task-based language teaching (TBLT) research by Professor Hong-gang Jin, I gradually realized that the TBLT approach may be a means for Chinese language teachers to resolve this current issue. Therefore, I began to attempt to use TBLT in my teaching in 2006. For approximate five-year experience between 2006 and 2009 both at Hamilton College and between 2009-2011 at Seton Hall University, I received a great deal of reactions and reflections regarding TBLT. Hence, I am taking the opportunity to write this thesis about using TBLT to effectively teach Chinese in the U.S. as the culmination of my five-year experience working and studying in the United States.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The crucial motivation for this research and thesis is to end my five-year teaching and learning experience in the United States with a sense of fulfillment. This thesis is not only for myself, but also for my whole family.

I have received a great deal of help with the writing of this thesis. Firstly, I am grateful to the three readers in my thesis committee in the Asian Studies program at Seton Hall University: Professor Dongdong Chen, who is also my thesis mentor, Professor Shigeru Osuka and Professor Michael Linderman. Without their academic support and patience, I could not have completed this master thesis during such a limited period of time. Professor Dongdong Chen has helped me to discover my motivation to conduct research on second language acquisition and language pedagogy. She put great effort and patience into helping me revise and improve my thesis proposal and drafts repeatedly in order to make my arguments strong. She also set very high standards to me in order to push me to reach the highest possible academic achievements. Professor Shigeru Osuka always gave me succinct and helpful suggestions. Professor Michael Linderman also provided many constructive suggestions that helped to make my thesis clearer, more coherent and logical. I have responded to most of the comments provided by the three professors in my thesis. Moreover, Professor Edwin Pak-wah Leung also encouraged me to continue finishing my thesis when I was almost ready to give up.

In addition, I am indebted to professor of Chinese, Hong-gang Jin, at Hamilton College for providing me with the teaching and research assistant experience that made it possible for me to study at the Asian Studies Program at Seton Hall University eventually. Professor Hong-gang Jin encouraged me to attempt the research on Task-

ABSTRACT

In my teaching experience and observation at the college level in the United States, I find that in teaching the Chinese language as a foreign language, one faces certain challenges and difficulties due to the learners' individual differences and the limitations of the school budget, which prevents the hiring of enough teachers. I raised the following question: how can one teach the Chinese language effectively in such conditions?

As the task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach is an increasingly popular approach in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) and the study of "task" has formed a connection between SLA and language pedagogy, language instructors using tasks in their class may be a good way to facilitate their students' practice of the target language. I will attempt to use the TBLT approach in my Chinese language teaching to examine how using tasks facilitates native Chinese teachers in teaching American learners with individual differences.

In this thesis, I will include four main components. Firstly, in Chapter 1, I will present the current challenges and difficulties for Chinese teachers teaching Chinese in America. Based on these challenges and difficulties, I will suggest using tasks to teach to meet different learners' needs. Secondly, I will review the literature and discuss the shortcomings in the literature in Chapter 2. Thirdly, in Chapters 3 and 4, through presenting the three tasks I used at Hamilton College between 2006 and 2009, I will explain how to effectively design and implement tasks to compensate for learners' individual differences from the perspective of teaching. In addition, I will analyze the design and implementation of the three tasks from the perspectives of both learning and

teaching. At last, based on the discussions in Chapter 3 and 4, I will develop five

strategies regarding task design and implementation for meeting individual learner's

demands and language proficiencies.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is an increasingly popular approach in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) and the study of "tasks" in language learning has connected SLA and language pedagogy since the 1960s (Ellis, 2003). Using tasks in a second language class is a good way to facilitate students' practice of the target language in meaningful communications (Nunan, 1989, Ellis, 2003). There has been quite a lot of research regarding the TBLT teaching approach in the context of ESL by scholars such as Peter Skehan, Rod Ellis, and David Nunan. However, there has been limited TBLT research in the context of teaching Chinese as a foreign language, with the exception of a few scholars such as Chuanren Ke, Hong-gang Jin, and Fangyuan Yuan. Their research examines task-based Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) instruction (Chen and Ke, 2010), task assessment (Ke, 2006), or task complexity (Jin, 2010), but lacks relevant examination of the advantages of the TBLT approach in CFL and how to solve difficulties specific to CFL.

In this thesis, I will focus on the difficulties that Chinese language instructors are currently facing in the U.S. and expound on the TBLT approach. In facing the current challenges and difficulties in teaching Chinese in American colleges, I think it is imperative for teachers to utilize the TBLT approach in teaching Chinese as a foreign language. As I have observed, there are various challenges and difficulties in CFL. The most significant challenges faced by Chinese instructors teaching Chinese in American colleges are real communications and individual differences. I will interpret the reasons

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for using TBLT in the context of CFL with explanations of the characteristics of tasks and the challenges of teaching Chinese in the U.S. I will then examine the effectiveness of TBLT as an approach to L2 teaching through analyzing three tasks I designed while teaching at Hamilton College between 2006 and 2009. I will also analyze the process of task design and implementation, as well as task outcomes.

In this first chapter, I will discuss two questions: (i) what current challenges and difficulties do instructors of Chinese face when teaching Chinese in the United States? (ii) What is the task-based language teaching approach and why is using tasks an effective way to deal with the challenges and difficulties of teaching Chinese in the U.S.?

I.   The Current Challenges and Difficulties of Teaching Chinese in American Colleges

(i)   The first challenge: Communications

In recent years, cultivating learners' communicative competence has become imperative in foreign language education in the United States. As a leading national voice among language educators and administrators in the U.S., the American Council on Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) published *The Standards of Foreign Language Learning* in 1996. One of the ACTFL standards defines communication as "the heart of second language study" (ACTFL, 1996). The primary role of language as a communicative tool is that of social communication. Second language (L2) learners need to communicate in target languages. To develop learners' communicative competence in a second language, instructors should engage them in performing communication functions of the target language. It is not as easy as people think to accomplish this task. However, it is difficult to practice the three types of communicative modes postulated by

ACTFL: interpersonal, interpretative, and presentational. In fact, language teachers are constantly challenged to make learners communicate effectively in the target language, in an aim to practice the skills of interpersonal, interpretative and presentational in their daily teaching.

Instructors of Chinese in the U.S. are particularly concerned with two major difficulties. The first one is that normally learners are not able to be immersed in a target language environment. As such, they do not have the opportunities to communicate with native Chinese speakers. Remarkable differences between teaching Chinese in the U.S. and teaching Chinese in China have been noted by Chinese language educators (e.g., Ke, 1992; Walker, 1999, 2010). ACTFL's five C's Standards, which were developed in 1996 as the national standards for foreign language education, include communication, cultures, connections, comparison, and community. Communication is the core of the five C's. These foreign language standards have not been held as curriculum guidelines, but rather as the main goals of foreign language learning. Learners are not only expected to acquire the target language, but also to understand the target-language culture and to use the language appropriately in multiple fields. The most powerful key to successful intercultural communication is "knowing how, when and why to say what to whom" (ACTFL Standards, 1996, p. 3). Thus, the primary goal of second language teaching is to help students acquire the ability to communicate in meaningful and appropriate ways with native speakers of the target language. Language teachers have the responsibility of providing learners with opportunities to engage in meaningful communication.

As we know, teaching Chinese in China may not have to involve designing a variety of communicative contexts, for students are already in an immersive environment

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in which they hear and speak Chinese every day. It is easy for them to immerse themselves in the local community. However, if students are learning Chinese in America, there are few opportunities for them to communicate with native Chinese speakers and blend in with the Chinese community. As such, it is more difficult for learners to gain cultural knowledge and acquire language skills. There is a consensus of opinion among instructors of Chinese that communication plays an important role in teaching Chinese as a foreign language (TCFL) (Ke, 1992, 2010; Walker 1999, 2010; Jin, 2010). However, I have personally observed some misinterpretations of communications in TCFL. I have observed that engaging students in group chat or role-playing games will probably facilitate communicative ability in Chinese, and both chatting and role playing function are ways of communication. Do such language activities provide meaningful communication settings? The ACTFL Standards have highlighted meaningful and appropriate communication. In oral language activities, teachers should make sure that students make meaningful conversations. It is not uncommon that students use vocabulary or grammar in inappropriate contexts during classroom activities. Even though there is no grammatical error in a conversation, what students say may still sound awkward to a native speaker's ear. Not all teachers of Chinese are aware that this is to some degree an ineffective teaching method, and that conducting group chat and role playing in a second language class may result in students learning incorrect structures. Instructors teaching Chinese outside China need to design effective language activities so as to increase communication opportunities for their students. If students continuously use the target language in meaningful communication, the goal of learning will be achieved.

There is an idea concerning the problems I have raised above that spurred my interest in the task-based language teaching approach. Task-based language teaching and learning is regarded as the core of recent SLA and language pedagogy research (Ellis, 2003). The question of what constitutes a "task" has been discussed by a number of scholars (e.g., Long, 1985; Crookes, 1986; Breen, 1989; Nunan, 1989; Shehan, 1996; Ellis, 2000, as cited in Ellis, 2003, p.4), who have defined "task" from their respective points of view. "Meaning" and "communication" were mentioned in all of their definitions. It is obvious that task-based language teaching has features that correspond to the primary goals of the ACTFL Standards. Therefore, the TBLT approach can be a way to compensate for the deficiencies of TCFL in the U.S.

(ii) The second challenge: Learners' backgrounds

The second major difficulty that instructors of Chinese face when teaching Chinese in the U.S. is the diversity of learners' backgrounds. This difficulty can be grouped from two perspectives — educational background and individual differences, as shown below:

a. Educational backgrounds

   - Instructional factors (Carroll, 1965)

   - Ethnic cultural backgrounds

b. Individual differences (Skehan, 1989; Ligntbown, 2006)

   - Motivations

   - Language learning strategies

   - Language styles

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(a) Educational background

Learners of Chinese in the U.S. have more diverse purposes and backgrounds. Some students taking Chinese courses in colleges have already studied the language in high schools. However, beginners and non-beginners are seldom separated into different classes. Even if students who have learned Chinese before are usually grouped into classes separately, they still may score at different levels of language proficiency due to prior instructional factors (Carroll, 1965).

The so-called instructional factor is one of the categories in a model of school learning proposed by J. B. Carroll in the field of SLA in the 1960s. Carroll (1965) focuses on two major types of variable factors – instructional factors and individual differences factors – in his model of school learning. The instructional factor consists of two sub-categories – time and instructional excellence. As Carroll points out, progress is a function of the amount of time spent learning, namely, the more time spent, the greater progress made by learners (Carroll, 1965). As for excellence, Carroll did not provide an appropriate definition. However, excellence is at least regarded as good teaching, or instructional effectiveness. Based on Carroll's model, learner success with a second language is influenced by the amount of learning time and effectiveness of instruction. These two factors of instruction can account for why students who have learned Chinese before differ in levels of proficiency. For instance, two students who have both learned Chinese for two years in high school are placed in an intermediate class, but there are distinctive differences of proficiency between them. This may be explained by pre-college classes scheduled with different amounts of time each week, albeit by instructors with different requirements and instructional skills. In addition, some students may have

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already had the opportunity to study in China before they began the college program. Some study abroad programs in China offer language and cultural courses, so high school students in such programs have some basic knowledge of the Chinese language and culture. Even in those programs with no formal language training courses, students may learn about the Chinese culture simply by traveling around China.

Aside from instructional factors, ethnic background is also at play. For example, some students are of East Asian cultural background, either with Chinese or Vietnamese heritage. They are perhaps not entirely unfamiliar with major elements of Chinese culture, such as Confucianism. Some Asian languages are also similar to the Chinese language or have been influenced by Chinese. Because of these factors, it may be relatively easier for students of Asian backgrounds to acquire the Chinese language than those with no Asian roots. I have observed that there are certain differences in learning and performance between Asian/Asian-American students and American students. For instance, Asian/Asian-American students may construct their Chinese language system faster than American students without an Asian background.

As differences in educational backgrounds are likely to influence the instructional effects and learning outcomes, it is better to sort students into different classes based on their language proficiency and cultural background. However, due to limited budgets and lack of teaching staff, most colleges and universities are not capable of placing students into different classes based on their language proficiency or cultural backgrounds. Therefore, students of different levels of proficiency or of different cultural backgrounds are grouped into one class. Under these circumstances, Chinese language instructors need to develop effective teaching methods to engage such diverse learners.

(b) Individual Differences

While the diversity of the learner backgrounds is only one of the many factors resulting in performance differences among second language adult learners, individual differences are also important. There also are considerable individual differences in foreign language learning. Taking into account individual differences can help learners succeed in secondary language acquisition. Skehan's individual differences concentrate on how language learners differ in "language aptitude, motivation and cognitive style and strategic influences" (Skehan, 1989, p. 1). In Lightbown and Spada research on individual differences, they propose different aspects, including learning style, personalities, intellectual abilities, motivation and attitudes, motivation in classroom, identity and ethnic group affiliation, learner beliefs and age of acquisition (Lightbown and Spada, 2006, pp. 59-68). Unlike Skehan's categories, Lightbown and Spada's add more variables but do not include language learning strategies. In my view, attitudes, interests, learning needs, and learning achievement affect learner motivation. Thus, learner attitudes should be incorporated into motivating factors. As for personality, I have chosen not to consider its influence on student learning outcomes in this thesis. This is an important factor, but it remains difficult to examine its effects on second language acquisition. Moreover, the ACTFL Standards suggest that everyone can learn foreign languages, so it is necessary to respect learners with different goals. Therefore I will not include individual personalities in my explanation. Although both Skehan and Lightbown and Spada mention the intellect, I will not include it as language aptitude since it is not easy for instructors to examine the differences among learners' language aptitude. In addition to motivation, I will include two other factors related to individual

differences: language learning strategies and learning styles touched on by Skehan and Lightbown and Spada respectively. In the following, I will discuss why Chinese instructors' teaching is challenged by individual differences from the perspectives of sub-categories of individual differences, motivations, language learning strategies, and language learning styles.

(c) The three factors related to individual differences

Motivation is the primary factor leading to individual differences. L2 learner motivations differ due to learning interest, learning needs and learning goals. There are a number of reasons why some students lack interest in learning Chinese. For Chinese-American students who were born and educated in the U.S., English is their first language. They may learn Chinese merely because their parents force them to do so. It is not easy to change their way of thinking and make them more interested in learning Chinese. Not all learners want to become experts on China. For instance, students who are majoring in science just need to meet departmental language requirements; students who are concentrating on Chinese studies or the more extensive East Asian studies are required to have better Chinese language skills; and some students learn Chinese merely for traveling purposes. Students with various learning needs in one class will not devote the same amount of time and effort to study and as such, their academic performance will vary. As learning needs vary, student learning goals will vary accordingly. However, it is the teacher's responsibility to motivate students toward whatever end results they want to achieve in learning. Therefore, instructors need to consider both motivations and language proficiencies.

The second relevant factor is language learning strategies. What are language

learning strategies? Skehan (1989) reviewed the "good language learner (GLLs)" research conducted by Naiman, Frohlich, Todesco and Stern in 1978. This group of researchers set up five major strategies based on results of their experiments (as cited in Skehan, 1989, pp. 76-77):

(i) Active task approach: good language learners actively involve themselves in the language learning task.

(ii) Realization of language as a system: good language learners develop or exploit an awareness of language as a system.

(iii) Realization of language as a means of communication and interaction: GLLs develop and exploit an awareness of language as a means of communication (i.e. conveying and receiving messages) and interaction (i.e. behaving in a culturally appropriate manner).

(iv) Management of affective demands: GLLs realize initially or with time that they must cope with affective demands made upon them by language learning and succeed in doing so.

(v) Monitoring of L2 performance: GLLs constantly revise their L2 systems. They monitor the language they are acquiring by testing their inferences (guesses): by looking for needed adjustments as they learn new material or by asking native informants when they think corrections are needed.

I would like to highlight certain key words in the above five learning strategies: language task, awareness and monitoring, and communication and interaction. Not all learners have good language learning strategies, particularly those who are learning their first foreign language. Teachers need to facilitate student learning by applying strategies so the students can become good language learners. I will expound on learning strategies in the context of individual differences in this thesis. Language instructors should take this factor into account in their teaching process. Knowing students' individual learning strategies and helping students develop their own effective strategies is likely to help instructors to deal with a class of students at mixed levels of proficiency.

The last factor related to individual differences is language learning style.

According to Lightbown and Spada (2006), there are three types of second language learners: visual learners, aural learners, and kinaesthetic learners. Visual learners cannot learn something until they have seen it; aural learners learn best by ear; and kinaesthetic learners learn by physical action such as skit or role-play. For language instructors, it is a major challenge to find appropriate teaching approaches and meet the needs of different learners. Teachers need to provide a variety of language learning materials and design various language activities in order to meet the different needs of students. For instance, if a student is an aural learner, providing audio materials will be more helpful for him/her. Likewise, reading materials will be more useful for visual learners.

As I mentioned above, due to limited school budgets and lack of teaching staff, students with different language proficiencies or cultural backgrounds are often grouped together in one class. Chinese teachers are faced with the challenge of teaching to a diversified audience. Teachers should engage students with language tasks that encourage participation in classroom activities, interaction with peers, and meaningful communications. This should be done regardless of the diversity factor or individual differences. Instructors are expected to teach Chinese based on learners' individual needs in order to produce effective teaching results. However, given limited energy and time, it is hard for both instructors and learners to achieve successful teaching and learning outcomes respectively. Teachers should create a variety of ways to motivate students to learn and use the target language. Moreover, it is very hard to conduct drills in a class composed of students with a wide range of proficiencies. Teachers need to stimulate learners' interest and instruct efficiently while striving to meet a variety of standards, such as course objectives, as well as district, state, and national standards. When students

with varied proficiencies are grouped into the same class as is common in the U.S., it is imperative for teachers to seek and utilize legitimate and effective teaching methods to meet teaching goals.

I have mentioned the task-based language teaching approach after explaining the first major challenge of teaching Chinese in America. The TBLT approach can also solve this second problem for teachers.

II. Using the Effective TBLT Approach in Dealing with the Challenges of Teaching Chinese

In this section, I will first explain what the TBLT approach is, along with providing a definition of "task." Then, I will explain why I have chosen TBLT to facilitate my Chinese teaching and handle teaching challenges.

The TBLT approach has been concerned in the field of second language acquisition (SLA). The study of "task" has focused on the connections between SLA and language pedagogy since the 1960s (Ellis, 2003). The TBLT theory has been developed since the early 1980's. "Task-based" means using language tasks to teach or learn a second language within a curriculum. Tasks are different from language activities because tasks require instructors to design tasks with specific communicative goals and guide learners to achieve communicative skills through real language communications in the process of completing tasks. The theory of TBLT has reached full maturity in Ellis's research overviews. Ellis points out that there are two different accounts of the theoretical basis for TBLT: one is from the psycholinguistic perspective; the other is based on socio-cultural theory (Ellis, 2000, p. 199). These two theories have contributed to the development of the TBLT approach. Lantolf (1995) refers to second language

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acquisition as the product of the input and output process, which is identified as "psycholinguistically motivated dimensions" of tasks (Long and Crookers, 1987, as cited in Ellis, 2000, p. 199). Scholars such as Vygotsky (1978) conducted research based on the socio-cultural theory. The psycholinguistic approach guides teachers in selecting and grading tasks based on learners' language learning process as well as performance, while the socio-cultural approach defines the language learning process as a kind of interactive social activity. As the theoretical basis of tasks focuses on individual learners and their interactions, TBLT can solve many current teaching difficulties for Chinese instructors.

Most language instructors agree that using tasks in their class is an effective way of helping students to practice the target language. Although the theoretical basis of tasks is applicable for SLA, the definition of "task" has not been clearly established. Different scholars (eg: Breen, 1989; Long, 1985, Nunan, 1989, Skehan, 1998; Willis, 1996) emphasize various key words when they define a "task". After examining different definitions of task, Ellis pointed out that most definitions address the main dimensions: (i) the scope of a task; (ii) the perspective from which a task is viewed; (iii) the authenticity of a task; (iv) the linguistic skills required to perform a task; (v) the psychological processes involved in task performance; and (vi) the outcome of a task (Ellis, 2003, pp. 2-8).

As is seen from these six dimensions, a complete definition of "task" should cover a wide range of dimensions and be defined from the perspective of SLA as well as that of linguistics. Willis (1996) noted that if a "task" is defined in the context of language teaching, the characteristics of TBLT should be made explicit so as to distinguish it from other teaching approaches. Since I will discuss how tasks can be used to teach Chinese

effectively, the definitions of "task" that I have selected to discuss here emphasize the

features of "task" from the perspective of language teaching. I have selected a set of

definitions cited by Ellis in 2003 and D. Willis and J. Willis in 2008.

      (i)   Nunan (1989)

"A piece of classroom work which involves learners in
comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target
language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather
than form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being
able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right" (Nunan,
1989, as cited in Ellis, 2003, p.4; as cited in Nunan, 2004, p. 4; as cited
in Willis and Willis, 2008, p. 12).

      (ii)   J. Willis (1996)
"[Tasks are] activities where the target language is used by the learner
for communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome." (J.
Willis, 1996)

      (iii)   Skehan (1996)
"A task is an activity in which: meaning is primary; there is some sort
of relationship to the real world; task completion has some priority; and
the assessment of task performance is in terms of task outcome."
(Skehan, 1996, as cited in Ellis, 2003, p. 4)

      (iv)   Ellis (2003)
"A task is a workplan that requires learners to process language
pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in
terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has
been conveyed. To this end, it requires them to give primary attention to
meaning and to make use of their own linguistic resources, although the
design of the task may predispose them to choose particular forms. A
task is intended to result in language use that bears a resemblance, direct
or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world. Like other
language activities, a task can engage productive or receptive, and oral
or written skills, and also various cognitive process" (Ellis, 2003, p.16).

These four scholars defined a "task" in the context of language teaching. Nunan's

definition highlights meaning. Willis' definition emphasizes goal/outcome. Shehan's

definition covers several aspects including producing meanings, achieving an outcome,

and assessing task performance. Ellis' definition is the most explicit from the perspective

of language pedagogy. In addition, he highlights that the primary characteristic of tasks is meaning. As Nunan mentions in his definition, Ellis points out that learners are expected to use their own language resources and choose particular forms that may be predisposed to achieve the outcome. Tasks should be related to activities in the real world. In short, it can be seen that a task is meaningful communication with certain planned goals related to the real world. To utilize tasks in language use is one of the pragmatic goals of task teaching. Hence, the core of task teaching essentially coincides with the core of ACTFL Standards—meaningful communication.

The definition of "task" is just the first question needing clarification. However, are tasks equal to traditional language activities or exercises? If not, what distinguishes a "task" from an "exercise" or "activity"? There are several views on the differences between task and exercise or activity proposed by researchers. Skehan (1996) suggests four defining criteria for tasks: (i) meaning is primary; (ii) there is a goal which needs to be worked towards; (iii) the activity is outcome-evaluated; and (iv) there is a real-world relationship. Widdowson (1998) argues that the criteria for distinguishing task and exercise do not exist in the interior, but they differ with respect to their meaning, goal, and outcome. Thus, exercises involve learning communicative abilities by means of developing linguistic skills, while tasks incorporate the development of linguistic abilities as a prerequisite for communicative activities. Comparing Skehan's criteria and Widdowson's view, Ellis (2000) points out that meaning is the primary focus for tasks, whereas the primary goal of exercises is engaging learners in producing correct linguistic forms. As Eckerth claims, there are two perspectives on the primary goal of TBLT: one is "to describe, to analyze and to predict the language use and the communicative patterns

learners are engaged in when accomplishing a task" and the other is "to determine the contribution of these communicative patterns to second language acquisition" (Eckerth, 2008, p. 13). Throughout these various definitions, "tasks" have been distinguished from traditional "exercises" and "activities."

Tasks promote interpersonal and referential communication, such as focusing on the negotiation of meaning indicated by Long's Interaction Hypothesis. Also, as Skehan (1996) stated, "the task-based approach sees language acquisition as a process of learning through doing. Learners develop their interlanguage by attending to form in the context of meaning-focused acuities" (Skehan, 1998, p. 4). That is to say, tasks should be designed for a certain context. Learners and instructors should focus on both language forms and meanings. The language proficiency guidelines stipulated by ACTFL emphasize meaningful communication, so it can be deduced that to some extent task-based language teaching and learning meet the ACTFL standards.

TBLT can help instructors of Chinese meet the ACTFL Standards. However, can TBLT solve the difficulties and challenges instructors face in the context of CFL? I will now clarify the reasons why TBLT is helpful for teaching Chinese.

As I have discussed earlier in this chapter, Chinese language teachers face many challenges and difficulties. Students with different language proficiencies and backgrounds are put into the same classroom. The limited teaching staff due to the lack of school budget has long created teaching difficulties. As the number of Chinese language learners has increased rapidly, learning motivations vary. Faced with students who are not strongly motivated, teachers need to know how to stimulate students' interest in learning Chinese in a class from diversified backgrounds with varying learning needs.

Otherwise, teachers will not be able to set up and implement consistent standards. Students who lack learning motivation probably also lack interest. Whether they need to pass a language certification exam, or they are forced to take Chinese by their parents, it is absolutely possible for students to become interested in learning Chinese if teachers choose teaching methods based on students' individual differences. However certain traditional teaching methods, such as grammar translation and the audio lingual approach, are not based on the theories of SLA and language pedagogy. Those methods which focus on linguistic drills can hardly drive teachers' attention to individual differences. TBLT is regarded as an ideal method in which tasks focus on meaningful communication, performance, and outcomes. While learners participate in discussions or problem-solving tasks, they become involved in a meaning-focused interaction. They share ideas and figure out how to best express their viewpoints (Willis and Willis, 2008). In this kind of process, learners need to overcome their weaknesses in order to complete tasks and achieve successful learning outcomes. As tasks involve exchanges of meaning, learners are encouraged to work on their own to prepare for the next step of the task. Therefore, tasks can help teachers focus on personalized instruction.

However, TBLT is still not a master teaching method. TBLT has a number of advantages for teaching Chinese language. But two pragmatic questions that Chinese instructors need to address are how to design effective tasks and how to use tasks effectively in their daily classes. If teachers of Chinese are designing and using tasks ineffectively, they cannot achieve expected goals and language learners cannot acquire Chinese successfully. If instructors devise tasks skillfully, tasks can increase participation and interaction among learners. As a result, students can achieve goals set

up by their teachers.

III.   The outline for the thesis

In this chapter, i.e. Chapter 1, I have interpreted the teaching difficulties and challenges in the field of CFL. Through analysis of three tasks I designed in the following chapters in this thesis, I will summarize in detail how the TBLT approach helps students to improve their Chinese and overcome individual weaknesses from the perspectives of the learner variable, topic variable and cognitive variable in task difficulty and complexity.

In Chapter 2, I will focus on a review of the literature pertaining to TBLT research. I will review the research of five scholars, Rod Ellis, David Nunan, Dave Willis and Jane Willis, and Hong-gang Jin. These scholars have contributed their research to TBLT approach regarding task difficulty and complexity. I will analyze how task difficulty and complexity affect learner individual differences.

In Chapter 3, I will interpret explicitly three tasks that I designed and implemented while teaching at Hamilton College between 2006 and 2009 from the perspectives of task objectives, requirements, procedure and goals. In Chapter 4, I will discuss how to effectively design and implement tasks for Chinese teaching and learning based on my own teaching designs. I will interpret case by case the three tasks from the perspectives of pre-task, core task and post task. In Chapter 5, I will conclude that the strategies of task design and implementation are related to individual differences, and explain how I came to this conclusion. At the end of Chapter 5, I will explain the limitations of this thesis and the direction of future study.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

I.   Introduction

In this chapter, I will review some research literature on task-based language teaching approach written by five scholars; namely Rod Ellis, David Nunan, Dave Willis and Jane Willis, and Hong-gang Jin. These scholars have made a great deal of contributions to TBLA with their respective research. Rod Ellis and David Nunan develop and clarify the definition of "task" in the context of SLA and teaching pedagogy. D. Willis and J. Willis and Nunan are more concerned with the utilities of the TBLT approach in teaching English as a second language (TESL). As for Hong-gang Jin, she attempts to apply the TBLT approach to teaching Chinese as a foreign language (TCFL). Ellis provides the overall comprehensive theoretical basis on task-based language teaching. Nunan defines the respective roles of teachers and learners in task-based language learning and teaching, and integrates technology into task-based language teaching. Willis and Willis focus on the application of task-based teaching. These four scholars have explained form-focused tasks and meaning-focused tasks while using different terms in their studies. Unlike these four scholars who study TBLT in the context of teaching English as a second language, Hong-gang Jin completed her study in the context of teaching Chinese as a foreign language. In this chapter, I will review her experimental research on the effects of negotiation of meaning on task complexity and difficulty. All of these scholars' various contributions cover both theoretical basis and practical experiments. Furthermore, they all notice the significance of how different task

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variables influence task difficulty and complexity, which links with my concerns in this thesis: namely, how to effectively use tasks to meet different learners' individual differences in the context of CFL.

This review emphasizes several aspects concerning the theoretical basis on TBLA, the definition of tasks, task complexity and difficulty, and the differences between focused tasks and unfocused tasks. In this chapter, I will review the five scholars' works from different dimensions regarding the TBLT approach. I will review the research studies done by these scholars and analyze the strengths and weaknesses of their studies. I will interpret Ellis and four other western scholars' studies from the perspective of general task-based language teaching. Lastly, I will present Hong-gang Jin's experiment in the context of TCSL to expound on task complexity and explain what elements influence the negotiation of meanings in a task. By reviewing these scholars' research, I will present my view on how to make full use of tasks to compensate for learners' individual differences. Since utilizing tasks to solve individual differences has not been fully attended to by SLA scholars, by reviewing relevant TBLT research I will explain how tasks can help instructors accommodate learners' individual differences.

II.   Rod Ellis

The concept of task has become very pervasive, and the task-based language teaching approach has been studied by a number of researchers in SLA. There is no doubt that Ellis, among many other well-known scholars, plays a significant role in the field. He has conducted a great amount of reliable research on his work, *Task-based Language Learning and Teaching*. In the book on task-based teaching, Ellis finds a basis for the

idea that language is used as a tool for communication. He believes that if learners participate in classroom activities and know how to use the target language to communicate inside the classroom, they are capable of using it outside the classroom. Most of Ellis' study results and his viewpoints on tasks in language pedagogy are included in the aforementioned book that surveys both the theory and the practice of TBLT. The book's first six chapters are mostly theoretical. He explains the definition of tasks using SLA theories and interprets the characteristics of tasks from the perspective of SLA. Chapters 7 through 10 address the practical use of TBLT; for example, how to design task-based language courses, how to assess task-based language learning and teaching, and how to evaluate task-based pedagogy. Ellis' book has fostered appreciation of TBLT among a broad audience of researchers regardless of their educational or theoretical backgrounds. Ellis attempts to examine "task" from a variety of perspectives in the context of SLA and language pedagogy. He has not only chosen and presented his personal view of TBLT, but has also strived to provide views of all current research related to TBLT. In this wide sweep, Ellis interprets tasks from the psycholinguistical and social-cultural perspectives. However, he acknowledges that learner needs should be considered under the context of education and critical pedagogy.

Ellis utilizes Lantolf's (1996) model of second language acquisition from a psycholinguistical perspective. Based on this perspective, tasks are viewed as "devices that provide learners with the data they need for learning; the design of a task is seen as potentially determining the kind of language use and opportunities for learning" (Ellis, 2000, p. 193). Here the underlying theory is that the properties of a task will predispose learners to engage in some kinds of language use and mental processing. These lingual

and mental processes are beneficial to L2 learner's acquisition. Thus, the task-as-workplan and the task-as-process are closely related. The so-called task-as-workplan indicates that tasks require learners to process language practically in order to achieve the predicted outcome, which can then be evaluated. He uses three different psycholinguistic models in his work: Long's (1981, 1983) interaction hypothesis, Skehan's (1996, 1998) cognitive approach, and Yule's (1997) communicative effectiveness. All three scholars see tasks as "devices for manipulating how learners process language" (Ellis, 2000, p. 198). Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis emphasizes that learners obtain comprehensible input and their acquisition is facilitated as a result of meaning negotiation. This theory leads to research using tasks to investigate which kind of input works best for learner comprehension. However, the researchers also ask in what way the instructor could provide learners with opportunities of meaning negotiation. Researchers are interested in finding out which types of tasks are most likely to generate meaning negotiation that facilitates language acquisition. Also, Skehan's cognitive approach is based on a difference in the way in which learners are believed to represent second language knowledge. Learners construct both an exemplar-based system and a rule-based system. The former system is lexical and includes both discrete lexical items and formulaic chunks of language. Thus, the linguistic knowledge included in this system can be quickly extracted and is appropriate for occasions requiring language fluency. The latter consists of abstract patterns of the language which require more processing and thus are more suitable for controlled but not fluent language performance. Yule's research has been on examining task-processes that contribute to communicative effectiveness, while the Interaction Hypothesis and Skehan's 'cognitive approach' address the problem of

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identifying task features that influence learner production for L2 acquisition. Yule's theory of communicative effectiveness is focused on referential tasks of the "Same-or-Different kind". Yule (1997) distinguishes two dimensions of communicative effectiveness: (i) the identification-of-referent dimension and (ii) the role-taking dimension. Learners have to be able to encode the referents they have to use in communication, and they are required to be able to encode the referents in ways that are distinct from other referents. As for the role-taking dimension, the participants are required to be able to cooperate with their communicative partners in order to achieve predicted outcomes (Yule, 1997).

According to the three theoretical bases, Ellis provides the task dimensions (see below in this paragraph) to show task characteristics that are more likely to generate meaning negotiation during task performance. As Ellis discovers, interactional modifications are more likely to contribute to L2 acquisition in tasks if the tasks (i) have a required information exchange; (ii) have a required information gap; (iii) have a closed outcome; (iv) have human/ethical familiar topics to the interactants; (v) have narrative and collaborative discourse domain; (vi) context-free detailed information regarding cognitive complexity (Ellis, 2003, Table 3.1, p. 96). These six task dimensions can guide the design and implementation of tasks. In the interpretations by Ellis in 2000, he notes that unfamiliar topics for learners have a more positive effect on the quantity of meaning negotiation. However, from the task dimensions he provided in 2003, familiar topics are put into the column representing positive effects. Ellis did not explain what changed his views on unfamiliar topics. What he thought actually had less positive effect on the quantity of meaning negotiation. According to Ellis, the level of familiarity with topics

clearly influences L2 learners' comprehension and it also affects the negotiation work. Ellis notes that topic relevance is one of the major incentives for interaction in a task. For example, if the topic is unfamiliar to interactants, L2 learners become more active in the communication. If it is a more universal topic, native speakers become more dominant in the conversation. According to Ellis, a problem that researchers have to face in the topic dimension is "identifying general categories for classifying topics that can be theoretically linked to task performance" (Ellis, 2003, p. 91). He acknowledges that learner variables are correlated with topic variables. There are individual differences regarding topic familiarity, which makes it difficult to identify which kind of topics are familiar to learners.

Another possible factor linked to topic variables is task planning. Ellis also contributes to the study of task planning. In 2005 Yuan and Ellis conducted research concerning the effects of task planning on oral and written task performance. Although relevant research has shown that task planning does have positive effects on the quantities and qualities of task production (Ellis, 1987, Yuan and Ellis, 2003), those effects are related to linguistic forms. However, the question of whether task planning has an effect on task topics seems to have been ignored by second language researchers.

Topic, contextual support, and the number of elements in a task are sub-categorized in input variable by Ellis. Apart from the variable of task design, Ellis elicits conditions as well as outcomes to interpret the effects of task design. I am highlighting a number of elements in input variables, which is relevant to my first task analysis. Brown *et al.* (1984) have proposed that the "number of elements and relationships between these elements influences the difficulty of the task" (Ellis, 2003, p. 120), for example, the

number of narrators, the number of time and locations within a story. If there are more narrators, times or locations, the task is more difficult for learners; conversely, when the task is less difficult, learners can produce more fluent language. There has not been much research on the effects of different task conditions on production. Ellis classifies condition variables by evaluating two factors: share vs. split information and task demands. According to Newton and Kennedy's research (1996), if learners share task information and have to be involved in decision-making, they will be pushed to produce more language. On the other hand, split information tasks help learners produce more meaning negotiation. The task outcome variable is under the influence of three factors: closed or open tasks, the inherent structure of outcome, and discourse mode (Ellis, 2003, pp. 122-124). In discourse mode, narrative tasks push learners to produce more complex output. Ellis provides a table showing how task design characteristics affect learner production (see Ellis, 2003, p. 126). It shows that each of the factors affecting the design variable has a different impact on the fluency, accuracy and complexity of learners' production.

Task-based language teaching has been primarily concerned with production tasks, particularly speaking tasks. However, tasks involve four language skills which have been mentioned in the definition of tasks. Therefore, Ellis focuses on listening tasks throughout Chapter 2. The most interesting point in this chapter is the effect of input modifications. This is the only chapter in which Ellis interprets input modifications. His research in this aspect focuses on the investigation of learners' ability to process specific linguistic features. Compared to unfocused tasks, focused tasks can be better devised by adding specific input to the targeted language forms. They can be designed in a certain

way so that learners could succeed in processing the tasks with targeted forms and achieve the product outcome. Ellis acknowledges that the "input can be modified to enable learners to process the feature" (Ellis, 2003, p. 37). Listening tasks provide a way of examining the effects of various kinds of input modification. Ellis provides some examples to present how and why listening tasks can be an effective starting point for a task-based course designed for low-proficiency learners. Beginner learners can engage in meaningful activity in a "non-threatening" way. Teachers can also use listening tasks to provide learners with enriched input of specific linguistic forms. According to Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985), learners need to obtain comprehensible input. Ellis makes a brief summary of early hypotheses concerning comprehensible input and modifications to interactional structure of conversations taking place in the process of negotiation.

Ellis explains the role listening comprehension plays in task-based language teaching. In designing listening tasks it is important for the instructor to recognize the relationship between comprehensible input and the acquisition of an L2. If teachers in the pre-task phase can provide comprehensible listening input that corresponds with the learners' language proficiency level, more likely than not they will also offer comprehensible reading input, especially in focused tasks. Ellis has discussed the pragmatic utility of listening tasks, but he has not extended the use of comprehensible input. If teachers can offer students of different levels different input materials and use the TBLT approach in order to help all of them gain comprehensible input, students are more likely to achieve success at their individual levels in Chinese learning. Traditional grammar translations and audiolingual methods fail to address individual learner differences. There are several reasons as to why this is the case. Firstly, translation

teaching method is merely based on linguistic forms and grammar. Even if some communicative questions are provided by instructors, the essence of the audiolingual method focuses on language forms. Linguistic form is the primary concern in traditional teaching methods. However, TBLT prioritizes the role of language as a communication tool. In order to succeed in meaningful communicative tasks, learners should conduct task assignments. Teachers should take into account the fact that learners are at different levels of proficiency and accordingly modify task materials by adjusting design variables in the phase of task planning. This is done in order to provide individual learners with comprehensible input and help them achieve the planned learning goals.

Another issue elicited by Ellis is the role of tasks in SLA. Ellis considers ways in which tasks can be employed to use specific linguistic features, and he focuses on forms in the implementation of a task. Ellis distinguishes between focused tasks and unfocused tasks in Chapter 1.

> Unfocused tasks may predispose learners to choose from a range of forms but they are not designed with the use of a specific form in mind. In contrast, focused tasks aim to induce learners to process, receptively or productively, some particular linguistic feature, for example, grammar structure. (Ellis, 2003, p. 16)

Before he discusses the issue of focused tasks, Ellis distinguishes between a focused task and a situational grammar exercise. That is, an exercise that is designed to provide contextualized practice of specific linguistic forms. In a focused task, learners are not introduced to specific language forms at the pre-task phase. This method is similar to an unfocused task in the sense that learners pay primary attention to content. In the grammar exercises, learner awareness of content is incidental. In contrast with a focused task, learners doing a grammar exercise are told what the linguistic focus is. Learners may

attempt to attend to it; therefore, attention to form is intentional. Ellis' study is concerned mainly with focused tasks that involve production. He points out that it is possible to have focused tasks, namely, tasks designed to induce attention to specific forms in oral or written input. Focused communicative tasks involving both reception and production are of considerable value. Researchers can test and provide evidence of what learners do when they are intentionally concentrated on using a form correctly and, as such, if they are focused on tasks that elicit implicit or explicit knowledge. Also, teachers can evaluate if learners are mastering specific language forms under communicative conditions.

Ellis first applies psycholinguistic rationale to analyze focused tasks, and then he introduces how to design and implement focused tasks. In the theoretical section, he examines two cognitive accounts of learning: skill-learning and implicit learning. Regarding theories of skill-learning, language learning is a process "by which controlled or declarative procedures are transformed into automatic procedures through practice" (Ellis, 2003, p.151). The second cognitive account indicates that learning is considered as an implicit process. Learners cannot be affected directly by means of instruction, but can be facilitated by explicit knowledge (Ellis, 2003). These two accounts provide evidence of what benefits learners will obtain through focused tasks and why focused tasks are significant in task-based language teaching. Ellis provides three ways of designing focused tasks: structure-based production tasks, comprehension tasks, and consciousness-raising tasks. He uses earlier research to explain the steps of focused task design. He explains how to provide linguistic forms using the first method, how to provide comprehensible input in the second method, and in the third how to assist in causing learners' to become aware of linguistic forms. The three aspects of focused tasks design

can guide teachers in task designing. However, Ellis' interpretations are based on a strong theoretical background, and it may be hard for teachers who are not researchers to follow his explanations. Though Ellis has attended to certain techniques of implementing focused tasks from the aspects of implicit and explicit methodologies, his research is comparatively more theoretical. As a result, there is a gap between his work and realistic teaching.

To summarize, Ellis provides his audience with the latest research regarding task-based language teaching and learning. He not only explicitly interprets the theoretical backgrounds of TBLT in the context of second language acquisition but also discusses very practical concerns; such as, task implementation in the classroom, task assessment and the design of task course. Ellis illustrates the TBLT approach from two major theoretical perspectives: psycholinguistics and social-culture. However, it is easy to see that Ellis induces more attention to interpreting task-based teaching from the perspective of psycholinguistics than that of social-culture. This is regarded as one of the limitations of Ellis' work. Secondly, Ellis does not drive his attention toward reading tasks. His research is mainly concerned with listening tasks. According to the definition of task, four language skills are involved. Ellis' research is incomplete in that it does not consider the effect of reading input on L2 acquisition. However, Ellis points out some positive effects of task planning on written and oral tasks in his other research.

Thirdly, in Ellis' research, task complexity is one of the key issues that I have critiqued. By using the theory of individual differences in SLA, I noted that the learner variable in task complexity is very important for the evaluation of other variables, such as the topic. Therefore, for categorizing topics, researchers have to consider the effects of

learner variables on interaction in tasks. Learners have different backgrounds and interests. What Chinese learners in America are interested in definitely differs from learners in Japan or Korea. If language teachers and researchers in the U.S. can design a general catalog of task topics, as well as a specific catalog for American students, language instructors would be better equipped with topic resources for task design. Topics are very crucial for intermediate learners' speaking output in task performing. In Lange's research mentioned by Ellis, 'learners were more motivated to talk about which prisoner should be granted parole than which candidate should get a heart transplant operation" (Ellis, 2003, p. 92). In this example, it is hard to tell which topic is more familiar to learners. If both the prisoner's parole and the heart transplant operation topic are unfamiliar to learners, why are L2 learners more motivated in the former task than the latter one? I have also observed that if teachers use focused linguistic forms in their teaching to design a task with a scenario which is unusual in everyday life, it may be seen as an unfamiliar topic for learners. However, cognitive unfamiliarity is likely compensated for by focused linguistic forms and learners still conduct meaning negotiation in tasks. I will provide evidence in Chapters 3 and 4, where I examine the three tasks designed for college intermediate Chinese language learners. The Task 1 which will be introduced in next chapter is a detective story. The topic of this task is not familiar to students based on Ellis' explanation, but the learners were all highly motivated and engaged in the achievement of the task. This phenomenon is just similar with Long's discovery in her research in 2000 (see Ellis, 2003, p. 92).

Finally, since both language forms and interactive strategies can be prepared before task performing, learners could discover more about unfamiliar task topics in the

phase of planning. If task planning can familiarize the learner with a given topic, it could be considered as another variable interacting with the topic. Although Ellis concludes that there has not yet been a solid conclusion regarding the effects of task topics on learners' participation and interaction, he did not explain why in 2000 he considered non-familiar topics as having more positive effects but in 2003 this same variable became an element with less positive effects in his view. Additionally, I have observed that Ellis considers the learner variable as the only sub-variable correlating with the topic. However, based on my review of his study on task planning, I think task planning should be regarded as another sub-variable related to topics. Obviously, Ellis does not provide very clear interpretation with regard to the relations among topic and learner variables, and language forms and interaction in a task.

III.   David Nunan

David Nunan is also a well-known scholar in task-based language teaching and learning. He has published a number of works on second language acquisition and such TBLT research as task designing. In his updated edition of *Task-based Language Teaching* (2004), Nunan presents a practical introduction to TBLT based on theoretical and empirical support. In this new work, he also absorbs some other scholar's research, such as the work by Rod Ellis (2003), and updates the principles and ideas related to task design. These principles include, (i) what roles teacher and learner play in TBLT, (ii) why and when one focuses on forms in setting TBLT instructional cycle, and (iii) what task difficulty has been noted by SLA researchers. Compared with Rod Ellis' work, Nunan's is more practical. In this book he tries to make explicit interpretation of designed

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task for the communicative classroom. He uses a theoretical perspective to explain what task-based language teaching is in chapter 1. His focus is more on task design, task implementation, and task grading. I will review Nunan's research on task design regarding the three issues listed above.

First, Nunan suggests that the teacher and learner roles should be regarded as a task component. When Ellis provides his framework for designing tasks, he focuses on five features: goal, input, conditions, procedures and predicted outcome/product. Ellis describes tasks in task-based teaching and learning without paying attention to the roles of teachers and learners. Since the communicative language teaching theory of TBLT underlies the carrying out of social and interpersonal interactions in tasks, teachers in task designing should consider what kind of roles they expect learners to play in a task. At the same time, the teacher's roles in carrying out tasks should not be ignored. The teacher's guidance and assistance is very important for learners to achieve the predicted task outcome. In the conventional view, the teachers play a prominent role in the classroom. They are regarded as the authority in the classroom, and learners are passive recipients most of the time. However, the principal role of the teacher in the communicative language teaching approach is to observe and support learner interaction in tasks. Nunan points out that the relationship been teacher and learner is comparable to the two sides of a coin. If the learner has a more proactive role, the teacher will assume the less dominant role. He cites Breen and Candlin (1980), which describes three major roles the teacher plays in the communicative classroom: facilitator, participant, and observer and learner (Nunan, 2004, p. 67). As a facilitator, the teacher should assist the communicative process in order to prevent unpredictable or uncomfortable situations from arising, which

might disrupt the progress of a task. It is easier for the teacher to interact with learners in tasks as a participant as well as an observer and learner, but the teacher needs to balance the roles that they take on and those demanded by the learner.

Nunan also provides primary recordings and transcriptions of groups of teachers reflecting on what roles they have been playing in a communicative classroom. All the teachers acknowledge that teachers should not play a dominating role in the classroom. In order to facilitate student learning, teachers ought to develop skills in dealing with unexpected situations, and they need to know in what instances they should interfere with learner interactions. Through careful planning, teachers make sure they can handle any changes in a positive way.

Besides learner and teacher roles, Nunan evaluates the factor of settings along with goals, input, and procedure. "Settings refer to the classroom arrangements specified or implied in the task" (Nunan, 2004, p. 69). Settings require teachers to practically consider, among other variables, the class size, how to group students, how to assign task materials, and whether the task is to be completely or partly used outside the classroom. Nunan believes that it is necessary to distinguish "mode" and "environment." The learning mode is related to the individual or group task operation. If the learner is performing a task as part of a group, his task performance may influence other members' outcomes. Therefore, learners should take responsibility for the completion of the task, which is normally a collaborative process. The environment refers to where the learning process takes place. Generally speaking, most learning occurs in a classroom, language lab, or media center, which can all be seen as conventional classrooms. However, with the development of technology, "satellite, internet, cable television and internet and

increasingly mobile workforces" (Nunan, 2004, p. 72) have all become possible learning locations.

All these technology tools facilitate development in second language learning settings. Nunan cites three specific benefits of using tasks with technology tools; including, providing learners more interactions in real life, adopting communicative roles, and changing the role relations in-class between teacher and learners (Nunan, 2004, p. 73). Nunan points out that as a new aspect, technology enlarges the scope and extends the meaning of the teaching setting. The teacher is not the only one from whom students can learn second language. Thanks to the application of technology in second language education, it has become possible for learners to interact with native speakers and peers both inside and outside the classroom. Moreover, technology provides learners with infinitive possibilities in the communicative use of a second language in the real-world.

Secondly, Nunan introduces focus-on-form tasks in TBLT. This is the grammar instruction in task-based language teaching, which has also been interpreted by Ellis (2003). Compared with Ellis' interpretation on focused and unfocused tasks, Nunan is more practical and easily comprehensible. It is a disputative issue in TBLT whether the tasks should be focused or unfocused. Nunan's definition of a focused task is "one in which a particular structure is required in order for a task to be completed" (Nunan, 2004, p. 94), while an unfocused task does not require predigesting grammatical resources. Learners are able to use any linguistic forms to complete the task (Nunan, 2004, p.95).

Nunan reviews the discussion on whether a task should predetermine particular grammatical forms. He shows two groups of scholars' opposite views on this issue, presenting their task samples without any of his own comments (Loschky and Bley-

Vroman, 1993, Willis and Willis, 2001, as cited in Nunan, 2004, pp. 95-97). Nunan particularly explains "Consciousness-raising tasks (CR)" which has been claimed by Ellis as a variant of focused tasks. He not only cites Ellis's statement about the differences between consciousness-raising tasks and other focused tasks in terms of structure-based and general nature (e.g. stories, pictures of objects), but also presents Fotos and Ellis' examples of a CR task to clarify the steps of designing CR tasks. Nunan also mentions another three issues regarding focused tasks: procedural language, where and when a focus should come in task cycle, and how a focus on form should be integrated into task work in the communicative classroom. Nunan believes that beside linguistic forms inherent in a task, procedural language is also necessary for the completion of a task. Nunan calls procedural language "byproducts" of the task and can be included in management language; such as, agreeing/disagreeing and negotiating meaning.

Moreover, Nunan explains the reasons why he places a focus on form at step 4 in the sequence of developing his proposed tasks. The sequence of developing units of work designed by Nunan includes schema building, controlled practice, authentic listening practice, focusing on linguistic elements, providing freer practice, and introducing the pedagogical task (Nunan, 2004, pp. 31-33). He points out that the sequence starts with communicative ends but not linguistic means. From a communicative perspective, learners at the beginning steps are supposed to familiarize themselves with the use of the target language, and then they are expected to establish connections between linguistic forms and communicative functions. In the remaining part of this section, Nunan uses an example to explain the procedure of integrating a focus on form into a communicative classroom. He divides the procedure into three parts: before the lesson, during the lesson, and after the lesson. Through exploring the role of a focus on form in TBLT, Nunan concludes that focused

tasks do have a place in the task-based instructional cycle. However, Nunan brings up certain questions, such as CR tasks, but he does not illustrate his purpose in presenting them.

Finally, Nunan examines task difficulty from the psycholinguistic perspective, as Ellis has done, but he only looks at two hypotheses: input hypothesis and output hypothesis. There is nothing new about his review of early theoretic studies. Nunan clarifies various elements of task difficulty that have been touched upon in different chapters in Ellis' work. In Nunan's view, determining task difficulty has become more problematic than determining functional difficulty. He cites Brindley's (1987) opinion that this question is complicated because there are at least three sets of factors involved: learner, task, and input factors.

Subsequent influential research regarding task difficulty/complexity is contributed by Skehan (1998) and Robinson (2001). Skehan developed a schema drawn on earlier work by Candlin (1987). Skehan's model provides three distinctions: code complexity related to language, cognitive complexity related to thinking, and communicative stress related to performance conditions of tasks. In this model, cognitive complexity is the most difficult to examine, but to some extent this model provides useful criteria that influence later research. Later on, Martyn (2001) makes two major contributions on the research of task difficulty. One is that different types of tasks have different cognitive features. The other is that Martyn draws on "density of negotiation" instead of negotiation of meaning.

Based on this previous research on task complexity and difficulty, Nunan (2004) suggests that the density of negotiation is an important element in future research on

relationships between task types, cognitive complexity and second language acquisition. Nunan explains the elements related on task complexity and difficulty from the perspective of cognition. His main contribution is drawing on pervious scholars' research to examine the effects of cognitive variable on task difficulty. In Nunan's (2004) viewpoint, particularly, the "density of negotiation" is an important element in the study of task difficulty and in any other aspects of TBLT. However, Nunan does not explicitly interpret the meaning of "density of negotiation," the reasons for bringing this new term into future task-based research, and the differences between "negotiation of meaning" and "density of negotiation." This makes it impossible for his audience to apply this term easily (Nunan, 2004, pp. 89-90).

In this section, I have reviewed Nunan's use of a comparatively easier method to interpret complicated theories. He also provides a number of task examples in this book for readers to understand the main ideas and ways of using tasks in their classrooms. Nunan's research bears a closer relation to practical teaching. He tends to examine task-based teaching and learning from the perspectives of teachers instead of the scholars. I am not saying that there is a lack of theoretical basis in Nunan's research; actually, I believe his use of specific examples to interpret theories is more effective for readers to learn about task-based language teaching, both theoretically and practically. His numerous examples of tasks provide novice teachers with valuable ideas about task design and implementation.

IV.   Dave Willis and Jane Willis

Like David Nunan, Dave Willis and Jane Willis provide many task examples for

readers to learn about the task-based teaching theory. In their work *Doing Task-based Teaching* (2008), Dave Willis and Jane Wills refine tasks for language teachers who are trying to understand the applications of task-based teaching practice. They provide a thorough discussion of various aspects of TBT in practical teaching with a number of examples; such as, task-based sequences in classroom, designing different types of tasks, language focus and form focus, the potential connections between tasks and real-world, and integration of tasks into course syllabus. Willis and Willis (2008)'s work lends confidence to beginning teachers and encourages them to use tasks in their classes.

This section will cover two issues by reviewing Willis and Willis's work. I will first discuss language focus and form focus and then analyze the design process of various types of tasks. The former question is related to unfocused and focused tasks, which has been interpreted by both Ellis and Nunan from theoretical and practical perspectives. In Willis and Willis's work, they distinguish language focus and form focus and then interpret the terminology "focus on form" and how it is used in task-based teaching. As the latter has not been covered systematically in the sections of Ellis and Nunan in this chapter, different types of tasks and their design will be presented and explained in this section.

Willis and Willis introduce two approaches to language teaching before distinguishing the differences between language focus and form focus: the form-based approach and the meaning-based approach. The biggest difference between the two is the timing of involving specific forms and grammatical structures in a teaching sequence. A well-known method of the form-focused approach is PPP (Presentation→ Practice→ Production). In carrying out the PPP sequence, teachers highlight one or two new

specific forms in the beginning, which means that the focus on form takes place before learners engage in communicative activity. Unlike the form-based approach, the meaning-based approach encourages learners to use the language as much as possible even though the language they produce may not be accurate enough. Learners think about language in general and search the target language which they have learned to express themselves in the target language. This is the so-called focus on language.

If teachers are involved in assisting students in reshaping or making their message clearer, it is regarded as a focus on language since the purpose is to help learners communicate. However, if teachers help learners focus on specific linguistic forms that occur in the context of the task, provide them with relevant examples and explanations, and encourage practice after the communicative task, this is called a focus on form. Willis and Willis make a distinction between a focus on language and a focus on form. They conclude that "a meaning-based approach involves a focus on meaning and a focus on language involves a focus on form" (Willis and Willis, 2008, p. 5). This has become the basic principle for the integration of linguistic forms into communicative tasks.

> A focus on language, in which learners pause in the course of a meaning-focused activity to think for themselves how best to express what they want to say, or a teacher takes part in the interaction and act as a facilitator by rephrasing or clarifying learner language.
> A focus on form in which one or more lexical or grammatical forms are isolated and specified for study, or in which the teacher comments on student language by drawing attention to problems. (Willis and Willis, 2008, p. 5)

Willis and Willis believe that there are various opportunities for learners to focus on language at different phases in a task cycle. It is proverbial that a task cycle normally is constituted by three phases: pre-task, core-task and post-task. Different scholars may choose different words to represent this three phases, such as priming stage called by

Willis and Willis. Generally speaking, a focus on language occurs when learners stop processing language in search of the right word to best express themselves. At that moment, they may use a dictionary. This phenomenon can take place at any phase of the task cycle, but Willis and Willis think it is better to point out that it occurs at the priming stage in the task cycle. They present examples to explain how to focus on language at the priming stage. They suggest that teachers provide learners a brief introduction to the topic with available vocabulary and worksheet for their homework before the next stage of the task. Teachers can reinforce the introduction through certain teaching activities, such as writing down some core vocabulary on the blackboard. Teachers should use this technique to help learners prepare for the implementation of the task at the next stage.

The key items in the task need to be prepared, and the procedural language mentioned by Nunan is also necessary for the preparation of core-task at the priming stage or pre-task phase. Additionally, it is also possible to create other opportunities for language-focused work. At a later stage, such as the planning stage, learners are given planning time to prepare for the presentation of their work, which is then more likely to be language focused. D. Willis and J. Willis (1987) and J. Willis (1996) outline a task cycle, called task→ planning→ report (Willis and Willis, 2008, p. 116). The likelihood of a focus on language taking place will be increased if the teacher asks learners to present their ideas through writing.

Willis and Willis also discuss what they consider to be the most distinctive difference between a focus on language and a focus on form. In their opinion, the major distinction between these two types of activities is whether or not the teacher explicitly identifies the grammar that students will practice. In a form focused task, teachers

normally drive learner attention to the linguistic forms at the end of the task cycle. Willis and Willis suggest three ways for teachers to help learners identify the specific forms, starting a task from (i) meaning, such as asking learners to read out the questions in a questionnaire; (ii) a given word, such as picking up phrases from a question with the word 'you'; and (iii) part of a word, such as highlighting the words ending in '-ly'. These ways help learners to focus on forms. The two scholars also point out that teachers need to correct learners as part of a form-focus activity. The three reasons for correction include preventing fossilization, motivating learners, and providing negative feedback. The issue of correction in a task is a disputative one in task-based teaching. When some teachers switch their role in the classroom from authority to facilitator, they are confused as to what their responsibilities are in the learning–teaching process. Some teachers only focus on drawing learners' attention to communication in a task and completely ignore the linguistic errors made by learners. Willis and Wills encourage teachers to think about how and when to correct, but they did not illustrate when teachers ought to correct learner errors given that the timing of correction is a complicated question.

Willis and Willis classify tasks from a text-based and topic-based perspective. They not only list all possible types of tasks, but also provide outlines and samples for teachers to design these various kinds of tasks, as summarized in Table 1. Willis and Willis classify the task types under the topic catalog according to cognitive processes theory. In this regard, neither Ellis nor Nunan can be compared.

Table 1. The Types of Tasks based on Willis and Willis's classification

Text-based	Topic/theme	
Discussion tasks	Listing	Brainstorming
Prediction tasks		Fact-finding
Jigsaw tasks		Games based on listing: quizzes, Memory challenges, and guessing games
General knowledge tasks	Ordering and sorting	Sequencing
		Rank ordering
		Classifying
		Games based on classified sets
	Matching	Words and phrases to pictures directions to street map
	Comparing and contrasting	Finding similarities or differences
	Problem-solving	Puzzles, logic problems prediction
	Projects and creative tasks	Class newspaper, poster, survey, etc
	Sharing personal experience	Storytelling, anecdotes, reminiscences

Willis and Willis's taxonomies of tasks differ from earlier taxonomies, such as Nunan, in that problem-solving is not a task type (Willis and Willis, 2008, p. 63). They point out that tasks are generated through cognitive processes, so one type of task often interacts with other types, such as 'opinion exchanges and information gaps would naturally occur when listing and discussing' (Willis and Willis, 2008, p. 64). Willis and Willis have also identified an interesting fact: English language learners have their own distinct interesting topics (see figure 4.1, Willis and Willis, 2008, pp. 64-65). Although Willis and Willis's classification of tasks is not unimpeachable, it is better and clearer for language teachers to follow their classification in order to design appropriate tasks in their lessons.

To summarize, D. Willis and J. Willis offer language teachers, particularly beginning teachers, an explicated explanation on and an introduction to the task-based teaching approach. This introduction includes task types and task design, basic issues in

task-based teaching and current challenges of TBT, and even methods to integrate tasks into a course syllabus. The two scholars have made contributions to the taxonomies of tasks, which by clarifying types is very helpful for teachers in task design.

Like Nunan, D. Willis and J. Willis also are more concerned with practical teaching issues of TBLT. They provide a number of sample tasks in order for teachers to design their own tasks. In Ellis' work, the theoretical basis and backgrounds regarding task-based language teaching are clarified. There are two kinds of theories that have influenced the development of TBLT: psycholinguistics and the social-cultural theory. Ellis interprets TBLT more often from the psycholinguistic perspective than the social-cultural perspective. Nunan and Willis' research also do not use the social-cultural theory explicitly. It is clear that researchers need to consider the interpretation of TBLT from a social-cultural perspective.

In the last part of this chapter, I will review an experimental piece of research in the context of CFL by Hong-gang Jin, a scholar of teaching Chinese as a foreign language. The works of the former four scholars I have reviewed in this chapter all focus on TBLT research in the context of English as a second language (ESL). Since this thesis is concerned with TBLT design and implementation in the context of CFL, it is necessary to review the relevant research done by scholar(s) who focus on teaching Chinese as a foreign language. Jin is a well-known scholar who concentrates on the application of TBLT research in the field of CFL.

V.   Hong Gang Jin

Based on the research in task-based language regarding how to differ task

complexity influences learner participation, interaction, and language productions, Jin (2010) designed an experiment to examine how task complexity influences interaction and production in a task. Jin shows that there have been a number of experiments (Doughly & Long, 2001; Robinson, 2001; Skehan & Foster, 1998; Nunan, 2004; N. Ellis, 1993; R. Ellis, 2003) about the relations between task complexity and language production, but those experiments are concerned with effects of task complexity on learners' language production. Jin also points out that most of the studies that have been done by western researchers are designed based on the characteristics of English, so measures regarding linguistic forms used to examine learners' language productions are not often appropriate for Chinese language. Moreover, there has been a lack of study on what and how much linguistic complexity and cognitive complexity can lead to information gaps on the negotiation of meaning.

Based on western scholars' previous empirical research (Long, 1983a, 1983b; Gass & Varonis, 1985; 1985b; Ellis, 203, cited by Jin, 2010), Jin proposes to analyze the effects of information gap on meaning negotiation from the perspectives of communicative gap under the context of non-western language in her research. She focuses on the three types of meaning negotiation that have been studied in SLA: (i) clarification requires, (ii) confirmation check, and (iii) comprehension check. By analyzing the effects of the three types of meaning negotiations on noticing, comprehensible input and pushed output, Jin attempts to examine three research questions:

(i) Whether code complexity (linguistic complexity) can affect task complexity, such as causing more meaning negotiations due to the communicative pauses of adding amount of unfamiliar linguistic forms
(ii) Whether the meaning negotiations caused by cognitive and code complexity can lead to learners' noticing different core structures, taking in these structures as comprehensible input, and then producing

pushed output

(iii) Whether the comprehensible input and pushed output caused by cognitive and code complexity can lead to incidental vocabulary learning and language acquisition.

There are twenty participants in Jin's experiment who are all college students from the same school, and their native language is English. The subjects are divided into two groups. The first is a control group (Group A) including 10 subjects, and the other is experimental group (Group B) including 10 subjects. Each five students are separated in sub-group A or B. When she groups students, she intends to group each two students based on their oral language proficiencies and their oral test performance six weeks before the experiment. Table 2 shows how she grouped students below. (see Table 3, Jin, 2010, p. 10)

Table 2. The groups of the experiment (translated from Jin, 2010, p. 10)

The groups of the experiment							
	Experimental group	Control group	How to group subjects				
			1	2	3	4	5
Group A	N=5	N=5	Weak	Strong	Relative strong	Relative weak	Strong
Group B	N=5	N=5	Weak	Weak	Relative weak	Relative strong	Strong

Jin's experiment includes four stages in the cycle of task design: the stage of pre-task, core task, post-task, and post-test. There are two ways to control the task complexity in Jin's experiment. The first is controlling the cognitive complexity of the task. The task information, a story, is split into two parts for the two subjects. Each subject is given two assignments, one is listening, and the other is reading. As long as they share their information with each other, the two subjects can obtain the whole story. Apart from controlling task assignments, the researcher also controls the way of communication. This is two-way communicative task, compared with the more complex one-way task. The second way of controlling task

complexity is distinguishing the code complexity between the control group and the experimental group. Jin gives her subjects 14 unfamiliar forms, including 12 vocabulary and 2 structures, based on three experienced teachers' evaluation.

The input material is an 800-word narrative story. The story is split into two parts. Group A and B each have one half of the story. They need to get input by means of both listening and reading. This stage is finished one day before the core task. In the core task, two subjects are required to exchange their information and put the whole story together. The whole 30-minutes process is recorded. Jin emphasizes that teachers have briefed subjects before the task implementation in order for them to understand the purpose of exchanging information and to be encouraged to negotiate the meaning with their partners. The post-task is writing. Subjects are required to summarize their partner's part of the story based on their exchanged information. The last stage is only for the experimental group, in which the subjects are arranged to finish the post-test with those unfamiliar forms without any preparation.

By the analysis of the subjects' recordings and writings collected during the task based on the three types of meaning negotiation, namely, noticing, comprehensible input, and pushed output, Jin found the following results with respect to her three research questions. Firstly, using quantity and quality analysis Jin found that more unfamiliar forms resulted in more meaning negotiation in a task. The experimental results of this study also provide evidence for the four questions in SLA and TBLT: (i) Unfamiliar topics or backgrounds can cause communicative difficulties and then lead to meaning negotiation; (ii) Similarly with cognitive complexity, code complexity, i.e. the complexity of linguistic forms, can affect task complexity; (iii) 2%-5% of unfamiliar forms not only do not influence the subject's reading

comprehension, but lead to more meaning negotiation; (iv)The meaning negotiation to some extent can result in a series of chain reactions, which means learners can negotiate the meanings consciously, not only using unfamiliar forms, but also other structures.

Secondly, Jin's experiment verifies that meaning negotiation enhances second language acquisition. The unfamiliar forms cause learners to notice, and then to absorb and transit those new forms into comprehensible input. After taking in the new forms, they are likely to produce pushed output. However, learners are not able to output all unfamiliar forms. The three types of meaning negotiation, i.e. (i) noticing; (ii) comprehensible input; (iii) pushed output, are shown in a pyramid of hierarchical relationship from bottom to top. Finally, Jin points out that incidental vocabulary learning can occur in task implementation as long as teachers attend to the following steps of task design: (i) Inserting a few number of unfamiliar linguistic forms. Teachers ought to strictly control the amount of unfamiliar forms, otherwise, they will become the learning burden; (ii) Encouraging learners to negotiate meaning during the cycle of a task, in the sequence of pre-task, core task, and post-task. Teachers can insert unfamiliar forms in all three stages of a task. Learners can learn about unfamiliar forms at the stage of pre-task, and then they need to exchange their unfamiliar forms with peers by asking questions. Finally unfamiliar forms can be represented in learners' writings at the stage of post-task.

Jin's research combines both the theory of cognitive psychology and that of second language acquisition to examine how code complexity affects task complexity in the context of CFL, and then leads to more effective negotiation of meaning and incidental vocabulary learning on the part of the learner. It is a significant study on task complexity in the field of CFL. However, Jin did not consider individual learner differences when she analyzed the

data. Individual learner differences influence their performance in second language learning, especially when learning strategies have an impact on the way learners use task strategies during the negotiation of meaning. Although she attended to learner differences when she grouped subjects, her research has not discussed whether different learner uses different way to negotiate meaning. In addition, the task designed by Jin only involves interactions between two subjects, but if a task involves more than two participants, will there be a different result?

By reviewing all of the scholars' research in this chapter, I conclude that these researchers have all focused on examining learning outcomes by analyzing task design and task complexity. There is however a lack of research that examines task complexity based on learners' individual difference. Ellis mentions that task difficulty and complexity is influenced by different variables, particularly cognitive, topic and learner variables. However, he does not mention how these variables affect task difficulty and complexity, and whether the effects of the three variables cause different task predicted outcomes to different individual learners. The five scholars in this chapter all draw their attention to the use of linguistic forms in tasks. According to Jin's research, linguistic forms also can change the complexity of tasks. However, she does not further point out how different linguistic forms affect individual learners' performance in tasks. Based on the shortcomings of the research reviewed in this chapter, in the following Chapters 3 and 4, I will illustrate and analyze three tasks that I designed and implemented at Hamilton College between 2006 and 2009. I will thus interpret how to compensate for learner's individual differences and meet individual learning demands or weaknesses through use of the TBLT approach.

Chapter 3

Three Tasks

I.   Introduction to the three tasks

In Chapter 2, through a review of the current literature, I have drawn attention to how the cognitive variable, topic variable and learner variable in task design affect task difficulty and complexity. Based on the theory of individual difference, the learner variable is likely to blend with other elements such as the learner's cognitive, learning and social strategies, and learning style. Those elements will lead to more difficulty in examining the effectiveness and complexity of tasks. However, because of this relationship between the learner variable and the topic variable, and because of the principal goals of SLA tasks, tasks may be an effective way of teaching Chinese in an individualized manner when teachers are faced with varied levels of student proficiencies in one class. This is an increasingly significant issue in CFL, but relevant research is limited.

In this chapter, I will explain three tasks designed either on my own or with the assistance of my former supervisor, Professor Hong-gang Jin, when I was teaching Chinese at Hamilton College between 2006 and 2009. The three tasks were designed for students with an intermediate-low or intermediate-mid level of language proficiency based on their scores of the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Test (OPI). The first task was a detective story. The second one utilized a blog related to the issue of a new Starbucks opening in the Forbidden City. The last one was called "presidential election." There are two reasons for choosing to analyze these three tasks. One reason is that they are all relatively complex and comprehensive tasks. Students are required to spend both in-class time and outside class

time to carry on their pre-task, core task and post task either with their group or on their own. Hence, the processes of the three tasks are complete, which makes it possible to examine task difficulty and complexity from the perspectives of cognitive, topic and learner variables. The other reason is that the three tasks include different types of tasks that are rarely to be applied used by teachers of Chinese. The first task is an information gap task, the second one combines the two types of tasks, i.e. information exchange and comparing and contrasting, and the last one is a creative task linked with students' general daily knowledge. In addition, both Task 2 and Task 3 are designed and implemented with technology tools. Therefore, the two reasons drive me to analyze and examine the three tasks in this chapter and Chapter 4.

The three tasks were all designed as focused tasks for learners with different language proficiency levels, and in these tasks they were required to communicate using the language forms identified by the teacher. According to my observations, not every learner is able to succeed in acquiring the target language forms through in-class drills due to their varied learning styles, different degrees of learning anxiety, or different learning backgrounds. The typical in-class drill is based on audiolingual and grammar translation teaching methods. In fast-paced class teaching, visual learners might not be able to follow the instructor merely by listening and speaking. If learners easily get anxious while speaking a foreign language, it might be more difficult and uncomfortable for them to answer their teacher's questions in front of the whole class. Facing these kinds of difficulties regarding learner differences, I have to think about using another teaching method that compensates for such learner weaknesses. Since the TBLT method highlights meaningful communication, and focused tasks emphasize the functions of linguistic forms

in a task, I have set out to design certain focused tasks for learners who are at different levels of proficiency but have been grouped into the same class. I will interpret how the teacher uses tasks to facilitate the learning process according to the differences between students' language proficiencies in one class. In this chapter, I will explain in detail how to design and implement the three focus tasks. By demonstrating these focused tasks, I will be able to present learners' feedback and my reactions on the focused tasks in the following chapter.

At Hamilton College, all textbooks used for Chinese learners are published by Princeton University. Students at the introductory level use *Chinese Primer* (中文入门) (Ch'en, Link, Tai and Tang, 1994) for both the fall and the spring semesters. Intermediate-level students use *Intermediate Reader of Modern Chinese* (现代汉语中级读本) (Chou and Chao, 1992) and *New China* (新的中国)(Chou, Chiang and Eagar, 1999). The language forms provided in the Princeton textbooks are relatively more formal written Chinese than other popular Chinese textbooks in the United States such as *Integrated Chinese* (中文听说读写) (Yao, *et al,* 2008), and this is one of the most distinctive features of the textbooks published by Princeton. For those Chinese language learners who are not in the target-language environment, they rarely have an opportunity to use this kind of formal written language. Moreover, I attempted to use these tasks to bring learners with different language proficiencies into situations involving real, meaningful communication. Thus, I designed certain tasks with the purpose of helping students learn to use the language forms they had learned in the textbooks in communication with their classmates. As I have mentioned above, all of the three tasks I will introduce in this chapter are focused tasks. In this chapter, I describe the three tasks

with screen shots and relevant appendices attached after the last chapter from four perspectives: (i) objectives; (ii) requirements; (iii) procedures; and (iv) goals, in order to explain in detail the design and implementation of the three tasks. Through descriptions of the three tasks in this chapter, I will analyze the strengths of the tasks from both the learning and teaching perspectives in Chapter 4, and I will develop the strategies of task design and implementation in Chapter 5.

II.   Task 1: "Detective Story"

The detective story task was used three times between the fall semester in 2006 and the fall semester in 2008. I revised this task each time it was used. I discuss this task in this thesis based on the last version, i.e. the version of 2008. The detective story task was designed for students at the intermediate-low level. Twenty U.S. undergraduate students participated in this task. All of these students had been learning Chinese as a foreign language for approximately three college-level semesters.

(i)   Objectives

My aim of designing this detective story was to train students so that they were able to organize and review the language forms by the end of the third semester. They were expected to use the given language forms when communicating with peers. This is a comprehensive task. Multiple types of language forms are included in one task, such as information gaps and problem-solving. Based on Willis and Willis' taxonomy, this task can also be classified as a text-based task.

I expect to achieve two goals by means of the detective story task. One is to help my students review the language forms they have learned. Based on the ACTFL Chinese

proficiency guidelines (ACTFL, 2008), this task focuses on students' ability to narrate and describe using accurate Chinese.

> Speaking: the advanced level is characterized by the speaker's ability to (i) conserve a clearly participatory fashion; (ii) initiate, sustain and bring to closure a wide variety of communicative tasks, including those that require an increased ability to convey meaning with diverse language strategies due to a complication or an unforeseen turn of events; (iii) satisfy the requirements of school and work situation; and (iv) narrate and describe with paragraph-length connected discourse. (ACTFL, 2008, pp. 471-487)

The use of a story is indeed an appropriate way for L2 learners to improve their ability to create narratives and descriptions. The other goal of this task is developing the students' communicative competence through carrying out a meaningful task.

(ii)   Requirements

Focusing on these two goals, I designed this task to require students to exchange their information about the story, restructure the whole story, and in the end solve the criminal case through working collaboratively. By discussing the plots and details in the story with logical analysis, the students can use the second language structures they have learned, as well as their cognitive, imaginative and communicative competence to discover the identity of the criminal in this detective story. A relatively efficient method for the teacher in this task is to provide written materials by including more focused structures and vocabulary in the detective story. This is especially effective for learners at the intermediate-low level. However, for students at the intermediate level, it is not recommended to use a great deal of authentic language materials as the learners only have limited language proficiency. Therefore, as a task designer, I am obliged to identify the focused forms in the task materials, since one of the goals of this task is to facilitate students to practice the language forms they have learned.

Table 3. List of the focused forms in the first two scenes of the detective story

雪碧	*xuěbì*	Sprite	受……欢迎	*shòu huānyíng*	popular
当地	*dāngdì*	Local	饮料	*yǐnliào*	beverage
服务	*fúwù*	service; serve	专业的	*zhuānyè de*	professional
记者	*jìzhě*	reporter; journalist	(被)强奸	*(bèi)qiángjiān*	rape (to be raped)
银行	*yínháng*	bank	顾客	*gùkè*	customer
经理	*jīnglǐ*	manager	提供	*tígōng*	supply; provide
需要	*xūyào*	need	忙着	*máng zhe*	to be busy with
修理	*xiūlǐ*	to fix; to repair	等……	*děng*	to wait (for)
空调	*kōngtiáo*	air conditioner	决定	*juédìng*	to determine; to decide
现代化	*Xiàndài huà*	Modernized	居然	*jūrán*	unexpectedly
秘书	*mìshū*	Secretary	明信片	*míngxìnpiàn*	post card
计算机	*jìsuànjī*	Computer	照片	*zhàopiàn*	photo; picture
只好	*zhǐhǎo*	to have to; to be forced to	干净	*gānjìng*	clean; neat
渴	*kě*	to be thirsty	街	*jiē*	street; avenue
不然…	*bùrán*	otherwise	发现	*fāxiàn*	To discover

This detective story (see Appendix II, p. 98) was centered on two main characters, Zhang Dazhong and Li Xiaofen, both of whom are characters in *Intermediate Reader of Modern Chinese* (现代汉语中级读本), but there is no connection between the two characters in the textbook. I chose these two characters as the protagonists because they arouse student interest to participate in the task. The protagonists were familiar to the students and were talked about by students in every text, so students were easily engaged in the task. Since this task bore an unfamiliar topic from the perspective of cognitive theory, I intentionally added familiar elements to reduce cognitive difficulties to a certain extent. The clue of this detective story is an expensive new camera. Zhang Dazhong, a journalist at *the New York Times,* will be sent to work in China. His supervisor gives him

a new professional camera and reminds him not to lose it. Dazhong is excited to have this opportunity and the camera, and is planning how to spend his remaining spare time with his girlfriend, Li Xiaofen. However, Xiaofen is not very happy about Dazhong's opportunity, because she is worried at the prospect of maintaining a long-distance romance. Nevertheless, Xiaofen does not say anything to Dazhong, but instead decides to do everything that Dazhaong has arranged.

The story describes their activities in a whole day. There are eight scenes in the whole story, which include Xiaofen's feelings, Dazhong's plan, the bank, at the snack store, on the road when they are driving, at a travel agency, at an Italian restaurant, and as they are leaving the Italian restaurant. Each scene includes some hints, which are time words for students to picture the whole story and then carry out the task. When I was writing the story, I inserted some unfamiliar forms into different scenes of the task materials, such as 拍照片(*pai zhaopian*-to take pictures), 钱包(*qianbao*-wallet), and 差 点儿+VP(*cha dianr*-almost). Based on Jin's research (2010), providing 2%-5% unfamiliar linguistic forms can increase negotiation meaning in tasks. There are a few strategies to add unfamiliar linguistics forms to a task. (i) The characters which consist of unfamiliar linguistic forms such as 工作人员(*gongzuo renyuan*-staff) have been learned by learners. (ii) Learners have learned some vocabulary as a noun. The unfamiliar form provides the corresponding verb, for example, 拍照片(*pai zhaopian*-to take pictures), students have learned "picture," so it is easy for them to guess the meaning of "taking pictures" in the context. (iii) Associate students' cognitive knowledge with the meaning of each Chinese character to develop new vocabulary, such as 纽约时报(*Niuyue Shibao-New York Times*). For American students, they all know *New York Times* and they have

learned all the four Chinese characters. So when I combined the four characters together,

students may figure out the meaning quickly.

Table 4. List of the unfamiliar forms in the whole detective story

拍照片	pāi zhàopiàn	Take picture	美女	měinǚ	pretty girl
差点儿	chàdiǎnr	nearly	纽约时报	Niǔyuē Shíbào	New York Times
排队	páiduì	stand in a line	钱包	qiánbāo	wallet; purse
高级	gāojí	high-ranking	小心	xiǎoxīn	Be careful
分手	fēnshǒu	to break up	上有天堂，下有苏杭	shàng yǒu Tiāntáng, xià yǒu Sū Háng	Up above there is heaven; down below there are Suzhou and Hangzhou.
工作人员	gōngzuò rényuán	Staff			

Preparing task materials is just the first phase of task design. In the process of task

design, creating or looking for materials is not difficult, but the more challenging phases

are when you have to consider how to use the materials, how to implement the task, and

how to make students engage in the task. In fact, before writing the story, I had a basic

sketch of the task in my mind: discovering the criminal by exchanging information and

problem solving. Furthermore, I also considered how to implement the task in advance.

(iii)   Procedure

The detective story includes eight parts in total, all of which are provided through

reading. There were twenty students, so I decided to make every four students a group.

Each student had access to two parts of the story. Jin (2010) discovered in her research if

students with mixed levels of language proficiency were grouped together in a task, their

negotiation meaning increased, because students were forced to explain the materials they

held to their partners and were required to let them understand the meaning of the

materials in detail; otherwise, it would be difficult for their partners to finish the post-task assignments.

Based on the Jin's research results regarding the effects of grouping on the interactions, participations and negotiation meanings of learners (see Table 3, Jin, 2010, p. 111), I made sure that there were students at different proficiency levels present in each group. Second language acquisition theorists have claimed that intermediate comprehensible input promotes L2 learners' output (Long, 1996). Based on this theory, providing effective input for learners is a must. Following the cycle of task (pre-task, core task and post task), the best time to input is at the phase of pre-task. Students can be expected to totally understand the details about the process of the task as well as to acquire a number of language forms.

Students were assigned appropriate reading materials based on their respective levels of language proficiency. For instance, if a student was relatively more proficient in the language, they would be assigned the parts of the story with certain unfamiliar forms. Likewise, if the language forms to be learned were difficult for a student with relatively low language proficiency, they would be given the parts of story without unfamiliar forms so that they could understand the story more easily. The students were required to read the materials, and then answered the questions to ensure that they comprehended the details of the story context. At this phase, they were reminded not to share their own parts with peers; they were expected to memorize their parts of the story in order to present them in front of other students. Even the weak students needed to figure out the meaning of the story. The pre-task was assigned the day before carrying out the core task, so students, whether they were proficient or not, had enough time to prepare their own parts.

The teacher should be a facilitator at this time and should offer the students at lower

levels of proficiency certain help to fulfill the pre-task if necessary.

The phase of the core-task was carried out in class. Each class was divided into

two groups and they were required to meet with their teacher, one group after another, so

the teacher did not need to observe two groups together at once. However, when the

detective story tasks took place in the classroom, the teacher had to supervise one group

including 5-6 students. This makes it relatively more difficult for the teacher to facilitate

students carrying out the task.

The students in each group should have exchanged their information by posing

and asking questions. After exchanging the information, they needed to cooperate and

picture the whole story together, and then analyzed the story by producing

comprehensible language, using their imaginative and cognitive ability to discover the

identity of the criminal. The group that first figured out the answer was the winner. Each

group should select one representative to explain their result in front of the classroom.

This was not the last phase for the task. The post-task as the follow-up must also be

included. During the core task, each group of students made the consensus decision to

win, but this does not mean that everyone in a group agreed on the identity of the thief.

So I required them to write an "investigation report" to interpret their individual opinions

as a take-home quiz over the weekend. During this time they could take advantage of

writing the report to re-digest the language forms (see Tables 1 & 2 above).

(iv)   Goals

The planned outcomes of the task included: (i) Students are expected to find out

who has stolen the camera and explain the evidence; (ii) They are expected to focus on

the given language forms at the phase of post-task and write an investigation report. At this phase, students have an opportunity to pay more attention to the accuracy and complexity of their use of the Chinese language.

The significant difference between Task 1 and Tasks 2 and 3 is that there is no technology tool integrated into the former. The task settings are based on traditional classrooms. In addition, there are no native speakers of Chinese involved and no authentic Chinese language materials are provided in Task 1. The teacher wrote the input materials for students. Therefore, Task 1 is more based on the specific teaching materials.

III.   Task 2: "Blog Discussion: The Issue of Opening Starbucks at the Forbidden City "

In recent years, technological tools are a must in foreign language education, also in Chinese learning and teaching. The tools referred to here include low-tech tools, hi-tech tools and web tools. As language is the primary tool of communication in our society, it is important for teachers to keep their students challenged and avoid disinterest. Nunan (2004) has pointed out the possibilities of combining tasks and technology tools. Along with the development of technology, classrooms and language labs are not the only places where language learning occurs. I mentioned this point in Chapter 2. All these technology tools facilitate development in second language learning settings. Nunan cites three specific benefits of using tasks with technology tools (Nunan, 2004, p. 73). Nunan points out a relatively new aspect in task-based teaching. Technology-based second language teaching enlarges the scope and extends the meaning of the teaching setting.

The second task I will discuss in this chapter utilizes a technology tool — the blog. This task was applied in the middle of the fourth semester of Chinese at Hamilton

College. Twenty-one students at the intermediate-mid level participated in this task. The topic of this task was not related to any texts, but it is also a focused task. Students had learned 97% of the language forms contained in the tasks. Since the task material drew on an authentic blog article, there are a few unfamiliar linguistic forms to the students.

(i)   Objectives

Blogs can offer a collaborative and participatory on-line learning environment. As Nunan (2004) noted, technology expands the possibilities of teaching locations and learning settings, so teachers can consider carrying out tasks outside the classroom through the use of internet tools, such as the blog. If students are able to fulfill the task by using such tools, teachers are likely to facilitate students individually. Compared with the detective story, the teachers did not need to facilitate 5-6 students simultaneously in the blog task. Since one of the characteristics of cyberspace is instantaneity, Professor Hong Gang Jin and I aimed to design a task-based learning activity using blogs. This task was designed to achieve four goals: (i) Use and review the target language, which students had learned through reading an authentic on-line blog article; (ii) Engage students in a real life on-line social discussion with many Chinese people; (iii) Encourage students to share their opinions and compositions with Chinese people as well as with their classmates; (iv) Increase students' participation and interaction with their peers and extend it to native speakers of Chinese in China regardless of time, space and distance.

(ii)   Requirements

I provided students with an edited blog article regarding the issue of opening a Starbucks at the Forbidden City (see Appendix IV, pp. 100-101). The task material drew on an authentic blog article by Rui, Chenggang, an author from CCTV 9. When I edited

the blog article, I merely deleted certain unfamiliar language forms and made some necessary English translations of a couple of key words.

This task occurred outside the classroom online. Students not only carried out the task individually, but were also required to collaborate with their fellow students. They read the blog article independently. After reading the blog article and answering the questions for comprehension, they were required to interview native Chinese international students on campus and ask their opinions on the issue of opening a Starbucks at the Forbidden City. The students further were required to record the report of their interviews orally in MP3 format when they finished up the interviews. They then posted their recordings of interviews of native Chinese on the blog, and then made comments on their peers' posts. This process is regarded as a two-way task. Since this type of task involves discussion, there is no closed ending for the task. In addition, with the application of technology in this task, the location where the task takes place can be anywhere, not confined in the classroom, as long as students are able to access the internet.

(iii)   Procedure

This blog task follows the rule of the cycle of tasks. Firstly, at the phase of pre-task, teachers exposed students to an authentic Chinese blog article (see Appendix IV, pp. 100-101) from China.   This allowed the students to understand the background of a social issue in Beijing about whether Starbucks should be allowed to open a location in the ancient palace. Students read the article as a one-day assignment. They were expected to understand the article and finish the questions, which were designed to check their comprehension. Secondly, at the phase of the core task, students were required to fulfill

two sub-tasks. (i) Students interviewed five native Chinese students on campus about their opinions on the issue of opening a Starbucks in the Forbidden City, and then students wrote a composition of the interview results in Chinese. (ii) Students were required to orally present the composition regarding the interview results and record this presentation in MP3 format. After recording, they posted the audio recording on the blog on Blackboard for their peers and the Chinese participants to hear and comment. Students were required to listen to at least three other students' recordings and make blog comments. Students were able to interact with their peers as well as native speakers of Chinese in China and in the U.S. via this blog. Since Blackboard is not a public educational online system, people who do not have accounts on Blackboard cannot access it. I needed to find a way to let the native speakers of Chinese access Blackboard to make comments for the student recordings. Under the support of my supervisor at Hamilton College, I contacted a technician at the IT center to open my course, Chinese 140, on Blackboard publicly for one month. Then I invited some native Chinese speakers to access Blackboard. These native speakers had been hired by the Associated Colleges in China program in Beijing, China (ACC), established by Hamilton College with other six liberal arts colleges in the US. When those native Chinese speakers were invited to comment on students' recordings, they had not yet begun to teach at the ACC program and had not been trained to be Chinese language teachers.
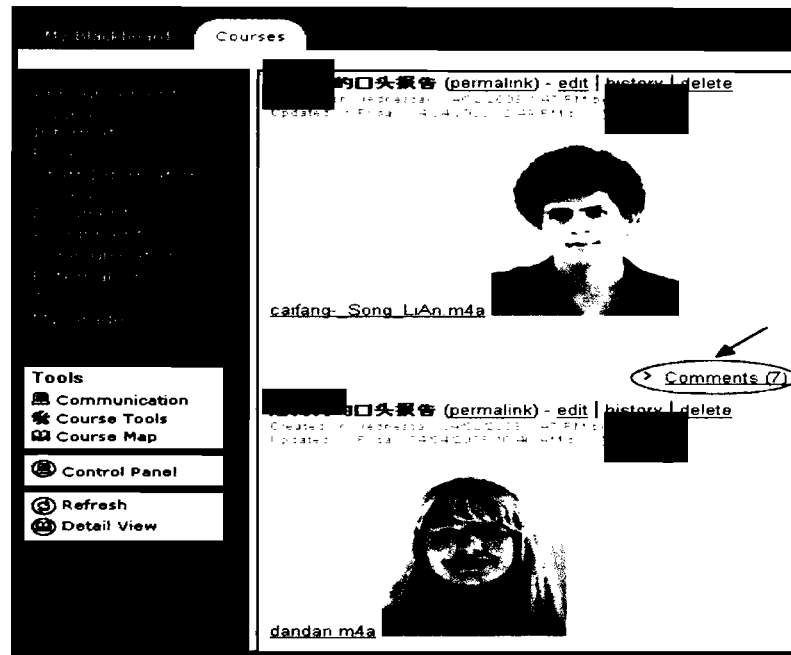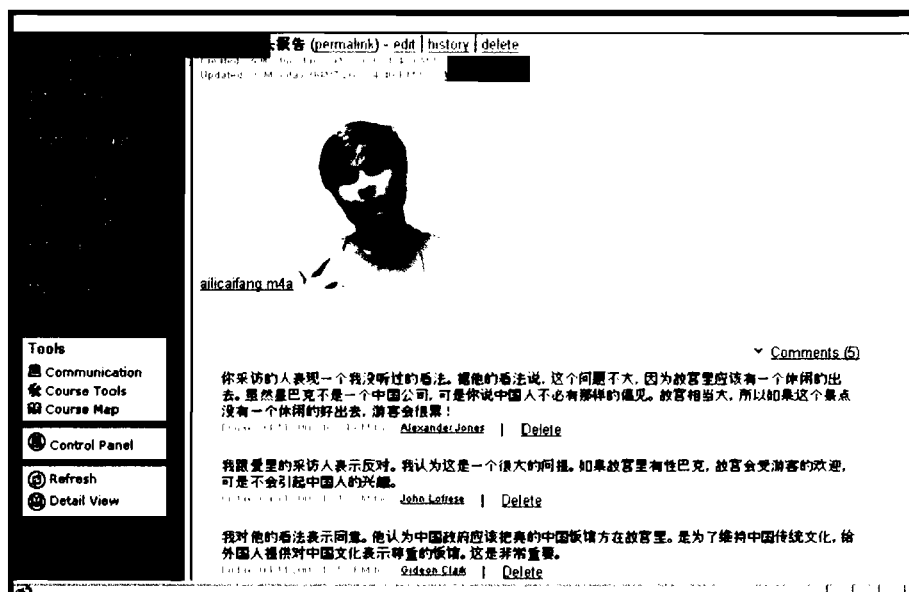
Screen Shot 1. Sample Blog
Screen Shot 1 shows students' blogs with oral recordings on Blackboard.

(iv)   Goals

This online web activity generates a great deal of student interest in communicating with each other and with Chinese bloggers in the target language. The outcome of this task is increasing use of the target language, as well as participation and interactivity.

This chain of tasks on the blog leads to a large quantity of target language use. Each student reads one article, listens to at least 3 recordings, interacts with at least 5-8 native speakers face to face or online, and shares their interview with more than 20 people. The following screen shot shows that one student's blog comment generated 4 additional comments and some exchange of views with fellow students and a Chinese blogger. Such tasks utilizing a web tool have achieved just as much as a traditional paper-and-pencil assignment in terms of quantity and quality of receptive and productive target language use, with a high degree of participation and interaction.

Screen shot 2. Sample comments

Screen Shot 2 shows the comments by both his peers and one native speaker of Chinese.

The blog tasks realized in different phases aroused a strong interest in participation among students. More than two-thirds of the students cited the original comments in the pre-task readings to elicit comments from native Chinese students. Many-to-many participation was also evident in that 21 students interviewed 50 Chinese-speaking students. On average, each student interviewed 2-3 persons and listened to 5-8 online summaries of survey results. Altogether students posted 144 items of written comments in this blog activity (Jin & Lu, 2011). Throughout the entire task cycle 21 students acted both as active senders and receivers of messages. By posting oral presentations on interview recordings, publishing their comments online and writing down their interview results, students established themselves as active senders. In the meantime, students read the blog articles and comments and listened to other bloggers' voices in the recordings (receivers). Thus, the type of interaction in these activities was not only many-to-many but also two-way communication.

Finally, with regard to communication mode, all 21 students made use of multiple modes to complete tasks in the three phases. By reading and listening to blogs, students were engaged in the interpretive mode of communication. The face-to-face interviews and comment exchange, including four language skills - speaking, listening, reading and writing - were all carried out in the interpersonal mode. The oral and written presentations of the interview results and comments in the target language all involved presentational modes as well.

IV.   Task 3: "The Presidential Election"

This task was designed for an intermediate-high Chinese class consisting of nine students at Hamilton College. This class was quite different from intermediate-low classes. At Hamilton College, students who are majoring in Chinese are required to study abroad in China to meet the departmental requirements. As a result, most of the students of the Chinese language at intermediate level complete their third year of Chinese language study in China. There were only a few students who were not able to study overseas for various reasons. These reasons included low level of Chinese proficiency, choosing not to major in Chinese, and having learned Chinese in high school so that they were placed at intermediate-high level directly after enrolling in college. For these reasons, the students in the intermediate-high class at Hamilton were at varied levels of language proficiency. Among those nine students, four of them had begun to learn Chinese at Hamilton when they were freshmen. Among these four students, two had studied abroad in China in the summer before taking this intermediate-high Chinese course. The other five students had all been learning Chinese since high school. Because

of the different requirements in high school and diverse learning backgrounds, those five students were not at the same levels of language proficiency either.

This task was not only used at Hamilton College in 2006-2008, but also used at Seton Hall University in fall 2009. In this task, I had to adjust the number of each group, since the numbers of students at intermediate-high level changed each year, especially at different two schools.

(i)   Objectives

The presidential election is also designed as a focused task. My primary goal of the task design is to help students with different language proficiencies use their target language and improve their respective level of language proficiency. The theme is in terms of Lesson 14, *Zongtong You le Nü Pengyou*, in *All Things Considered* (Chou, Xia and Goh, 2001), published by Princeton University. This text is studied in the middle of the semester when students have touched upon enough formal topics and social issues, such as Sino-Taiwan relations and Chinese college students' views on sexual relationships. However, the election is a good topic that can be combined with a variety of themes. For L2 learners at the intermediate level, using authentic materials is inevitable. The ACTFL Chinese proficiency guidelines emphasize that learners should be able to read authentic language materials. It is the teacher's responsibility to provide students with authentic input and encourage them to read authentic language materials. The teacher should not only provide authentic materials, but also consider how to engage individually different students in the task without communication anxiety.

(ii)   Requirements

I designed the task on WebQuest, a web-based educational tool. Teachers in other disciplines have also designed a variety of tasks on WebQuest. The most distinctive characteristic of WebQuest task is that it provides web resources, so the instructor does not have to completely input task materials. Learners need to search and look up the useful materials on their own based on the links or websites offered by teachers. That is to say, this is not a text-based task, but a task based on theme (Willis and Willis, 2008).
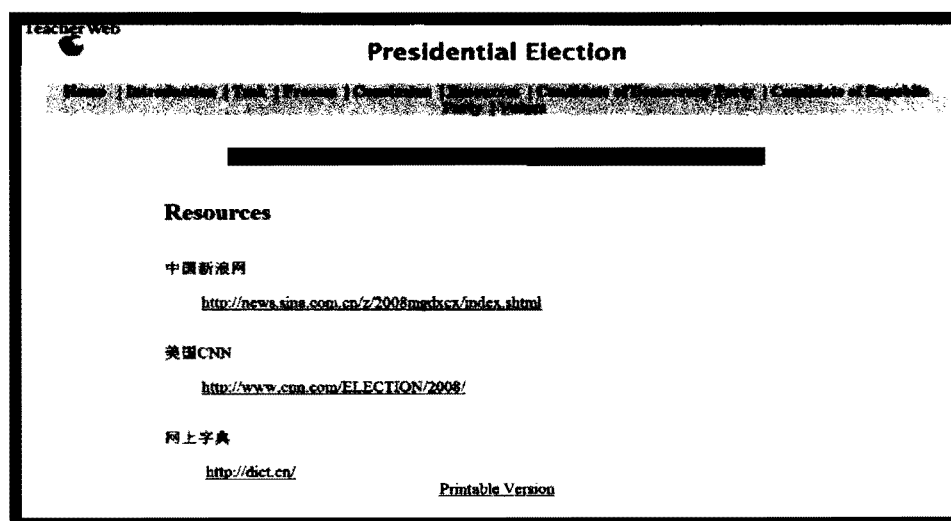
Screen Shot 3. On-line Resources
Screen shot 3 shows the web resources provided on WebQuest.

Generally speaking, teachers assign different roles to each student. Every student is required to access to the websites that their teachers listed on WebQuest, and answer specific questions the teacher asks. Each of them not only needs to complete their own assignment, but also needs to cooperate with other students in his group through doing research to achieve the teacher's assigned questions. Therefore, the participants not only do their job independently, but also do collaborative assignments with others. In a word,

it involves one-way and two-way communicative tasks. Since the students select an ideal president in the process of completion and discussion, this is a closed ending task.
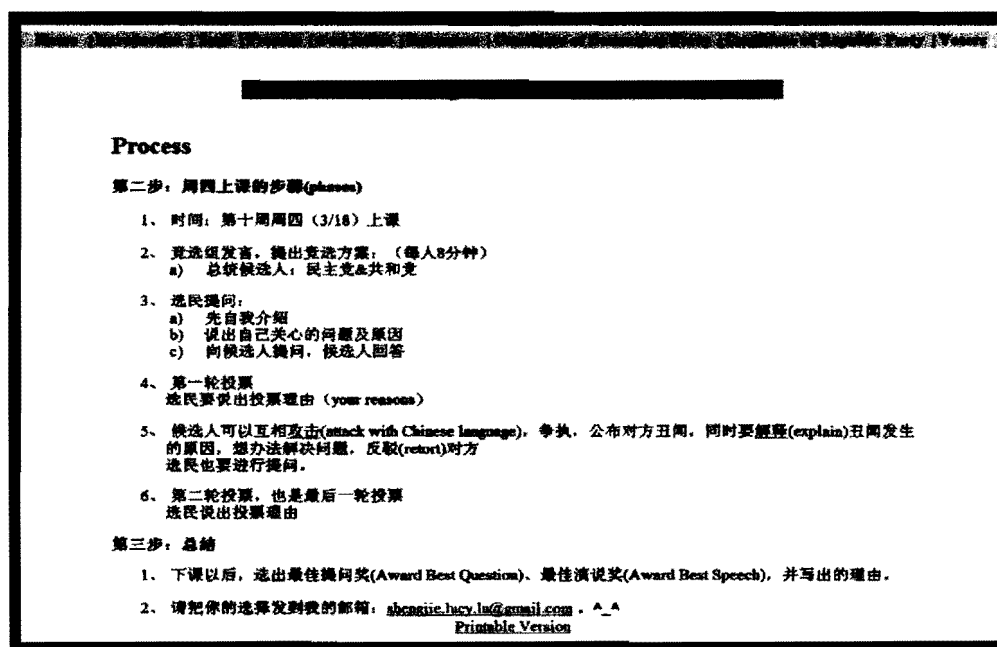
(iii)   Procedure

During this process, learners have the opportunity to improve their target language while communicating with their peers. Because they get different materials based on their own language abilities, it is possible for students to get authentic input at different levels from the websites. I assigned them a task before class and they shared their information through presentation, debating or interview in class. Normally, the topics of the authentic materials given to them were the same, but the difficulties of the materials were different.

For this task, there were three types of roles: the candidate of the Democratic Party, the candidate of the Republican Party, and the voters. Each group consisted of three students with different language abilities, and I assigned each student in a group one role, so they could collaborate with each other. I created a new WebQuest for this task, including 5 sections: introduction, process, role 1, role 2, role 3 and conclusion. At the introduction and process parts, I gave students very clear and detailed directions on the task. They were required to select the new president from the two candidates at the first step. At the role 1 and role 2 sections, I provided two websites for the two candidates so that those at a relatively higher language level could read authentic Chinese materials (see Screen Shot 3), and then write their own speech draft. The reading materials online could provide some special vocabulary, phrases and sentence patterns for them, which they could use as a reference for their writing. As for the role 3 section, I posted the link of the survey on American voters' backgrounds and attitudes toward the election.

Students needed to understand the poll and discuss who represented which type of voters. During the process of discussion i.e. step 2, the student who had the best language proficiency in the group could help the other two understand the online materials and express themselves. After they chose their own identities, they were required to write their self-introductions, social issues that they were concerned about and questions they wanted to ask the candidates. Step 2 was carried out in Thursday's class, which includes six sub-phases: (i) time; (ii) presenting the speeches by the candidates from each two Parties; (iii) voters introducing their identities and asking the candidates questions; (iv) voting and explaining the reasons by the group of voters; (v) debating between two Parties, (vi) the last round voting and voters presenting their reasons. For Step 3, i.e. the conclusion part, the three voters needed to select one candidate and explain their reasons. Moreover, after the class, students were required to write an essay to explain who would be awarded the best question and best speech in the core-task.
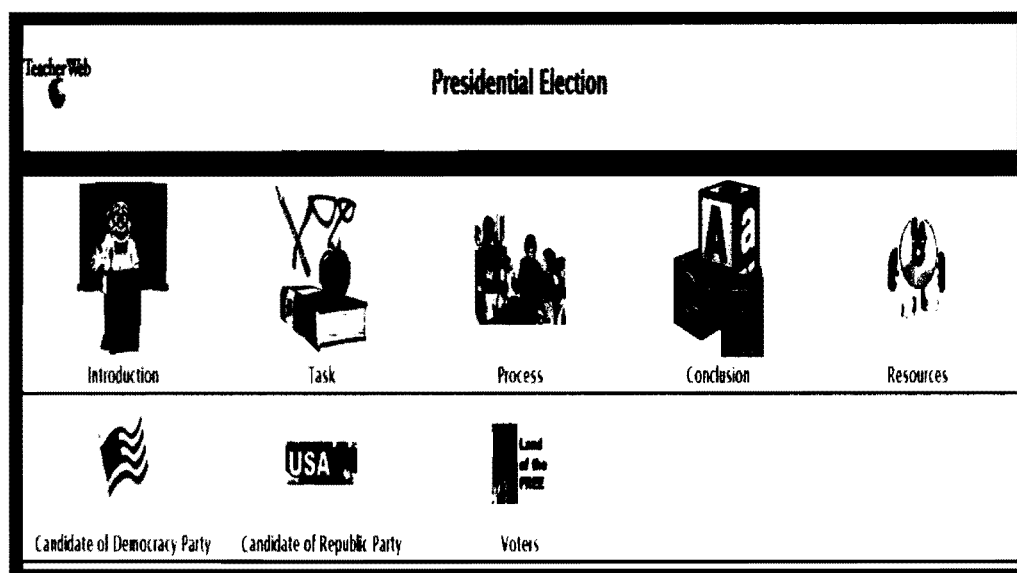
Screen shot 4
It shows the homepage for the task on WebQuest.

Screen shot 5. The procedure of the core task

(iv)   Goals

The task on WebQuest is only one of the many ways of helping the students use

Chinese in class. Through the WebQuest task, interpretative, interpersonal and

presentational communicative modes are achieved. Each student searches and expresses

himself in the appropriate target language. The strong learners try to use more

complicated language forms, and the weak learners also attempt to retrieve the language

forms they have learned. During this process, each learner makes maximal use of the

target language. Therefore, it is possible to use TBLT to push students at different

proficiency levels to use and improve their Chinese at the same time.

V.   Summary

In this chapter, I have tried to explain how to design and implement tasks to meet

different learners' demands. The three tasks have different characteristics. The detective

story is a text-based focused task. The teacher has to identify language forms strictly and

provide different learners different materials by means of inserting unfamiliar linguistic forms. The second task provides students opportunities to interact with more than five participants, including both their classmates and native speakers of Chinese. Since students need to carry out the pre-task and core task individually, they are likely to discover the means of communication in Chinese in a comfortable environment. When involved in the post-task, which requires them to interact with peers on the blog, the relatively weak students become more confident. The third task, the presidential election, highlights both individual and collaborative work in second language learning. The learner has a chance to compensate for their weaknesses by working on the pre-task individually, and then students discuss the issue in groups and have effective interactions.

In these three tasks, firstly, learners' individual differences are considered. Different types of input materials are provided to students with different learning styles; for instance, reading text can meet the visual learners' demands, and listening materials are helpful for aural learners. Meanwhile, the different types of input materials also compensate for learners' individual weaknesses. For example, aural learners can improve their reading comprehension by reading input materials. Furthermore, the effects of the cognitive and topic variable are reduced in this task, thus, the teacher can focus on the learner variable. I will explain this point more explicitly in Chapter 4. Finally, Tasks 2 and 3 integrate technology tools, which were attempted based on Nunan's point of view regarding using technology in TBLT. In the next chapter, I will analyze these three tasks from both the learning and the teaching perspectives to show that TBLT makes individualized second language teaching possible, while interpreting the above three points explicitly.

Chapter 4

Analyzing tasks from learning and teaching perspectives

I.   Introduction

In Chapter 2, I questioned the effects of the relationship among learner variable,

cognitive variable, and topic variable on task difficulty and complexity. In Chapter 3, I

explicitly explained how to design and implement tasks. In this chapter, I will apply

TBLT into individualized teaching in CFL by analysis of the three tasks in Chapter 3

from teaching and learning perspectives. There are reciprocities among the learner,

cognitive, and topic variables. The individual difference among learners is an inevitable

phenomenon in SLA, so individualized teaching has aroused increased attention among

SLA scholars and teachers (Skehan, 1989). I have also mentioned the challenges and

difficulties in CFL, such as schools not having the budget to hire enough teachers,

learners having more diversified backgrounds in U.S. colleges, and ACTFL requiring

teachers to meet the communication standard in their teaching. If learners are expected to

learn how to communicate in the target language, they ought to interact with other

learners or native speakers. When there are interactions, the individual characteristics of

different learners may influence the effect of interaction and communication in a task. In

order to carry out effective communication in a task, the teacher needs to consider several

aspects from the teaching perspective when they prepare the tasks: (i)At the phase of pre-

task, how to consider individual differences designing and assigning task materials? (ii)

How to control and be involved at the phase of core task if learners are having difficulties

in performing a task? (iii) How to design post-task so that learners could reflect on and

revise their performance during a task, from both the linguistic and communicative

perspectives? In the following, I will address these questions by analyzing the three tasks.

II.   Learners' needs, the analysis of TBLT from the learning perspective

In this section, I will analyze how to design and implement tasks from the

learning perspective. Although the TBLT method is effective for Chinese language

teaching and especially good for individualized teaching, it is not enough to have only

studied task design and implementation from the perspective of teaching. TBLT approach

is effective in facilitating not only individualized teaching but also individualized

learning. Thus, studying TBLT from the learning perspective is also very important. I

will analyze learners' feedback in a survey regarding their language learning experiences

to interpret how to design and implement task in order to meet learners' needs (see

Appendix VI, pp. 104-105).

I did a survey to investigate learners' opinions on their second language learning

at the end of the spring semester at Hamilton College in 2008 and at the end of the spring

semester at Seton Hall University in 2010 (see Appendix VI, pp. 104-105). The subjects

completed the survey after they carried out Task 1 and Task 2. This survey was not

originally designed for this task-based teaching approach research; rather, it was

concerned with Chinese second language learners' viewpoints on second language

teaching methods and their learning process. Nevertheless, I can still extract certain

useful information in order to interpret why task-based teaching approach is an effective

way of learning Chinese.

In this survey, students were asked nine questions regarding their second language

learning and teachers' teaching methods. These questions help the teacher know the students' individual learning differences and needs. In this chapter, I only have analyzed the data I collected at Hamilton College. The twenty subjects who have participated in Task1 and Task 2 are discussed in this thesis. I have selected four key questions in the survey to analyze the twenty learners' responses in this chapter: (i) What is your best language skill(s)? (ii) What is your learning style? (iii) Do you think your personality affects your second language learning? What personalities of you influence your L2 learning? (iv) Which teaching method(s) would be more helpful for your second language learning?

Before answering the questions in the survey, learners were required to self-evaluate their Chinese language proficiency. There were 12 learners who thought their Chinese proficiency was at intermediate-mid level, 5 learners thought they were at intermediate-low level, and the rest of the learners thought they were intermediate-high level Chinese language learners. Those 20 learners' responses were varied. Since the data set was not large enough, I had only interpreted their responses in general so as to provide a macro-picture on learners' needs. Those 20 learners have had been trained with the traditional audiolingual and grammar translation methods for four semesters, so they were supposed to have good listening and speaking skills as a result of the teaching methods and the learning time. However, not all of them thought their listening and speaking skills were their best skills. Some of them said that listening and reading are their best language skills while some said their speaking and reading skills are better. I noticed that none of the students think their writing skills are good enough. As for the second question, most of the learners thought they are 'visual' learners. Only 5 of the 20

learners are 'aural' learners, and 2 are 'kinaesthetic' learners. Over half of learners believed that their personalities influence their second language learning. Among the different personalities related to L2 learning, learning anxiety is one of the most significant factors mentioned by learners. One of the learners noted in the survey that he easily gets anxious whenever the teacher begins to ask individual students to answer questions. Regarding the fourth question, the results show two quite interesting points: (i) Seventeen students have chosen both drill and communicative approaches, which indicates that L2 learners are concerned about their communication skills and the grasp of linguistic forms. (ii) Most of the learners believe that communication is the premier goal of second language learning, but only 5 learners would like to communicate with their peers in pair work. They prefer communicating with their peers in class to doing that out of class. Also, all the learners are eager to communicate with native speakers and teachers. Table 5 presents the results for the four questions.

Table 5. The results concerning the four key questions in the survey (Questions 1, 3 and 4 are multiple choices)

1. What is your best language skill(s) in the second language you are studying?			
a. Speaking	b. Listening	c. Reading	d. Writing
8	9	5	1

2. What is your learning style about learning foreign language?		
a. Visual	b. Aural	Kinaesthetic
13	5	2

3. Do you think your personality affects your ability to learn a second language? Which of your personality traits influence your second language learning?			
a. Yes	b. No	c. Maybe	d. I am not sure
13	0	3	3

a. anxiety	b. self-esteem	c. empathy	d. dominance	e. talkativeness	f. responsibilities
12	5	2	0	3	5

4. Which teaching method(s) would be more helpful for you when studying a second language?	
a. repeat, imitate, memorize	5
b. mechanical pattern drill	7
c. translation	7
d. communicative drill	1
e. communicate with peers through discussion or pair work	1
f. communicate with teacher and peers in class	4
g. communicate with any native speaker or peer both in class and out of class	15
h. presentation in class	9
i. collaborate language tasks (cooperate with your peers to achieve assigned task)	3
j. watch TV or read news paper, whether you understand it or not	8

These students' feedback does not constitute large quantities of data, but by analyzing the feedback teachers are likely to discover learners' needs in order to design and implement tasks effectively. I have concluded from the learners' feedback that there are several reactions to the tasks I have designed. Initially, teachers ought to provide a variety of input materials at the phase of pre-task to accommodate learners' different learning styles and address their different learning weaknesses. In the three tasks discussed in Chapter 3, I only provided text-based input but not listening or video input. Additionally, teachers should consider how to eliminate learners' learning anxiety before conducting group/pair work. If a learner becomes anxious when speaking Chinese, the teacher should try to find the reason for his or her anxiety. If the learner is anxious due to the lack of confidence, the teacher ought to offer the individual some help before the core task; such as, tutoring or assigning appropriate input materials. Furthermore, teachers ought to focus on both linguistic forms and communication skills since these two aspects of learning are what L2 learners are most interested in. More than one researcher has noticed that there is a lack of accuracy in learner output in TBLT (Skehan, 1996, Ellis, *et al*, 2003). Real communication is important, but both learners and teachers are concerned about accuracy. Teachers need to keep a balance between fluency and accuracy. Focused tasks are likely to meet this requirement. As I have addressed in Chapters 2, 3 and 4, TBLT meets those teaching goals which are focused on communication and individual differences in SLA. Individual differences not only exist in the learning styles but also in learning needs. Using focused tasks is a way of addressing the need of individual learners to acquire linguistic forms. Lastly, since most learners are not interested in in-class communication with their peers, teachers ought to try to increase interaction among

learners, and between learners and native speakers. For this purpose, technological tools should be used more often in tasks. Task 2 is a good example for integrating technological tools into TBLT. With the assistance of technology, for example, blog, learners are able to communicate with more peers, even with native speakers of Chinese in China anytime outside the classroom. They can prepare the task independently and interact with other participants actively. Since the blog has expanded the scope of interaction, one learner is able to communicate with as many participants as possible. Blogs not only makes one-to-many communication possible but also many-to-many communication. In addition, learners can get access to on-line dictionaries or other references to assist their communication, which can result in decrease or even elimination of learning anxiety. Therefore, the application of technology in TBLT is likely to compensate for the disadvantages of task-based teaching.

III.   The analysis of the use of the three tasks from the teaching perspective

Task 1: "Detective story"

(i)   Pre-task

Before task design, teachers should think about how to control task difficulty. If a task is so complicated that students are not able to handle it, it would be a failure in terms of teaching and learning with tasks. As a task designer, the teacher should not only know the language proficiency level of each individual learner, but also the kind of topics students might be interested in. Willis and Wills have noted that second language learners have different topic interests at different places around the world (Willis & Willis, 2008, pp. 64-65). Hence, learner interest is the basis on which teachers design tasks. In this

thesis, all my discussions on TBLT are in the context of CFL at the American college level. Since all of the subjects carrying out tasks are American college students, I could narrow the scope of task topics with ease by drawing on my teaching experience. The detective story may seem like an unfamiliar topic. Because most students do not have the special opportunity to experience the process of detecting, this task might be beyond many students' levels of cognitive knowledge.

However, according to Nunan's citation (2004, pp. 97-98), such detective tasks can be made more lively as well by "encouraging students to act innocence or indignation". Learners should be able to express themselves in the target language by change and emphasis of intonation in the sentences, and this help learners develop strategies on carrying out a task. If learners are interested in such a topic due to curiosity, they may attempt to overcome the difficulties regarding their cognitive knowledge in order to achieve the outcome of the task. In addition, in order to decrease cognitive difficulty, I arranged all eight scenes in places familiar to the students. The activities of the two protagonists were from ordinary daily life, so students could handle this detective task without that much cognitive difficulty as teachers thought.

The next step to consider is how to make task input individualized. This is a focused task, meaning a focus on linguistic forms should be emphasized. When I prepared the task input, I followed the two principals: (i) let relatively weak learners get a solid grasp of the linguistic forms before or during the phase of pre-task; (ii) let learners with relatively high language proficiency not only review the identified linguistic forms, but also learn something new in the task.

Based on these two principals, I inserted such unfamiliar forms as 拍照片(*pai zhaopian-to take pictures*) in certain scenes when I wrote the story. After writing the story, I altered the order of the eight scenes and assigned scenes with new words to high-level students and those without new components to relatively weak learners. The appropriate assignment of task input is not the only factor which teachers need to be concerned about.

Grouping students is another key factor of task design. Nunan highlights task settings as including 'mode' and 'environment' (Nunan, 2004). Mode refers to whether the learner is operating a task individually or as part of a group and also how big is a group—a whole class, a small group, or a pair work. 'Environment' indicates where tasks do happen. For example, is it in a classroom or other location such as the internet? In this detective task, I am more concerned about the 'mode' condition. Since each group consists of 5-6 students in this task, I was very cautious to group them. If the effective interactions in one group had not taken place, the task would have been a failure. Therefore, I needed to find out some effective means of grouping students. As I have mentioned in Chapter 3, I evenly divided twenty students into five groups consisting of both high level and weak students in each respective group. Having mixed-level learners in a group work is more likely to produce effective meaning negotiations (Jin, 2010).

In addition, the teacher is not only a task designer, he or she is also a facilitator even at the phase of pre-task. Normally, students are required to fulfill pre-tasks independently but, if some learners have relatively low levels of language proficiency, it may influence the result of the task. In this case, it is necessary that teachers give extra time for the preparation outside the classroom to ensure that such learners better

understand and prepare the input. Students must have enough time to prepare by following the instruction of the task in terms of both language and communication. The teacher can also give some students necessary help in the pre-task phase, such as helping them figure out the meaning of the story, practicing language forms, and re-telling the story of their assigned parts. If teacher design good tasks and students prepare them well, the implementation of core tasks will probably be successful.

(ii)　Core task

During the phase of core task, the teacher plays the role of the guider, facilitator and supervisor. During the process of carrying out the task, the learner plays the role of an information sender as well as a recipient, so each individual learner's performance affects the task outcome of the whole group. In order to ensure that each group operates the task on a right track, the teacher should supervise the overall process of the task. In order to facilitate students to carry out the task effectively, I arranged to make students conduct their work group by group. That is to say, I worked only with one group at a time. Normally, it takes 50 minutes for one class at Hamilton College, so I divided one class into two parts averagely. Each group was assigned for 25 minutes to conduct the task.

In this task, the teacher is able to guide students onto the right track if he or she finds students having trouble restructuring the story and finding out the thief. The teacher does not need to point out students' incorrect guesses; instead, he or she should give certain hints by asking questions related to the plots. If a student has the problems expressing himself and the problems affected others' comprehension in the group, the teacher ought to intervene and help the group of students solve the communication

problem while also encouraging students to use clarification, comprehension checks, and confirmation checks. In addition, if someone's errors make it for others to misunderstand them, the teacher must correct linguistic errors. All these techniques of supervising the implementation of a task are focused on individual learner performance.

Table 6. The sample of transcript for the recording during the task (The transcript is based on the recording for group A, section II, in Chinese 130 course at Hamilton College in 2008.)

Role	Transcript and Translation	Notes
Student	小芬不高兴，因为她觉得大中旅行的时候会碰到新的[美女] Xiǎo Fēn bù gāoxìng, yīnwèi tā juéde Dà Zhōng lǚxíng de shíshòu huì pèngdào xīn de [měinǚ]	Student made an error on pronunciation when he narrated his part of the story.
	Xiao Fen felt unhappy because she was thinking that her boyfriend, Da Zhong might meet other pretty girls during his travel in China	
Teacher	美女, měi nǚ,	Teacher corrected student' pronunciation
	Pretty girl. [emphasize the first syllable]	
Student	哦，美女 O, měi nǚ	Student repeated what the teacher said to correct himself.
	Yea, pretty girl	
Teacher	你们明白什么是[美女]的意思吗？ Nǐmen míngbai shénme shì [měinǚ] de yìsi ma?	Teacher intervened in time to guide the student not to ignore the key unfamiliar word in the story.
	Do you know what meaning of měi nǚ is?	
Student	噢，对，[美女]就是漂亮的女孩儿。 Ou, duì, měinǚ jiùshì piàoliàng de nǚháir.	Student explained the new word by teacher's reminder.
	Yea, měinǚ means pretty girls.	

(iii)   Post-task

In the detective story task, I designed a post-task writing assignment which is writing an investigation report from the perspective of a policeman with no less than 800 Chinese characters (see Appendix III, p.99). In this report, students were required to re-

picture the whole story first and then analyze who the thief is, based on their individual

viewpoints and the discussions in class. There are two purposes behind choosing writing

as the follow-up activity. One is to drive students' attention to the structures of the story.

When students are required to rewrite the story, they will take notes and prepare in a

more serious manner so that they will learn to communicate with peers instead of

operating this task for entertainment. Generally speaking, learners notice their own

weaknesses in the second language learning process when they conduct real

communications with the target language. If they attempt to achieve the goal of the task,

they are likely to consciously overcome their weaknesses, especially when they are asked

to rewrite the task input in detail. They intend to collect materials for their follow-up

writing by interactions and meaning negotiations. At this phase, teachers help learners

individually in an indirect manner.

Task 2: "The issue of opening a Starbucks in the Forbidden City"

(i)   Pre-task

This task is different from the detective story. Students are required to complete

both the pre-task and core task independently. The task input is a half-authentic blog

article published in China. Although every American college student knows Starbucks,

they have no knowledge regarding the background of Starbucks in China, not to mention

the dispute regarding Starbucks' opening its branch stores in famous places of interest,

such as the Forbidden City. In other words, it is a relatively novel topic for every

American college student in this experiment. Thus, the topic variable has not influenced

the learner variable on the task difficulty in Task 2. In pre-task, teacher needs to find out

appropriate authentic materials for students and make sure if the topic is fresh to every student.

(ii)   Core task

In core task, teacher assisted students to interview five international students from China about their viewpoints on this issue. Not every student had friends with native speakers of Chinese on campus, so teacher should help those students with no Chinese friends find out appropriate native speakers of Chinese. In this step, even if students deal with the problems of understanding the blog article and conducting the interviews by themselves, teacher still should be able to provide students necessary assistance, such as in aspect of language. By this step, teacher is not only a facilitator, but also a mentor to supervise student language performance both in general and in detail.

(iii)   Post-task

At the phase of post-task, the teacher should arrange students and native Chinese speakers to make comments for students' oral report recordings. In this phase, the teacher should coordinate how and what kind of native Chinese speakers can have access to Blackboard. As I mentioned in chapter 3, Blackboard is not a public website but is an on-campus educational on-line course system. Only the participants invited by instructors can access to Blackboard; so, teachers need to contact the technicians at school to arrange native speakers of Chinese to sign up for the accounts on Blackboard.

In fact, there are three advantages of applying the blog tool to conducting tasks on Blackboard instead of other public blogs. (i) Using the blog tool on Blackboard can help avoid a situation in which a few netizens disorder the task process by posting certain radical words or meaningless net symbols. (ii) Since all of the students in this task were

at the intermediate level, their Chinese proficiencies were not adequate enough for them to understand comments made by native speakers. Therefore, the teacher had best choose native speakers who have some experience communicating with Americans. To some extent, it facilitates mutual understanding. (iii) After students post their oral recordings on their blogs, the teacher should listen to each recording carefully and summarize the errors for each student before sending the summary of errors to each of students via e-mail so that they may notice and revise their errors.

Task 3: "Presidential election"

(i)   Pre-task

The presidential election task has similar features with previous two tasks. The teacher needs to group students at the phase of pre-task. The rule of grouping students is the same with that of the detective story. The difference between Task 1 and Task 3 at this phase is that I did not provide students with text-based input in Task 3. Students need to look for the useful materials on-line via the websites that I have provided. Despite the fact that it is a non-text-based task, it is however a focused task, because teachers can require students to use the identified linguistic forms (see Table 3) in their oral presentation for the election during the process of core task. When they search for relevant materials on-line, students pay more attention to the text with those identified forms.

Table 7. The sample for the identified linguistic forms in Task 3

竞选	Jīngxuǎn	to elect	候选人	hòuxuǎn rén	Candidate
投……的票	tóu...de piào	vote for sb.	值得+V. (骄傲/讨论/重视)	zhídé (jiāo'ào/tǎolùn/zhòngshì)	to be worth
小题大做	xiǎotí dà zuò	make a great fuss over a trifle	无权/有权 +do sth.	wúquán/ yǒuquán	have (no) rights to do sth.
贪污腐化	tānwū fǔhuà	degeneration and corruption	国家元首	guójiā yuǎnshǒu	chief of state
制裁	zhìcái	Sanctions	公布丑闻	gōngbù chǒuwén	To make scandal public

(ii)   Core task

Doing research and searching for useful materials on their own is good for student learning; however, teachers still need to provide necessary assistance. Compared with using input assigned by teachers, students in this task are more likely to find input appropriate for their own levels of language proficiency. It is no doubt that authentic materials include unfamiliar linguistic forms. However, not every learner has the ability to evaluate their language proficiency and find the appropriate authentic materials for them. In any case, teachers should supervise and advise students as to whether the materials they find for themselves are suitable or not. In addition, since I also provided a Chinese news website to the students, I also needed to make sure each student knew how to search relevant news in the Chinese website. If anyone had any problem using the website, I guided them to solve the problems.

(iii)   Post task

At the phase of post task, teachers need to collect students' post writing task for revision so that students have the chance to recognize their errors. This learning process

facilitates students' ability to notice their errors and emphasizes the correct linguistic forms.

Through the analysis of the students' feedback and the procedures of the three tasks, it has been shown how teachers should consider learners' individual differences when designing and implementing a task. It also has been shown that learners' learning demands and needs should be considered by teachers so as to effectively use tasks for learning. Based on the analysis in this chapter, in Chapter 5, I will develop certain strategies of task design and task implementation for teachers.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

I.   Introduction

In the previous chapters, I discussed what challenges and difficulties Instructors of Chinese in the U.S. are facing, why the task-based teaching approach would solve the aforementioned difficulties, and how teachers utilize the TBLT approach, through analyzing three tasks that I designed from both the learning and teaching perspectives. The significant and premier challenge and difficulty is how to effectively teach Chinese to a class of learners with diverse levels, learning styles, motivations, and backgrounds. In order to explore a possible solution to this challenge, Chapter 2 focuses on the research in literature. Specifically, this chapter will discuss the management of the relationships between cognitive, topic and learner variables in task design and implementation, in order to facilitate instructors of Chinese in meeting different learners' learning needs. Through examining and analyzing the three tasks in Chapters 3 and 4 from the perspectives of the challenges faced by Chinese teachers in the U.S. and the lacks in previous research, in this last chapter, I will develop and elaborate on (i) the strategies for task design; (ii) the strategies for task implementation; and (iii) issues for further study. All the strategies following are based on focused tasks.

In order to organize these strategies properly I will present them from the perspective of task design and task implementation as shown in Table 8, including five sub-aspects, cognitive variable, topic variable, learner variable, technology application and unfamiliar forms. I elaborate on the strategies from these five sub-aspects because I discussed the variables of cognitive, topic and learner variable, all related to task

complexity and difficulty discussed in Chapters 2, 3 and 4 when I interpreted the TBLT

in the context of CFL.

Table 8. The strategies for task design and implementation

Strategies for task design	(i) Topic choice, related to cognitive and topic variable
	(ii) Learning style, related to learner variable
	(iii) Unfamiliar linguistic forms
Strategies for task implementation	(iv) Learner's anxiety, related to learner variable
	(v) Integration of technology tool

II. Strategies for task design

(i)   Strategy 1: topic choice, related to cognitive variable and topic variable

Teachers should attempt to eliminate the effects of cognitive variables on task

complexity and difficulty when choosing the topic of a task. If there is no significant

cognitive influence from task topic, teachers could assign appropriate input materials to

individual learners. For instance in Task 1, although the topic is somehow not familiar to

some students due to cognitive knowledge and experience, I designed the story to take

place in ordinary places so as to dismiss those effects of cognition. The topic for Task 2

in Chapter 3 was completely unfamiliar to the students, and the topic for Task 3 was

totally familiar to the students, so all students were at the same starting line from the

cognitive perspective in both tasks. Hence, it is possible for teachers when designing

tasks to consider learners' individual differences based on their language proficiency

levels and prepare different materials to compensate for students' individual weaknesses.

(ii)   Strategy 2: learning style, related to learner variable

Teachers should provide learners of different learning styles with various and

appropriate input material, such as reading, listening, and video material, and should

incorporate different language skills into the tasks so that learners can enhance their

strengths and overcome their weak points in Chinese language learning. Comprehensible input is one of the most significant hypotheses in SLA. If learners receive effective comprehensible input, they produce so-called pushed output, which I have discussed in reviewing Hong-gang Jin's research. Thus, one of the duties of language teachers is to offer learners effective language input. In Task 1, I provided students with input materials, both in listening and in reading, which can meet the requirements of students with different learning styles. In Task 2, I only provided students with reading input materials, but at the phase of core task students were required to speak with and listen to the native speakers of Chinese during interviews with those individuals. After posting their recordings on blogs, they were expected to listen to other students' oral reports and make comments. At this phase, students had aural input materials so that they may make comment. In Task 3, I provided students with on-line resources as input materials. Students had relative learning freedom to search the appropriate material, such as text-based, audio or video material. The means I used in the three tasks all help teachers offer different types of input materials to students.

(iii)   Strategy 3: unfamiliar linguistic forms, related to language forms

Teachers not only have to provide a variety of materials but should also control the level of difficulty and complexity of input materials, especially in terms of linguistic forms.

In order to make each student at different language proficiency level challenged but not overwhelmed when they receive the task input materials, teachers should grasp some strategies for controlling the level of difficulty of the linguistic forms. Inserting certain unfamiliar linguistic forms is one of effective ways of controlling the level of the

difficulty of the input materials. By using this way in task, I developed several strategies to add unfamiliar linguistics forms in task. I have mentioned these strategies with explanations in Chapter 3 when I discussed Task 1. Thus, I am only summarizing them briefly here. (i) Add the characters which consist of those unfamiliar linguistic forms have been learned by learners. (ii) Extend the lexical collocations of general words based on the vocabulary learners have learned. (iii) Develop new vocabulary with old characters. Since learners know the meaning of each character in new vocabulary, they can probably easily figure out the meaning of the new word with their cognitive knowledge. These strategies related to providing unfamiliar forms in task input materials are easy to grasp for teachers. Also, the forms inserted by those strategies are easy to learn for learners.

III. Strategies for task implementation

(iv)   Strategy 4: learner's anxiety, related to learner variable

Strategy 2 concerns the learner variable from the perspective of learning style. As we know, learners' individual personality trait is also one of significant elements of individual differences. Learning style is likely to influence tasks-based teaching at the step of task design, while learners' personalities are more likely to affect their performance in tasks. Therefore, teachers should drive attention to learners' individual personality traits at the step of task implementation. Based on the question 3 at Table 1 in Chapter 4, among the listed personality traits related with second language learning in Table 1, learning anxiety is the most significant for second language learners. Therefore I am developing a strategy to reduce learners' learning anxiety.

Learners sometimes are not willing to communicate with their peers due to peer pressure and lack of confidence, which leads to learning anxiety. Teachers should provide assistance to learners at the phase of pre-task in order for students to achieve the goals during the core task. Teachers also should consider avoiding collaborative tasks when there are several learners who are easily getting anxious in collaborative tasks. However, communication with peers is a necessary learning process when studying a second language. Teachers ought to consider how to implement tasks to arouse learners' interest and build up their confidence in the communication with peers. In Tasks 2 and 3, I utilized technological tools to facilitate my task-based teaching. Technological tools make interaction and communication more flexible. Learners are no longer limited by time and space. Using technological tools is one of effective ways to help teachers reduce learners' learning anxiety.

The key points for this strategy are providing the learners who are easily getting anxious with more help at the phase of pre-task and assigning them more time to produce or to achieve the task outcomes through various means including technology. After operating the Task 3 with this strategy in my class, a learner who rarely spoke Chinese in my drill section wrote an e-mail to me.

> "I know I wasn't a great student to have in class, but I definitely enjoyed being in your class. Your teaching methods and style were everything that I wanted my previous Chinese classes to be like. I learned so much in your class and even though I don't speak much or have trouble forming sentences, you have helped my Chinese improve tremendously and helped me to over come [overcome] a big fear I have of speaking around people." (see Appendix VII, p. 106 for the complete e-mail message).

(V)   Strategy 5: integration of technology tool

I have mentioned technology tools can be integrated into task implementation when discussing the Strategy 4. In Strategy 5, I will elaborate on why and how technology tool should be integrated into task-based language learning and teaching.

I discussed settings in TBLT when analyzing Task 1. However, I have only discussed the first condition in task setting: mode. Mode of setting requires teachers to practically consider, among other variables, class size, how to group students, how to assign task materials, and whether the task is to be completely or partly used outside the classroom (Nunan, 2004). As for environment, I have not touched upon it because Task 1 only takes place in the classroom that is the traditional teaching and learning location. I will emphasize the environment condition in task settings in this section however. Along with the development of technology, "satellite, internet, cable television and internet and increasingly mobile workforces" (Nunan, 2004, p. 72) have all become possible learning locations.

All these technological tools facilitate development in second language learning settings. Nunan cites three specific benefits of using tasks with technological tools (Nunan, 2004, p. 73). First, technology tools make it possible for learners to have more real-life interactions. This kind of authentic interaction is also individualized. Different learners use different communicative strategies and target-language expressions to achieve communicative goals, and this sort of practice is no longer as mechanical as pattern drills or translations. For example, in Task 2, at the phase of post task, students communicated with native speakers of Chinese on blog by means of making comments to one another.

Second, teachers do not need to make connections between second language learners and the world of real-life communications. In the blog task, students making comments do not use linguistic forms identified by teachers. Although this task is called a focused task, it focuses on language more than on linguistic forms. During the pre-task and core task, the linguistic forms have been prepared for the post-task so that students have already gained effective input before the real-life communications. Teachers do not intervene until at the end of the task, when they have to correct students' errors, such as Tasks 2 and 3.

Third, the relationship between the teacher and the learner has changed. The teacher needs to drive learners' attention to their linguistic errors at the end of the whole task cycle. This step seems trivial, but it is significant for learners' second language acquisition. Since it is not necessary for them to be involved in the interactions during the phase of pre-task and core task, teachers devote more time and energy to help individual students correct their errors in order to avoid fossilization in SLA. For instance, as I did in Task 2, teachers can provide students with a personal error sheet as learning records by listening to their oral presentation recordings and viewing comments in written Chinese, or the teacher can discuss with students one by one about their errors.

IV. Further study

Since this study is still a work in progress and has been conducted in a short period of time, it has certain limitations. First, I have not analyzed the collected data in quantity and thus have not been able to present explicit interpretation of the advantages of implementing the TBLT method for individualized Chinese language teaching from a

statistical perspective. Second, the three tasks have not been carried out repeatedly. The detective story task has been used three times, but each time I made various revisions. The finalized version has only been operated once. As for the presidential election task, I have implemented it twice but in two different schools. The arguments for those adverse factors in this thesis are based on qualitative analysis instead of the analysis of quantities. Third, there is also certain weakness in the task design and task implementation. For instance, in Task 2, people may critique that there were not enough native speakers of Chinese to make comments on Blackboard. Also, in Task 1 and Task 3, increasing group size can be discussed more in the future study since the task procedure and the outcomes should be adjusted if the group size is adjusted.

Additionally, I must mention a key issue in task-based teaching which I have not touched upon in this thesis: assessing the learning outcomes. If one does not follow a reliable and valuable assessment system, it is impossible to evaluate which task is good for facilitating achievement of the learning objectives. Only when effective and reliable assessments are employed, can we evaluate whether or not tasks help learners improve their language proficiency. When reliable measures are utilized to assess students' learning outcome after tasks, the strengths and weaknesses of task-based teaching can be examined.

Given that this study is in progress, I will continue to work on my research. In future study, I intend to design two experiments. The first is to examine to what extent TBLT can assist learners to overcome learning weaknesses by comparing the differences and similarities of learner's performance in the TBLT method and in the traditional drill method. The other one is to examine to what extent TBLT can reduce or even eliminate

learner anxiety by comparing group performance both in drill class and in a task. These two experiments will likely provide statistical empirical evidence that TBLT can effectively facilitate individualized Chinese teaching.

APPENDICES

Appendix I: The task procedure for detective story

中文 130 W15 IC 5 Procedure for Detective Story

ଔ **Please read this procedure sheet in order to make sure what we will do on Thursday.**
Introduction to task:
This is a detective story. You should read your own paragraphs and answer the questions before going to Thursday's class. During the class, you should re-organize the whole story by means of communicating/discussing with your partners, and then speculate who stole Zhang Dazhong's camera.
[We will record this activity by M-Audio]

Procedure:
I.   Each section is divided into two groups. Each group has 4-5 students. Each student in one group has your own information

II.   Please read the short paragraphs, make sure you know the plots and details in your parts, and then answer the following questions. That is Wednesday's assignment homework. You are not allowed to read them for your classmates.

III.   During the Thursday's class, you are required to exchange your information with the other students in your group. You are encouraged to narrate your parts in details, (please memorize your parts before Thursday's class), ask others' questions on any plots, expound reasons, etc. It will take 40 -43 minutes for your group to reorganize the whole story and find out the criminal.

IV.   At last, you can choose 1 student in your group to report the sequence of the story and the result, i.e., your group think who stole Zhang Dazhong's camera. The rest of students are allowed to help them explain.

V.   If two groups conclude different results, you can argue.

VI.   You need to write an investigation report as a take-home essay at the weekend. It is expected to explain your own opinion.

Appendix II: Sample reading assignment for the pre-task of detective story

中文 130 W15 IC 5 阅读练习 (Reading for Detective Story)
*语言活动——谁偷了他的照相机

Read the short paragraph and make sure you know all of plots and details in your part. You are required not to share your information until at Thursday's class and tell the students in your group your part as details.

人物： 张大中、张大中的女朋友-小芬、
银行的秘书、被强奸的服务员、旅行社导游、意大利(Italian)餐厅的服务员

✍ **在银行**

星期六一大早，张大中带着那个现代化的照相机先去了银行。银行里的人并不多，可是因为张大中是这家银行的 VIP 顾客，所以总是经理秘书给他提供服务，他不需要排队（páidul, stand in a line）。但是今天银行没有电，计算机都坏了，一些工作人员(staff)正忙着修理，所以张大中只好先等一会儿。因为空调也不能用了，所以张大中又热又渴，他决定先去买一瓶雪碧。他把照相机放在自己的椅子上，告诉秘书这是现在最贵最好的照相机，一定不能丢，不然他就去不了中国了，然后就出去了。银行经理的秘书告诉他从银行出去过两条街才有卖雪碧的商店，可是张大中一出门就发现对面就有卖雪碧的商店。

问题：
1、张大中去银行做什么？他碰到什么麻烦？
2、张大中为什么要去买雪碧，秘书告诉他在哪可以买到雪碧了吗？
3、请你写出 3 个跟故事有关系的，你认为需要知道的问题，上课的时候，问你的同学。

Appendix III: Sample for student' post-task writing assignment for Task 1

Name: ███

12 / 8 / 08

<center>调查报告</center>

　　三天前，张大中和他的女朋友李小芬向纽约市警察局报案，报社发给张大中的那个相当贵的照相机被偷了。

　　通过三天的调查，警察知道了整个案件是这样的。上个星期张大中申请到了"纽约时报"的记者工作，报社派他去中国工作一年，下个月就要离开。为了拍很多照片，报社给大中提供了一个特别贵的照相机。据张大中说，为了告诉小芬他得到那份工作，他约小芬一块去一家意大利饭馆吃晚饭。张大中不但要告诉他的女朋友他得到那份"纽约时报"的工作，而且要给小芬拍很多漂亮的照片，带到中国去，这样想小芬的时候，他就可以看看那些照片。可是他们吃完饭以后，张大中发现他的照相机被偷了。

　　警察现在认为是一个小商店服务员和一个旅行社的导游一块偷了张大中的照相机。他们的原因有三个。第一个是张大中的照相机被偷的前两天，大中在帮助一个被强奸的女孩的时候，他把钱包丢了。可是后来他发现那个女孩在一家买雪碧的商店工作。在那家商店，店里不但有各种各样受欢迎的零食，饮料，还有帮一些不是当地的客人拍照片的服务。大中在商店的时候，服务员听到大中说他有一个很现代化的照相机。所以，从她的角度来看，一个现代化的照相机很有用。

　　另一个原因是张大中跟小芬一块去意大利饭馆以前，因为大中想跟小芬去法国旅行的关系，他们决定去一个旅行社。在旅行社的时候，张大中先告诉导游他会去中国拍照片，还给导游看自己的照相机。导游一看到大中的照相机眼睛就亮了。所以，据张大中说，自己的照相机让导游很兴奋。

　　最后一个是大中和小芬进意大利饭馆以后，他们发现那个小商店被强奸的服务员和导游也在饭馆吃饭。我们认为这一点很奇怪。然后，男服务员把大中和小芬的大衣，还有照相机放在一个柜子里，让他们坐在导游旁边的桌子。后来，小芬去找经理的时候，在柜子旁边看到了旅行社的那个导游。还有，小芬回到桌子以后，导游来问好，可是大中没看到那个被强奸的女孩，导游说"她最近肚子有问题，所以又去厕所了。"我们认为这一点也有一点奇怪。然后，大中和小芬离开的时候，张大中发现他的照相机被偷了。我们认为那个商店服务员和那个旅行社的导游总是一块骗别人。我们认为他们不但偷了照相机，而且偷了张大中的钱包。我们认为那个商店服务员被导游强奸，大中帮助她的时候，导游偷了他的钱包。在偷照相机的这件事上，大中的照相机让商店服务员和导游都觉得很兴奋。所以，两个人都想偷大中的照相机。

　　所以，我们认为这个案件是小商店那个女服务员和旅行社那个导游做的，请立刻派其他警察去检查他们的办公室和住处。

Appendix IV: Reading materials for Task 2

来源：千龙网

央视(CCTV)主播(Host)*芮成钢*要求*星巴克*离开故宫

故宫内的星巴克咖啡店。资料图片

央视英语主播芮成钢。

　　本报讯（记者杨万国）在故宫一座华丽的房间里，星巴克咖啡店在这里开了 6 年。最近，央视(CCTV)英语主播(host)*芮成钢*在他的博客（blog）上写到"故宫里的星巴克"是对中国传统文化不尊重的一种表现。同时用自己的名字向星巴克总裁(CEO)提出，要求星巴克从故宫里搬出去。昨天，芮成钢告诉记者，文章(article)贴出来以后，读者增加到 50 万，许多网(internet)友表示支持。不过星巴克方面到现在为止还没有做出任何表示。

　　据芮成钢介绍，星巴克饮品在美国 4 美元就可以买一大杯，"也就是说，应该是在中国花 4 块

人民币就可以买一杯的饮料"。在西方人的一般观念中，星巴克是"不登大雅之堂的饮食文化的代表"，也可以说，星巴克代表的美国饮食文化根本没法跟故宫代表的中国文化结合在一起。"故宫是中国几千年文化的代表"，芮成钢说，把星巴克开在故宫里面，是对中国传统文化的歧视和不尊重。

"故宫星巴克成为西方笑柄（话）"

据芮成钢介绍，几年前他和美国的几位友人到故宫参观，当看到故宫内的星巴克时，外国友人都笑了，"我当时也觉得挺不好意思的，星巴克怎么开到了像故宫这样神圣的地方"。

芮成钢说，因为工作的关系，他采访(interview)了全世界 300 多个跨国公司总裁，比方比尔·盖茨(Bill Gates)，所以他知道，"故宫里的星巴克"已经在西方上层社会成为笑柄，"许多西方名人也认为这是对中国文化的不尊重"。

去年，芮成钢在*耶鲁大学(Yale)*的一次全美 CEO 峰会(summit)上，碰到星巴克的新 CEO *吉姆·当诺*，芮成钢公开提出意见，"我不知道星巴克是不是也有在印度(India)的泰姬陵(Taj Mahal)，法国的凡尔赛(Versailles)，英国的白金汉宫(Buckingham Palace)开店的计划，但是请星巴克先把在中国故宫里的店关掉"，那时候现场一片爆笑。后来*吉姆*说，这是以前的总裁做的，需要回去和同事们讨论，但四个月过去了，还是没有任何反应。

"还没收到星巴克的回答"

芮成钢介绍，他前几天又给*吉姆*发去两封电子邮件，前天收到了回信。吉姆在回信中说，6 年前是在故宫的要求下，星巴克才把咖啡店开到故宫里。吉姆表示在解决这件事以前，星巴克故宫店会努力和故宫整个的环境结合的，来保护(protect)中国的文化。据说，在这件事以前星巴克故宫店为了适合故宫的环境，已经摘掉了外面的大招牌。

Adapted and glossed based on the original blog article.

Appendix V: Sample comments on blog for Task 2

BLOG:
https://blackboard.hamilton.edu/webapps/portal/frameset.jsp?tab_id=_2_1&url=%2fwebapps%2fblackboard%2fexecute%2flauncher%3ftype%3dCourse%26id%3d_10127_1%26url%3d

(This link has not been available unless ask the technicians at Hamilton College to reactivate it because it was a part of course materials and only accessible from Hamilton course CHINSES 140, 2008)

███████的口头报告

███████.m4a

因为她的看法跟采访的人的看法不一样的关系，所仪她说的是比较有意思。她采访的看法是故宫里的 Starbucks 不是象作者说那么大问题。小咖啡吧对中国文化没有什么影响，也对中美之间的关系没有影响。我同意这个人的看法。
Friday, 04/11/2008 11:52 PM by Jennifer Whitman

因为他的采访的人认为故宫里的星罢课不是一个问题，所以陆丹丹 的看法跟她的 采访人 的看法完全不同。对她的采访人来说，故宫里的星罢课不是美国的饭馆 就是一个小咖啡点。还有这样的饭馆对中国文化没有影响。不过，对陆丹丹来说，星罢课是美国的公司，也美国的公司 不应该在中国文化中。我对陆丹 丹 的看法表示同意。
Wednesday, 04/16/2008 08:21 PM by Michelle Fisher

在我看来， 星巴克不应该在故宫里， 所以我跟丹丹的看法一样。当然我觉得我们的看法是对的，可是我也理解她的采访人的看法。 星巴克会对故宫赚很多钱。我认为一个咖啡商店不是一个问题提， 可是有美国的咖啡商店表现西方的影响。
Thursday, 04/17/2008 6:46 PM by John Lofrese

陆丹丹说的话是星巴克虽然是一个小咖啡管， 可是他们是表现美国的特点。 她认为美国的咖啡管不尊重中国的古代的建筑。 我的意见跟她的意见之间有很大的差异。我明白她的意思，可是我认为中国人的最要紧的事是经济和国际关系。
Thursday, 04/17/2008 7:08 PM by Ashley Chang

陆 丹丹 说她的采访的人认为这个咖啡店不是一个很大的问题。 美国饭馆对中国文化没有影响。 陆丹丹认为美国公司不是应该中国文化中心。因为中国政府只要对别的国家看起来很进步。 他们牺牲中国古代文化。 他们要有很好的影响。 我真 喜欢陆丹丹的想法。
Monday, 04/21/2008 1:58 AM by Ebony Doyle

丹丹的采访的人的看法也让我大吃一惊因为我以为任何中国人都认为在故宫里的星巴克表现了美国干涉中国的文化。虽然他的看法让我大吃一惊，可是也许他说得很对。也许星巴克一点儿都不是一个表现，也许只是一个咖啡店。
Friday, 04/25/2008 4:22 PM by Chelsea Stone

我对陆丹丹的看法表示反对因为 starbucks 只是一个小咖啡店，不是一个大问题。在我看来，中国人不应该担心这个小问题。 虽然 starbucks 在故宫里，他们不必去，他们不必买他们的咖啡。因为故宫有时候有很多游客所以这一点让他们有好处。在我看来，因为这一点让别的人不舒服，他们应该把 starbucks 防灾故宫的外边儿。
Sunday, 04/27/2008 1:05 AM by Rebecca Ching

你的看法很有意思。我觉得你的采访者的看法有一定的正确性，本来星巴克事件不是一个特别大的问题，只是舆论界和媒体把这个问题扩大了。我觉得星巴克开设在故宫里并不表示西方干涉中国文化，可能老板在故宫里面开设星巴克的目的只是赚钱。后来，人们把这个问题引向政治，国际关系等等，使星巴克问题显得比较复杂。当然，我觉得，星巴克不应该开设在故宫里，但可以在故宫附近开设。 段丽
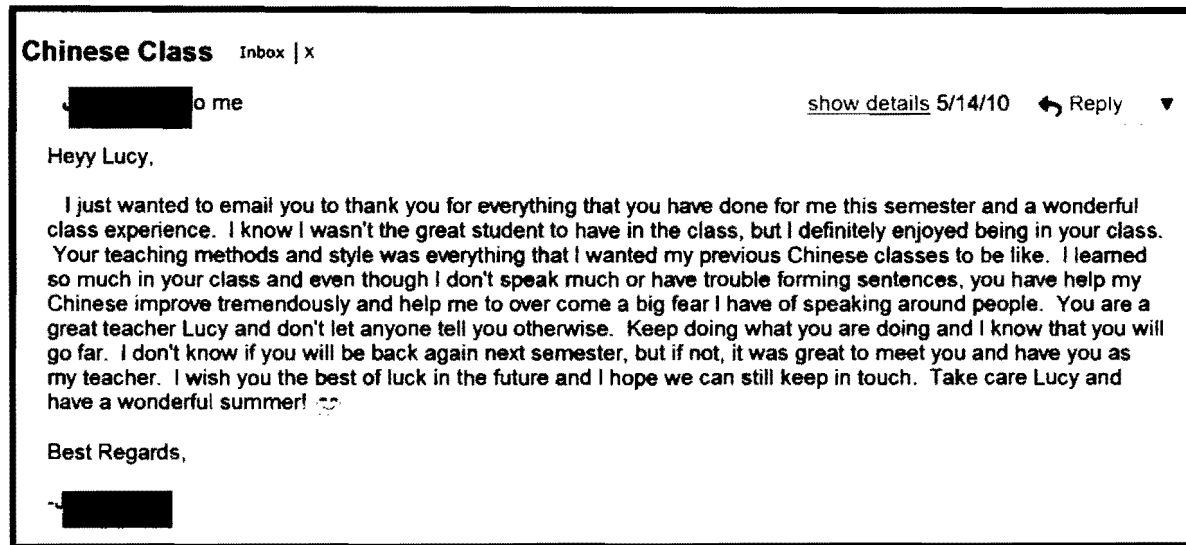Tuesday, 04/29/2008 2:45 AM by Duan Li, a Chinese native speaker

Appendix VI: Survey on second language learning

1. Do you think what your Chinese language proficiency is?
   A. Naïve
   B. intermediate-low
   C. intermediate- high
   D. advance-low
   E. advance-high

2. What is your best language skill(s) in the second language you are studying?
   A. Speaking
   B. Listening
   C. Reading
   D. Writing

3. In your opinion, which language skill(s) is the most important?
   A. Interpretation
   B. Comprehension
   C. Clarification
   D. Negotiation

4. What is your learning style about learning foreign langauge?
   A. "Visual" learner, people cannot learn something until they have seen it.
   B. "Aural" learner, people seem to learn best by ear
   C. "kinaesthetic" learner, people are good at physical action such as miming or role-play

5. Do you think your personality affects your ability to learn a second language?
   A. Yes
   B. No
   C. Maybe
   D. I am not sure

6. If so, which of your personality traits influence your second language learning?
   A. Anxiety, feeling of worry/ nervousness and stress
   B. Self-esteem
   C. Empathy
   D. Dominance
   E. Talkativeness
   F. Responsiveness

7. Which teaching method(s) would be more helpful for you when studying a second language?
   A. Repeat, imitate, memorize
   B. Mechanical pattern drill
   C. Translation
   D. Communicative drill
   E. Communicate with peers though discussion or pair work
   F. Communicate with teacher and peers in class
   G. Communicate with any native speaker or peer both in class and out of class
   H. Presentation in class
   I. Collaborate language tasks (cooperate with your peers to achieve a assigned task)
   J. Watch TV or read news paper whatever you understand or not

8. What is your language learning strategy?
   A. Speak as much as possible in class
   B. Avoid speaking in front of teacher and peers, but practice by yourself after class
   C. Avoid speaking in class, but practice with native speakers
   D. Do not feel uncomfortable if you make mistakes
   E. Think twice before speaking or writing
   F. Speak out without thinking
   G. Notice the difference between your sentences and native speakers'
   H. Never draw your attention to the errors as long as you can communicate with native speakers
   I. You feel so shy when you speak Chinese that you avoid speaking and prefer reading and writing

9. What is your successful and unsuccessful experience with learning Chinese as a foreign language?

Appendix VII: Student's e-mail

Chinese Class Inbox | x

████████ o me   show details 5/14/10   ↰ Reply   ▼

Heyy Lucy,

   I just wanted to email you to thank you for everything that you have done for me this semester and a wonderful class experience. I know I wasn't the great student to have in the class, but I definitely enjoyed being in your class. Your teaching methods and style was everything that I wanted my previous Chinese classes to be like. I learned so much in your class and even though I don't speak much or have trouble forming sentences, you have help my Chinese improve tremendously and help me to over come a big fear I have of speaking around people. You are a great teacher Lucy and don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Keep doing what you are doing and I know that you will go far. I don't know if you will be back again next semester, but if not, it was great to meet you and have you as my teacher. I wish you the best of luck in the future and I hope we can still keep in touch. Take care Lucy and have a wonderful summer! ☺

Best Regards,

-████████

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