

Cultural Blind Spots in Task-based Language Teaching: A Study of Implicit Cultural Assumptions in Task Design and Learners' Cultural Identity Conflict

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Abstract

Task-based Language Teaching method (TBLT), as one of the mainstream methods of foreign language teaching worldwide, emphasizes the development of communicative competence through authentic tasks. However, the implicit cultural assumptions latent in its task design are often overlooked, leading to conflicts with learners' cultural identities. Taking Chinese foreign language teaching as a background, this paper analyzes the manifestations of hidden cultural assumptions in TBLT task design, such as the implantation of Western socio-cultural scenarios, the individualistic-oriented role assignment, and the evaluation criteria dominated by Western communicative norms, and explores the mechanisms of their conflicts with Chinese learners' cultural identities, such as their collectivist values and their indirect communicative preferences. The study found that these conflicts may trigger learners' cultural cognitive biases, communicative behavioral conflicts and value collisions, which may weaken teaching effectiveness and cultural confidence. Based on this, this paper proposes optimization strategies such as diversified task context design, balanced role allocation and communicative evaluation, and enhanced cultural awareness and learner autonomy. This study aims to provide theoretical and empirical support for the construction of a foreign language teaching practice that meets China's national conditions, and responds to the need for contextual sensitivity in teaching in the "post-methodological era".

Keywords

Task-based Language Teaching; Cultural Blind Spots; Implicit Cultural Assumptions; Cultural Identity; Foreign Language Teaching.

1. Introduction

With the increasing prominence of intercultural communication needs in the context of globalization, Task-based Language Teaching, with its simulation of real-life language use scenarios and the cultivation of communicative competence, has become one of the mainstream methods in the field of international second language teaching that has attracted much attention. As Richards and Rodgers point out in *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching* (2nd edition), Task-based Language Teaching, as an important part of the current approach to communicative teaching, has gained much attention and popularity in second and foreign language teaching since its emergence at the end of the 1980s, emphasizing the realization of language acquisition through the completion of authentic tasks. Its emphasis on language acquisition through the performance of authentic tasks is widely regarded as fitting the core goal of contemporary language education[1].

However, an issue that needs urgent attention but is often overlooked in the promotion of Task-based Language Teaching has gradually emerged: the conflict between the implicit cultural assumptions embedded in task design and the learners' cultural identity. Existing studies have

mostly focused on the application of Task-based Language Teaching in different types of courses[20][21]. Focusing on task types, process optimization, or language skill development, there is a lack of critical examination of the cultural values implicit in task scenarios, such as individualistically oriented modes of interaction, and communicative etiquette in the context of specific social norms. When task templates originating from Western cultural contexts are directly transplanted into non-Western teaching environments, learners may not only face barriers to task participation due to cultural cognitive differences, but also be caught in a conflict between cultural adaptation and identity persistence, which may not only weaken the effectiveness of the task, but also lead to confusion about their own cultural identity. This “cultural blind spot” not only undermines the effectiveness of the task, but also triggers learners' confusion about their own cultural identity. This problem is particularly prominent in the context of foreign language teaching in China. Foreign language education in China has long been influenced by Western teaching methods, and although the promotion of task-based language teaching in curriculum standards has promoted teaching reform, the neglect of Chinese socio-cultural contexts, such as collectivist values and indirect communication preferences, in some task designs has led to a disconnect between advanced methods and local practices. As some researchers have pointed out in their critique of the cultural imperialism of Western pedagogical theories, the transplantation of methods that ignore the pedagogical context may lead to the dichotomy of advanced and backward cognition, which precisely ignores the subjectivity of Chinese learners in cultural identity[2][3]. Based on this, this study aims to take Task-based Language Teaching as an entry point to systematically analyze the manifestations of implicit cultural assumptions in task design, such as context setting, role assignment, and evaluation criteria, to explore the conflict mechanism between them and Chinese learners' cultural identity, including cultural self-confidence and cross-cultural adaptability, and to further propose a path to optimize the task that takes into account both language acquisition and cultural identity. This not only responds to the call for context sensitivity in teaching in the “post-methodological era”, but also provides theoretical and empirical support for the construction of foreign language teaching practices that are in line with China's national conditions.

2. Core Concepts and Rationale

2.1. Task-based Language Teaching

The task-based approach has its roots in the communicative approach. Communicative teaching method is a system of teaching methodology which takes language function items as the outline and the cultivation of students' communicative competence as the basic goal. Prabhu, in the process of leading a communicative teaching program in Bangalore, South India, allowed students to learn by using and presented classroom teaching activities in the form of tasks, and formally proposed the Task-based Approach in 1983, also known as Task-based Language Teaching (Task-based Language Teaching, TBLT). Task-Based Language Teaching is a teaching method that organizes language teaching and learning activities with a focus on tasks. It belongs to the development of communicative language teaching method, emphasizes the concept of learning by doing, and believes that the most effective way of language learning is for learners to use language by completing meaningful and real-life related tasks, and to acquire language knowledge and skills naturally in the process. With the rise of the task-based approach, the term task has rapidly replaced communicative activities. Regarding the interpretation of task, many scholars have unique insights on task. Richards believes that a task is an action of processing and understanding language[4]. Candlin sees tasks as a series of activities that contain communicative problems, are differentiated and hierarchical, and in which learners use cognitive and communicative processes to find solutions and explore goals

with new and old knowledge in context[5]. Willis and Ellis further explain that it is an activity in the classroom that is designed to communicate results, requires processing of language to obtain results, and contains an assessment dimension. They also proposed three steps of task-based pedagogy (PTP): 1) Pre-task; 2) Task-cycle, including tasks, planning, and reporting; and 3) Post-task, including analyzing and practicing[6][7]. Domestically, Lu also studied deeply and proposed the classroom teaching procedure of task-based teaching method[22]. The Task-based Language Teaching method discussed in this paper is to transform language teaching concepts into practice in the actual teaching process, take the idea of communicative teaching as the foundation, follow the principle of gradual progress, tasks around the actual language project, take the students as the starting point, take the task as the center, drive the students to become thinkers, analyzers, and completers, and take advantage of interaction and mutual help to cultivate language use ability and enhance students' comprehensive language ability. The task is centered on the students, driving them to become thinkers, analyzers and finishers, cultivating their language ability through interaction and mutual help, and improving their comprehensive language ability by taking the students as the basis.

2.2. Constructivist Theory

The Swiss psychologist Piaget, the founder of constructivism, emphasized that individuals actively construct knowledge through their own cognitive structures. Later, Russian psychologist Vygotsky further enriched constructivism with his socio-cultural theories, and his concept of the “zone of nearest development”, which emphasizes the key role of social interaction and cultural environment in the construction of knowledge. By the mid-to-late 20th century, American educational psychologist Bruner's discovery learning theory and Ausubel's meaningful learning theory also provided important support for the development of constructivism, which gradually formed a complete theoretical system focusing on learners' subjectivity, interactivity and contextuality, and was widely used in many fields such as education and psychology. Constructivist theorists believe that learners reshape and construct new knowledge on the basis of their existing knowledge and experience and in cooperation with their peers. Its core view is that learning is a process in which learners process, understand, and construct their own knowledge systems based on their existing experiences, through social interaction and negotiation of meaning, and by processing new information[8]. Therefore, social interaction and cultural environment play a key role in task-based pedagogy.

3. Contextual Challenges to Task-based Language Teaching

In the 1980s, China, Japan and other Asian countries began to re-examine the grammar-translation method that had long been used in foreign language classrooms. Scholars pointed out that the traditional language teaching was overly focused on grammar rules and written translation, which led to a lag in the development of students' communicative competence. Long and Robinson refer to this as teaching that focuses on “linguistic form”, which tends to sever the link between linguistic form and meaning[9]. In order to break through the limitations of the traditional grammar-translation method of “dismembering” language, Asian countries have been introducing task-based language teaching method in the foreign language classroom since the 1980s. Since its emergence in the 1980s, the task-based approach has had a profound impact on foreign language teaching in Asian countries, especially on English language teaching in primary and secondary schools. However, the question of the applicability of the task-based approach in the Asian foreign language classroom has not ceased to be questioned. When this method was transferred from native English-speaking environments such as the United Kingdom, Australia, and North America to non-native English-speaking environments in primary, secondary, and tertiary schools in the Asian region, the effectiveness of the method was hotly debated. According to Chang and Beaumont, the reasons for this debate are: first, the

conflict between task-based teaching and traditional cultural concepts. Secondly, there is a conflict between the application of the task-based approach and the practical difficulties in adopting it in Asian teaching and learning environments[10].

4. Analysis of Implicit Cultural Assumptions in Task Design

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) has become one of the mainstream approaches to foreign language teaching worldwide because of its emphasis on authentic contexts and communicative competence. However, beneath the seemingly objective and universal surface of its task design, hidden assumptions rooted in specific cultural soils often lurk. These unspoken cultural assumptions, which are not even fully realized by the designers themselves, constitute a key “cultural blind spot” in TBLT practice. Cortazzi and Jin argue that the classroom culture in the Asian context is very different from that in the British, Australian and North American contexts, and that the Asian region is not suitable for the task-based language teaching method[11]. Miller also believes that Asian students are less expressive in language learning due to the cultural environment[12]. In addition, Flowerdew also believes that Asian students, influenced by Confucianism, do not favor group activities in the classroom. In the Asian teaching environment, the key to teaching is the transfer of knowledge, not the transfer of skills[13]. Cameron agrees that the distinction between so-called “communicative competence” and “communicative problems” made by the task-based language teaching method is to some extent based on Anglo-American culture and is not applicable to language teaching in all language environments[14]. Based on this, the next section will analyze in depth the manifestations and sources of implicit cultural assumptions in task-based pedagogy.

4.1. Situational Context Setting: Implicit Implantation of Western Social and Cultural Scenes

The Task-based Language Teaching method often requires the selection of authentic materials that are relevant to students' lives, but most of the existing teaching resources are based on Western social and cultural scenarios. For example, when it comes to family gatherings, community activities, workplace communication, etc., they tend to default to Western social etiquette, family structure or work patterns, such as emphasizing individual expression in a team, relaxed interaction in informal situations, and so on. When certain textbooks or classroom activities present family dinners by default as free-flowing conversations in a meal-sharing system, rather than the common Asian structure of communal meals and conversations between elders and children, they may in fact be constructing a discursive hegemony of cultural authenticity. And this hegemony affects learning efficacy through two paths: On the one hand, at the cognitive level, learners are forced to engage in cultural transposition. For example, direct debates in Western team brainstorming are interpreted as effective communication, whereas silent reflections in East Asian cultures are labeled as insufficient participation. On the other hand, the affective level, which triggers a cultural identity crisis, leads to elevated affective filters when linguistic inputs are judged by the cognitive system as low relevance information when students are unable to find a corresponding scene in their own cultural schema[15]. These implicit implantations make it necessary for Asian students to cross the barrier of cultural cognition when understanding and participating in the tasks - for Asian students, the seemingly authentic corpus may actually be unfamiliar and difficult to empathize with due to cultural differences, and may even lead to a misinterpretation of the task's meaning, which affects the sense of immersion and the effectiveness of language learning.

4.2. Role Allocation: Individualism-oriented Representation of Interactions

The design aspects of the task-based language teaching method in role assignment are often unconsciously rooted in the Western cultural value system of individualism. Such systems

emphasize the independence, autonomy, and explicit contribution of the individual in the interaction[24]. In particular, learners are encouraged to express their personal views, actively challenge different opinions, and take ownership of the decision-making process in group tasks, such as discussions and project collaboration, as the core motivational mechanism for task advancement and individual competence demonstration. However, there is a significant tension between this preconceived logic of interaction and the behavioral patterns of Asian learners, who are deeply influenced by collectivist cultural traditions. In the context of a collectivist culture, typified by East Asia, social interaction places greater emphasis on group harmony, interdependence, respect for authority, and the pursuit of consensus[16]. As a result, Asian learners are more likely to adopt a collaborative rather than competitive stance in group tasks, prioritizing the maintenance of team relationships, listening to and integrating the views of others, and avoiding potential conflicts that may be triggered by highlighting individual views or openly questioning them. Their learning behaviors tend to be implicit, observant, and focused on contributing within a group framework. This deep-seated difference in cultural values and behavioral patterns leads to the fact that role assignments and interaction expectations based on individualistic presuppositions in task-based instruction may not accurately capture or effectively stimulate the participatory potential of Asian learners. They conform to collectivist norms of behavior, such as thoughtful speaking, commitment to internal consensus building, and respect for authoritative views[25], may be interpreted as passivity, lack of initiative, or insufficient participation. Such misinterpretation may not only weaken learners' subjective initiative and efficacy in the task and affect the quality of their learning experience and output, but also negatively affect their self-identity and learning motivation in cross-cultural teaching and learning contexts, creating an evaluation dilemma originating from cultural mismatch.

4.3. Evaluation Criteria: Potential Dominance of Western Communicative Norms

The Task-based Language Teaching method of assessing students' oral communication performance is often implicitly rooted in, and promotes, mainstream Western norms, particularly those of North America and Western Europe. Such norms often consider features such as fluency, initiating and dominating the conversation, responding directly and explicitly to questions, and expressing one's own views clearly as core markers of effective communicative competence[26].

However, this evaluative framework fails to adequately consider the fundamental impact of cultural diversity on communicative practices. In many East and Southeast Asian cultural contexts, such as China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, effective communicative behaviors are often given different cultural connotations and priorities. Communication patterns in these cultures tend to emphasize ambiguity, indirectness, deep dependence on context, and maintenance of group harmony. For example, when expressing disagreement or making suggestions, a decent strategy is often to agree with or respect the other person's point of view before politely introducing a dissenting opinion[17]. Alternatively, subtle attitudes and intentions are more likely to be conveyed through non-verbal signals such as silence, body language, changes in intonation, or situational cues than through straightforward verbal expressions. This systematic discrepancy between evaluative criteria and native communicative norms poses a key problem. It may lead to underestimation or even misjudgment of Asian students' communicative behavior in the language learning environment. Even if students' expressions are highly appropriate and effective within their own cultural frameworks, they may be labeled as less communicative, less active, or less articulate because they do not conform to the Western "direct-low-context" paradigm implicit in task evaluation. Such assessment results not only fail to reflect students' actual intercultural communicative potential, but also have a profoundly

negative impact on their self-efficacy, motivation, and judgment of their own language learning effectiveness. Students may become frustrated, question their own abilities, and lose confidence in their attempts to communicate in the target language environment, thus hindering the overall development of their language proficiency.

5. Specific Conflicting Manifestations of Implicit Cultural Assumptions about Learners' Cultural Identity

5.1. Confusion and Bias in Cultural Perceptions

Due to the large number of western cultural scenarios implanted in the task design, learners will take the western cultural elements they have been exposed to as universal cultural standards in the process of completing the task. For example, if learners are exposed to the family gathering task based on the Western Thanksgiving Day for a long period of time, they may think that the family gathering should be a model of equal and free communication, thus they may be confused about the tradition of family gatherings in their own culture, which emphasizes the order of the young and the old and the family etiquettes, and may even question the rationality of the family gatherings. This cognitive bias makes it difficult for learners to recognize the uniqueness of different cultures comprehensively and objectively, and makes them confused about their cultural identity and unable to clearly define their own cultural affiliation.

5.2. Conflicts and Struggles in Communicative Behavior

Under the influence of individualism-oriented role assignment and evaluation criteria dominated by Western communicative norms, learners can be caught in a contradiction in their linguistic communicative behavior. Learners in a collectivist culture are asked to emphasize their individual viewpoint expression in group discussion tasks, while their accustomed implicit and modest communicative style may lead to poor performance and lower evaluation in the tasks. In order to be recognized, they have to change their accustomed communication mode and imitate the direct and open expression of the West. However, such a change is contrary to their deep-rooted cultural values, which leads to a strong inner conflict in the process of communication, not only failing to fully adapt to the Western mode of communication, but also shaking their own original communication culture, thus affecting the stability of their cultural identity.

5.3. Conflict of Cultural Values

Western values conveyed by implicit cultural assumptions in task design can be in direct conflict with learners' native cultural values. The Western values that emphasize individualism and self-actualization contrast sharply with the values of the collectivist culture that focus on collective interests and harmonious relationships. When learners are constantly indoctrinated with Western values in a task, they may become skeptical of native cultural values such as respect for authority and group collaboration. This clash of cultural values will make learners feel torn in their cultural identity, making it difficult to find a balance between the two cultural value systems, and may even lead to a crisis of cultural identity.

6. Strategies for Coping with the Conflict Between Implicit Cultural Assumptions and Cultural Identity

6.1. Diversified Task Context Design

Constructivist learning environment design, advocating that the learner will be placed in the real situation. Its theoretical basis is mainly two: one is from the psychology of contextual cognition. The second is from the social anthropology of contextual learning. Both view learning

as a situational activity and emphasize the social aspects of learning[23]. Therefore, context plays an important role in task-based language teaching method, we can't ignore the context of the task, and the task and the context can't be divorced from each other. In the actual teaching process of the task-based language teaching method, the tasks designed by the teacher should be real situations. However, in order to avoid the conflict between implicit cultural assumptions and cultural identity in the tasks, teachers should set up diversified task contexts. Breaking the single pattern of western cultural scenes, teachers should take into full consideration the needs of learners with different cultural backgrounds and build diversified task situations. In the family gathering task, multiple contexts can be designed at the same time, such as Western Thanksgiving Day party, Chinese New Year's reunion dinner, Japanese New Year's family gathering, etc., so that learners can recognize the diversity of cultures and avoid the one-sided cognition of a certain culture in the task practice of different cultural scenes. In this way, learners can deepen their understanding of their own culture and enhance their sense of cultural identity in the process of contacting multiple cultures.

6.2. Balancing Role Assignment and Communicative Evaluation

In intercultural educational situations, the balance between role assignment and communicative evaluation is crucial. From the perspective of cultural dimension theory, individualism and collectivism are the two ends of the cultural value orientation. In individualistic cultures, such as the United States, the United Kingdom and other Western countries, individual achievement, rights and freedom are emphasized, and individual goals are often prioritized over collective goals. In collectivist cultures, on the other hand, in countries such as China and Japan, the interests of the collective, harmony and solidarity are prioritized, and individuals have a high degree of loyalty to the collective. For this reason, when designing teaching activities, such as group discussion tasks, these two cultural characteristics should be fully taken into account. Individual viewpoint elaboration sessions can be set up to encourage learners to express their unique opinions boldly and independently, as they do in individualistic cultures, which helps to cultivate their independent thinking and self-expression abilities. At the same time, teamwork and joint decision-making sessions are arranged to allow learners to experience teamwork, coordination and decision-making processes oriented to collective interests in a collectivist culture, so as to encourage them to learn to listen to others' opinions, integrate collective wisdom, and ultimately achieve common goals. This flexible switching mode of interaction enables learners to deeply understand the behavioral patterns of different cultures, thus enhancing their cross-cultural communication skills. In terms of evaluation criteria, it is necessary to establish a diversified evaluation system, which not only pays attention to the direct expression valued by Western communication norms, but also recognizes the effective communication modes in different cultures, such as implicit euphemism. Comprehensive evaluation should be carried out according to the learners' cultural adaptability and communication effects in the task, so as to avoid a single evaluation criterion leading to the learners' denial of their own cultural communication modes. Learners can flexibly switch between different modes of interaction to develop their intercultural communicative competence.

6.3. Enhancing Cultural Awareness Development and Reflection

Developing learners' cultural awareness and guiding their cultural reflection are key in the task-based language teaching method process[18]. Teachers play a crucial role in this process and need to plan their teaching and learning activities carefully to promote a deeper understanding of cultural diversity. Teachers should focus on cultivating learners' cultural awareness. Cultural awareness is not only the recognition of different cultural phenomena, but also the ability to see the underlying meanings, values and behaviors of cultures[19]. Therefore, in the process of task-based language teaching, teachers should pay attention to cultivating

learners' cultural awareness and guiding them to reflect on the cultural assumptions in task design. The understanding of cultural relativity should not be neglected. Every culture has its unique developmental lineage, value system and adapted social environment, and there is no absolutely superior or inferior culture. Teachers should make learners understand that certain elements of Western culture are reasonable and valid in their own cultural context, while local culture also plays an irreplaceable role in local society. This helps learners to abandon cultural prejudices and accept different cultures with a more tolerant and open mind. Through the teaching of cultural comparison, learners can clearly recognize the differences between the Western cultural elements embedded in the tasks and their own cultures, helping them to understand the diversity and relativity of cultures. At the same time, learners are encouraged to think deeply about their own cultural identity, and in the practice of intercultural communication tasks, they take the initiative to explore how to maintain their own cultural characteristics while effectively absorbing the beneficial components of other cultures, so as to realize the harmonious development of cultural identity.

6.4. Development of Learner Autonomy

In the field of intercultural education, fostering learners' autonomy is crucial to strengthening their cultural identity and intercultural communication skills. Learners' active reflection on cultural differences is the core path to achieve this goal. In a classroom that adopts the task-based language teaching method, teachers can skillfully set up a reflection section in the teaching process to guide learners to explore the cultural connotations in depth. For example, after completing the task of comparing Chinese and Western cultures, learners are asked to write a cultural reflection diary to record their feelings and thoughts about cultural differences and changes in their own cultural concepts during the task. In addition, cultural thematic discussion activities are organized to encourage learners to share their understanding and views of cultural differences, and to deepen their understanding of different cultures through exchanges and collisions. Through these ways, learners' sense of independent reflection is cultivated, so that in the process of actively exploring cultural differences, they can strengthen their identification with their own cultural identity, gradually master cross-cultural communication skills, and improve their ability to use language in a multicultural environment.

7. Conclusion

Focusing on the problem of cultural blindness in Task-based Language Teaching, this study systematically explores the conflict mechanism between implicit cultural assumptions in task design and Chinese learners' cultural identity, and proposes an optimization path that takes into account both language acquisition and cultural identity. The study first clarifies the core connotation and theoretical foundation of task-based language teaching method, pointing out that as a development of communicative teaching method, it emphasizes the realization of language acquisition through authentic tasks, but reveals the neglect of local culture when transplanting from Western contexts to non-Western contexts, especially Chinese foreign language teaching contexts. The analysis reveals that the implicit cultural assumptions in task design are mainly reflected in the Westernized implantation of situational contexts, the individualistic tendency of role assignment, and the focus on Western communicative norms in evaluation criteria. These assumptions conflict with the collectivist culture and indirect communication habits of Chinese learners, which are manifested in learners' cultural cognitive confusion, communicative behavioral contradictions, and cultural value collisions, thus affecting language learning effects and cultural identity. In response to the above problems, this study proposes corresponding coping strategies, including designing diversified task contexts, balancing role assignment and communicative evaluation, strengthening cultural awareness cultivation and reflection, and enhancing learner autonomy, aiming at the localization and

optimization of task-based language teaching method, taking into account both language acquisition and cultural identity. The significance of this study lies in the fact that it not only responds to the call for contextual sensitivity in teaching in the “post-method era”, but also provides a theoretical reference for the practice of foreign language teaching in China: the localization of task-based language teaching method should not be a simple transplantation of the method, but also a synergistic development of language skill development and cultural identity based on respect for cultural differences. Future research can further quantify and analyze the influence of cultural assumptions on learning effects through empirical investigations to provide a more concrete practical basis for task optimization.

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