A Study on the Application of Task-based Language Teaching Method in a Comprehensive English Class in China

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Abstract—This study set out to investigate whether the implementation of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in a comprehensive English class would have a positive effect on students' study motivation and language proficiency. A two-phase eight-cycle action research project was conducted in one of the author's classes. Questionnaires, interviews, classroom observation and a teaching journal were employed as data collection instruments. The quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data revealed that the majority of students showed positive perceptions towards the use of TBLT in their English learning class and acknowledged a growth in their study motivation, indicated by increased interest, enjoyment and study autonomy, and their language skills, especially speaking and writing as well as some other related skills like information retrieving. However, problems arose in the process, showing that more literature reading and further research are needed by the author for better implementation of this language teaching approach in English learning classes in the future.

Index Terms—Task-Based Language Teaching, motivation, demotivation, language proficiency

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Comprehensive English Course

Comprehensive English course in China, originally as an essential course for English majors, has long been regarded as one for the fostering of students' comprehensive skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Now the objectives of this course expand to include the development of English proficiency, the guidance on learning strategies, the transmission of social and cultural elements in English-speaking countries, and the cultivation of communication skills in the target language as well as logical, cooperative and independent characters. It also takes into consideration students' attitude, motivation and affective factors. Task-based Language Teaching, which derived from communicative teaching method is a perfect fit for these objectives. A lot of Chinese teachers of English have already applied it in their Comprehensive English classes and fruitful results have been generated in terms of both the improvement of students' language skills and the promotion of their interest and motivation. This inspired the author to adopt this teaching method in her own class and conduct an investigation into its effect afterwards.

B. Problems Identified

In traditional English classes in China, teachers do almost all the talking while students' role is to listen and take notes, and therefore Chinese students are typically good at listening and reading and bad at speaking and writing due to the lack of opportunities to use the language as a communication tool. It is also true of the author's students who, according to the teacher's observation, are reluctant to speak in English in class and whose writing papers are full of structural as well as grammatical errors. The teacher has also noted that her students are bad at searching and dealing with information whenever asked to do a presentation concerning a given topic. Another explicit problem is that they have little understanding of the society and culture of English-speaking countries. This inevitably hinders their understanding and therefore acquisition of the language, since language and culture are closely-related, as stated by Halliday (2000) who believed that language plays an important role in cultural transmission and societal transformation and as behaviors are conditioned by the environment to a large degree, the choice of language forms are also greatly conditioned by its cultural environment. In a word, both the students' overall language skills and language-related abilities need to be developed.

A more serious problem, identified by the author who has been teaching in a college for four years, is that some students tend to be somewhat demotivated after one-semester study and some even lose confidence in learning English altogether. According to the teacher's observation, near the end of the first semester some students became easily distracted and talked with each other about irrelevant things, some used mobile phones to send text messages while the teacher was lecturing and some were even absent with no reasons. And quite a few of them came to the classroom unprepared without previewing reading texts and doing exercises assigned in the previous lesson. In order to further identify this problem, the author has asked her students to answer a questionnaire concerning the degree to which they are demotivated and factors causing demotivation. In the second part of the questionnaire students were required to tick

one of the four options: not demotivated, slightly demotivated, demotivated to some degree and seriously demotivated, and the numbers are calculated. Of 29 students, 13 said that their motivation level remained unchanged, 14 reported having been demotivated slightly and 2 demotivated to some extent. The third part of the questionnaire is 39 statements of demotivation factors which were answered only by the 16 demotivated students. The most frequently reported factor was "the lack of an authentic English learning environment" (statement 7) "the lack of interaction opportunities in class" (statement 13), and "no extracurricular English activities" (statement 16), followed by "most English classes only focusing on translation and grammar teaching (statement 26 & 27). "English teachers' unchanged teaching method" (statement 31), "the lack of study autonomy" (statement 9), laziness (statement 36), "the themes of the articles in English textbooks being outdated and not being close to life" (statement 19 &21) were also referred to as factors influencing their English study by some students. In summary, both internal and external factors (mostly student-, teacher- and textbook-related) contributed to students' motivation change. The students who have kept their motivation were asked to answer the question in part 4, and most of them (9 in number) reported the urgency to pass IELTS examination and then to study abroad as the reason for their stability in motivation.

Based on the identification of the problems, the aim of the research is to see whether the application of task-based language teaching method in the comprehensive English course, which focuses on in-class interaction, the introduction of cultural elements and the improvement of students' study autonomy through implementation of tasks, will change the current situation.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Motivation and Demotivation in the Field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

In the field of SLA, motivation is valued by scholars and experts, and it has been defined from different perspectives. Gardner, in his socio-educational model, regards motivation as "the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favorable attitudes toward learning the language" (Gardner, 1985, p.10). According to Ellis (1994), motivation is the effort that learners put into learning a second language driven by a need or desire to learn it. Both definitions emphasize an inner desire and external effort made accordingly while learning a language.

Just as definitions of motivation abound in the literature, classifications also vary. Deci and Ryan (1985) groups motivation into intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsically motivated learners learn a language out of interest while extrinsically motivated learners learn to gain rewards or threats, as they pointed out. Another influential work is Dörnyei's three-level model (1994) which divides motivational components into three levels: the language level, the learner level and the learning situation level. According to him, the language level includes integrative and instrumental motivational subsystems related to aspects of the L2 such as the usefulness of the language and the culture in which the language is spoken; the learner level includes learner-related components like need for achievement and self-confidence, learning situation level describes course-specific components such as interest in the course and relevance of the course to learners' needs, teacher-specific components such as teachers' teaching styles, personal traits, instructing approach and so on, group-specific components like group cohesiveness and classroom goal structure (cooperative, competitive or individualistic).

Chinese researchers also showed interest in students' motivation to learn a foreign language and conducted numerous empirical studies on learners' motivation types and the relation of motivation to other factors. Yi'an Wu et al (1993), in their research of individual differences, found that Chinese learners of English tended to be motivated by such instrumental factors as passing English examinations to get a degree or find a better job. Yi'hong Gao et.al (2003) classified Chinese students' motivation into seven types: interest, achievement, learning context, going abroad, social responsibility, personal development and information media.

Demotivation is closely related to motivation, since demotivated individuals are regarded by researchers as those who were originally motivated to engage in an activity but lose their interest or desire later due to some reasons, as shown by Dörnyei's definition of demotivation: "specific external forces that reduce or diminish the motivational basis of a behavioral intention or an ongoing action." (2005, p.68). Dörnyei conducted a large-scale research and identified nine demotivating factors for unsuccessful language learning: the teacher (competence, teaching method, personality and commitment), inadequate school facilities, reduced self-confidence, negative attitude towards the L2, compulsory nature of L2 study, interference of another L2 being studied, negative attitude towards L2 community, attitudes of group members and coursebook (1998b). It can be seen that both external and internal factors are recognized. Another similar work is done by Keita Kikuchi, who identified five demotivators: learning contents and materials, teachers' competence and teaching styles, inadequate school facilities, lack of intrinsic motivation and test scores (2009).

Cases of demotivation were also noticed in English classrooms in China by Chinese teachers and educationists. Zhe Zhang (2007) recognized several factors for the failure of the second language learning of Chinese students and divided them into four categories: teacher-related factors, students-related factors, coursebook-related factors and learning environment-related factors. Zheqiong Kong (2009) made a similar classification: teacher immediacy, teacher competence and teaching styles, contextual demotivating factors and task-related factors, and learner-related factors.

B. Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT)

TBLT, as a version of communicative language teaching, is a language teaching approach that encourages learners to

do things in the target language. Scholars have different understandings of tasks in the field of language teaching. Breen (1987) perceives tasks as "any structural language learning endeavor which has a particular objective, appropriate content, a specified working procedure, and a range of outcomes for those who undertake the task." (p.23). Nunan considers tasks from a communicative perspective and defines the communicative task as "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 on form." (1989, p.10).

As to the components of tasks, opinions also vary. Candlin thinks that essential components of tasks are input, roles, settings, actions, monitoring, outcomes and feedback (1987). This is similar to Nunan's view that tasks should contain such components as goals, input, procedures, teacher role, learner role and settings (2011). According to him, goals can be language-related, communicative, sociocultural, process-oriented or cultural; Input is spoken, written and visual data that students work with while doing tasks; procedures are seen as what learners actually do with the input; teacher role and learner role refer to the roles that the teacher and learners take in the process of completing tasks; settings are understood as the classroom arrangements for the task (Nunan, 2011).

The classification of tasks differs as well. Prabhu (1987) classifies tasks into three major ones: "information-gap activity, which involves a transfer of given information from one person to another–or from one form to another, or from one place to another– generally calling for the decoding or encoding of information from or into language, reasoning-gap activity, which involves deriving some new information from given information through processes of inference, deduction, practical reasoning, or a perception of relationships or patterns and opinion-gap activity, which involves identifying and articulating a personal preference, feeling, or attitude in response to a given situation" (p.46-47). The author used this classification while designing the tasks in the current research for its high popularity among successive researchers like Nunan (2011). Pattison (1987) proposed seven task types which are questions and answers, dialogues and role plays, matching activities, communication strategies, pictures and picture stories, puzzles and problems, as well as discussions and decisions. A more recent classification has been given by Richards (2001) who categorizes tasks into such pedagogical types as jigsaw, information-gap, problem-solving, decision-making and opinion exchange.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Questions

The questions addressed in the research were:

1) Whether will the Task-based Language Teaching approach strengthen students' motivation to study English in the Comprehensive English Course?

2) Whether will students' overall language skills, speaking and writing in particular, be improved by finishing tasks?

3) How do students perceive the use of TBLT in the Comprehensive English course?

B. Participants

The teacher conducted this action research project in her own ESL class, which consisted of 29 mixed-sex students with their ages ranging from 17 to 19. The students were on a 2+2 study program (first two years at home and another two years abroad) in an international college, and so they had to gain a score of at least 6 in IELTS examination. They undertook a comprehensive English class for 80 minutes three times a week and had studied in the college for half a year.

C. Data Collection

Data was collected via two main questionnaires (written in the L1) and a set of short questionnaires for assessing difficulties and usefulness of tasks, a set of interviews (also conducted in the L1) to gain students' feedback on the tasks and their perception of the effect of the teaching method as a whole, a teaching journal written down after class observation and checklists for assessing group discussions as well as writing practice.

D. Research Process

The action research lasted for 16 weeks in which there were 8 cycles, each cycle for two weeks. At the very beginning of the semester, questionnaire I (see Appendix A), adapted from Sun Jianjun (2011), was distributed to the students. It contains four parts. The first part was designed to obtain demographic information about the subjects, the second part was four options concerning motivation change, the third included 40 statements and an open-ended question regarding demotivating factors and the fourth was an open-ended question to find out the reason for motivation maintenance The teacher explained the purpose of the questionnaire and guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity. All the 29 students answered it according to the requirement. Upon collecting the questionnaire papers, the teacher analyzed the data immediately and identified the problem. Then she introduced the task-based teaching method to the students, clarifying the purpose, demands and adjustments as compared to last semester.

According to the syllabus, in each semester students are required to learn all the eight units in the comprehensive English textbook, each unit discussing a topic and containing two reading passages. As it takes two weeks to learn a unit, two weeks form a research cycle. The teacher designed tasks based on the topic of each unit. After students had

completed the tasks of each unit, they filled out a short questionnaire eliciting their ideas about the usefulness and difficulties of the tasks so that the teacher could make changes for next unit. Whenever a cycle was finished, the teacher interviewed two students to find information about their implementation of tasks as well as difficulties and problems they encountered in the process. Near the end of the semester, questionnaire II (see Appendix B) was handed out to students, which included three sections: personal information, statements about effect of TBLT on English study motivation and language competence in comprehensive English course and open-ended questions about personal ideas of this new teaching method and suggestions for future perfection. At the same time, four students were interviewed to elicit more information. Once again, data was analyzed to show the result of the research.

Since the comprehensive English course was meant to enhance students' comprehensive skills, tasks were devised to improve all the four basic skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Given students' comparative weakness in speaking and writing, these two skills were the main focus.

Task types for speaking varied, including information-gap, opinion-gap and reasoning-gap activities. Group discussion was the most frequently employed approach to finishing tasks targeting at the improvement of communication skills. Students were divided into seven groups, four in the first six groups and 5 in the last group. A group leader was elected in each group with the responsibility of organizing discussions and making sure each member's contribution. A secretary was also chosen to take notes of members' ideas during group discussion, and in order to ensure that every member has the opportunity to take different roles a different member would act as the secretary in each different discussion. After each discussion, every student was asked to fill out a checklist for the assessment of their contribution to the discussion so as to make them reflect on their own performance and aware of the direction in which they can improve next time. Apart from group discussion, pair cooperation was also adopted as an approach to finishing tasks targeting at improvement of oral skills, especially when students were asked to talk about an IELTS speaking topic.

After the learning of each unit had been finished, students were required to write a composition related to the topic discussed following the standard of IELTS writing task two and they were encouraged to use newly-learnt words, phrases and sentence patterns in the unit. Then the writing papers would be collected for assessment by the teacher, who would point out structural and grammatical errors and give suggestions for improvement. After that the papers were returned to students for revision, and each second draft was again handed in for further assessment. And students were given another checklist to assess their writing papers by themselves and give them a clear understanding of how to better writing skills.

Sometimes IELTS-related reading and listening materials were given to students as extra after-class tasks to get them familiar with IELTS reading and listening question types and have a clear grasp of skills needed to deal with such question types. Tasks concerning social and cultural elements of English-speaking countries were also designed as a part of the topic for the students to understand and appreciate foreign customs and behaviors, and when necessary, a comparison was made between Chinese and Western cultures.

E.   Reflections and Adjustments

Through class observation the teacher found several problems with group discussion during the first phase of the research (from the beginning to the midterm of the semester), which are students' excessive use of Chinese, frequent distraction from the task, lack of preparation and bad performance in the presentation of discussion results.

After the interview with some students, the existence of the problems mentioned above was confirmed and reasons identified—being incapable of finding appropriate words to explain their thoughts, feeling awkward to speak English with those sharing the same first language, and being inexperienced in group discussion in English and study autonomy to prepare for lessons.

To solve these problems, the teacher demonstrated to students how to express ideas using different ways and discouraged them to rely on a single word which they thought most appropriate, and she asked the members of each group to remind each other of speaking in English and at the same time she made a sign board of "English Only" to show to them while supervising the discussion. Meanwhile, she had a meeting with group leaders, emphasizing the importance of leadership and clarifying their role as an organizer to divide tasks within members, to ensure every member's contribution, and with a clear purpose in mind, to lead discussion in the right direction once distraction occurred. Given that students were not sure of how to engage in discussion, the teacher found and showed some videos of effective group discussion and then discussed with them how to negotiate meaning, how to give personal opinions and factual information, how to invite contributions from other members, how to agree or disagree appropriately and how to use non-verbal signals to help the expression of their thoughts. She also specified assessment details for the course, that is, students' performance in implementing tasks accounted for 30% of the overall; every time groups finished a task, the teacher would give each group a score of 0 to 30 based on their overall performance and the final score for the group was the average of all the scores given in the whole semester; within each group members graded each other based on their contributions and got a score of 0 to 100% after calculating the average of all the scores given by different members; each member then got a final score by multiplying the final score for the group and his/her average percentage of contributions graded by other members. Having known that their performance was closely related to their final grade for the course, students became more prepared and attentive. Considering students' lack of presentation skills, the teacher showed some video clips of English presentations to let them observe and learn, and

encouraged them to practice in front of a mirror after class.

After the implementation of the adjustments outlined above, some changes were noted. Students were more willing to speak English, although L1 was still heard from time to time, and they became more focused during group discussion. Almost everyone was prepared and engaged in discussion. Besides, they seemed more motivated in the class. In the teacher's teaching journal she wrote "As everyone was attentively participating in finishing tasks, chitchatting, using mobile phone for personal purposes and absence from class were seldom noticed." Confidence also grew in them when they came to the front stage to give presentations.

The problem recognized with the completion of the writing task was that students' performance differed greatly due to their different levels of English proficiency especially the mastery of grammatical rules. When getting the teacher's comments and revision suggestions, some students still did not know how to revise their work. Considering this, the teacher decided to adopt another approach. After marking their writing papers, she picked several from those with a high score and showed them to the whole class. Then discussion was conducted within each group about the good points of these papers so that students with lower proficiency could learn from those with higher proficiency. This change proved to be effective since students' performance in writing had an overall improvement, which will be discussed in next part.

As time went by, the second phase of the action research (from the midterm examination to the final examination) seemed to go more smoothly. But new problems still occurred. As students got more acquainted with each other and more comfortable in giving their opinions, sometimes their discussion developed into quarrels especially when such activities as debates were carried out (in the second phase more demanding tasks like games and debates were added), as is shown in the teaching journal—"Some students got so excited that they stood up and shouted to each other." In order to keep them disciplined, the teacher re-emphasized the classroom rules and had them understand that the purpose of the debate was to learn from others and learn in the process, and that the process was more important than the result.

Quite a lot of students also displayed their incompetence in summarizing the information searched for the discussion of social and cultural aspects and were unable to think critically when required to express their own views. In view of this, the teacher asked students to summarize the two passages in each unit and then discussed with their group members before presenting the result. Students were also encouraged to read more about the topic in question after class and form their own judgment, and they were given more opportunities to answer open-ended questions in class.

These solutions were effective to some degree. Classroom discipline was guaranteed. Students became better at getting main ideas from information and when answering questions, they could say more. But this is far from enough. What they need is constant practice in information summary and critical thinking in the future.

After the conduction of the action research in this semester, students have made some improvement in terms of study autonomy, communication skills and team spirit, writing skills as well as confidence in themselves. Although there is still a long way to go, this is a good start for them. The teacher herself has gained from this experience too. In her future career, she will be more flexible in choosing teaching approaches and ready to do more research to help students in their language learning.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To address the first and second research question, a quantitative analysis was carried out on students' responses to Questionnaire II. The questionnaire papers were distributed to all the 29 students and 26 of them completed and returned. Part 1 of the questionnaire was about students' personal information. Part 2 includes 23 items and items 1 to 12 concern motivation change while items 13 to 23 were about language skills.

TABLE 2
STUDENTS' VIEWS ON THE EFFECT OF TBLT ON THEIR STUDY MOTIVATION (N=26)

Items	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n
Strongly disagree	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Disagree	1	2	0	0	0	1	0	3	1	0	1	1
Neutral	6	7	6	6	5	7	5	6	2	6	3	7
Agree	17	17	16	18	21	17	19	15	19	18	17	18
Strongly Agree	2	0	4	2	0	1	2	2	4	2	5	0
Percentage (%)for those who agree/strongly agree	73.1	65.2	76.9	76.9	80.8	69.2	80.8	65.4	88.5	76.9	84.6	69.3

Table 2 presents a number and percentage comparison of students' responses to each of the 12 items on the relation of TBLT to study motivation. Items 1- 4 asked students to identify some important changes in their performance in the Comprehensive English course, and most respondents acknowledged that this new teaching approach made them more willing to speak English (73.1%), more attentive (65.4%), more in expectation of their own performance and improvement (76.9) and have a stronger sense of achievement (76.9%). Items 5-7 concerned students' involvement in tasks, and the responses showed that the majority of them had participated in in-class tasks actively (80.8%), had finished pre-lesson tasks on their own (69.2%) and had clearly known the theme of each task. Items 8-12 were concerned with respondents' attitude towards task implementation. More than half of the students (65.4%) agreed that

this teaching approach was more interesting than the traditional one characterized by lectures and practice; A vast majority had demonstrated their willingness to exchange ideas with classmates in group discussion (88.5%) and their enjoyment in the interaction with the teacher and classmates (84.6%); 76.9% acknowledged that they had learnt a lot by completing tasks; 69.3% recognized an enhancement in their confidence and sense of belonging due to the relaxing atmosphere created while they were working on tasks.

TABLE 3
STUDENTS' VIEWS ON THE EFFECT OF TBLT ON THEIR LANGUAGE SKILLS (N=26)

Items	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23
	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n
Strongly disagree	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Disagree	0	1	1	2	2	1	0	0	1	1	1
Neutral	9	4	1	3	3	2	4	2	3	1	3
Agree	16	19	22	19	17	19	19	18	16	19	19
Strongly agree	1	2	2	2	4	4	3	3	6	5	3
Percentage (%) for those who agree/strongly agree	65.4	80.8	92.3	80.8	80.8	88.5	84.6	80.8	84.6	92.3	84.6

Table 3 shows students' recognition of a growth in their overall language skills. Responses to items 13 and 17 indicated an improvement in their ability to retrieve information through finishing pre-class and after-class tasks (65.4% of respondents) and a deeper understanding of the western culture through group discussion (80.8% of respondents). In response to items 14 and 18 students reported that they had seen a clear growth in their communication skills through group discussion and result presentations (80.8%) and better performance for part two of the IELTS speaking task owing to constant practice (88.5%). Responses to items 15 and 16revealed that students were mostly in agreement that they could understand English essay features better, which was conducive to reading comprehension and writing design, by finishing tasks of reading passage summarization and outline analysis, and were more able to reason logically by answering questions concerning the theme of each unit (92.3% and 80.8% respectively). In response to items 19 and 20, most respondents admitted a development in overall reading abilities as well as a better grasp of skills for certain IELTS reading question types thanks to the addition of IELTS reading materials to their daily reading assignments (84.6% and 80.8% respectively). Items 21, 22 and 23 were about writing, and according to the responses, a clear majority recognized an overall growth in writing skills (84.6%), a better mastery of outline design, paragraph development and the use of words (92.3%) and a clear awareness of employing newly-learnt words, phrases and sentence patterns in writing (84.6%) after finishing IELTS writing tasks.

To address the third research question, three open-ended questions were designed in part three of Questionnaire II, which were meant to elicit students' attitudes towards the application of TBLT in the Comprehensive English course, views on tasks and suggestions for future perfection of this course.

The answers to the first question show that 19 out of 26 students preferred the new language teaching approach to the old one mainly for the reason that this approach could give them more opportunities to speak and thus improve their communication skills while the traditional method, which emphasized word and grammar explanation, was comparatively boring. The remaining seven who had returned completed questionnaire papers were in favor of the traditional teaching method. The reasons, as they stated, were "It is of more help for those whose English proficiency was not so good", "It is better in laying the foundation for the future" and "I am more accustomed to this one".

The answers to the second question reveal that most students perceived group discussion and writing tasks to be most helpful. The most frequently mentioned problems with tasks were the time-consuming preparation for group discussion and the lack of vocabulary and arguments for writing. When asked to provide suggestions for the future (the third question), some respondents stated a need to adopt this approach from the first semester so that their speaking and writing skills could be bettered earlier; some recommended the introduction of some language learning tips and the addition of some expressions for daily conversations to better prepare them for future life in an English speaking country.

Apart from the open-ended questions in Questionnaire II, qualitative data was also taken from interviews conducted with four students (three females and one male) of the teacher's class. They were asked three questions: 1) what do you think of the TBLT method adopted in the Comprehensive English class this semester? 2) what improvement have you experienced through the completion of various tasks? 3) what suggestions do you have for the future improvement of the TBLT approach and the teaching of the Comprehensive English course as well?

All of the interviewees showed a positive attitude towards the TBLT method, as shown in the following extracts of their statements which are the responses to the first interview question:

[S1] The teaching method employed this semester is much better than the one used last semester. I didn't know why and what to learn last semester, while I am clearly aware of the purpose of learning this term because I have tasks to finish and thus my learning is more effective.

[S2] Everyone prepares for the same task, and when it is time for discussion, we can express ideas freely.

[S3] This teaching approach is good. I feel highly motivated and excited in the Comprehensive English class. I used to be reluctant to go to English classes, because I was fed up with listening grammar explanations and doing translation exercises, but now I'm always fully prepared for lessons and expect my performance in class.

[S4] I become more active in thinking, since I have to think of ways to complete my share of tasks. Besides, I have to do a lot of information searching and literature reading, and so I spend more time in exposing myself in English, which is good for my learning.

All the four students also felt a positive effect of this method on their speaking, reading and writing skills, as shown in the following extracts which are their answers to the second interview question.

[S1] Presenting discussion results is my favorite part. I need to summarize ideas of my group members and then present it in front of the whole class, and this gives me confidence in public speaking. My overall writing skill has been bettered. And I become more aware of the importance of using newly-learnt words and expressions in my writing, which I think is a good way of consolidating what has been learnt.

[S2] My communication skills have been greatly improved. At the beginning, I was afraid of speaking in public, but with the passage of time, I get used to group discussion, and knowing that I have prepared for it, I can convey my feelings in English fluently.

[S3] IELTS reading exercise is of more use to me. The tips you gave us for dealing with certain question types such as how to scan reading passages quickly and how to find topic sentences are quite helpful.

[S4] I had no desire to write in English before. Now, as you assigned the writing task and introduced some ways of developing ideas, I feel it much easier to write. And after the revision from the first draft to the second one, I have noted my problems.

Problems also arise, as stated in the following:

[S2] It gives me headaches to think of examples to back up my arguments in writing and it takes me a lot of time to write an English essay.

[S3] I felt easily distracted from the topic in discussion and tended to chat with my classmates about irrelevant things like sport news and gossips in the entertainment circle.

When asked to give suggestions for the future, the interviewees thought it would be better if we could introduce this teaching method at the start of the first school year, and the earlier they had access to IELTS reading question types and writing topics, the better they could get prepared for the IELTS examination, which is in agreement with the responses to the last open-ended question in Questionnaire II.

From the above quantitative analysis, it is evident that the students have experienced an upward change in the level of their study motivation and language proficiency. The qualitative findings also showed an improvement in their speaking, reading and writing skills, and revealed their positive perceptions towards the use of tasks in language teaching. Students' study autonomy has been strengthened to some degree since they took a more active role in preparing for task completion, and their information searching ability has been advanced at the same time. In addition, they displayed a better appreciation of Western cultures, and as a result a deeper understanding of the target language.

Despite this expected result, the fact that not all the students agreed with the questionnaire statements concerning study motivation change and language ability improvement demonstrates that this anti-traditional language teaching method is not appropriate for all and it takes time and effort to make it become overwhelmingly popular with language learners. The fact that there are still seven students in preference to the traditional language teaching method also shows that tradition has its own strengthens worth inheriting, and that the combination of both the old and the new might be a better solution. Additionally, that there were problems accompanying the application of this approach in the English classroom indicates the teacher's lack of experience and competence in carrying it out completely successfully, and thus she needs to read more and do more research to get better equipped in the future.

V. CONCLUSION

The present research was conducted to investigate the effect of the application of Task-Based Language Teaching method into the Comprehensive English course on the university students' motivation and language proficiency as well as their perception of this new method.

The results revealed that the majority of the students recognized a positive relation of TBLT to their motivation for English study in terms of an enhanced interest in and enjoyment of the language itself, more active participation in classroom activities and strengthened study autonomy as indicated by the increased time spent on preparation for and completion for tasks. Most students also identified a growth in their language skills, especially their speaking and writing skills, information retrieval abilities, and a better understanding of Western cultures due to the communicative nature of the approach.

However, this action research suffered from limitations. Action research in itself is not perfect and lacks external validity, since "it is simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of those practices and the situations in which the practices are carried out" (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p.162). To investigate the effect of a teaching method, experimental research designs, the pre-test post- test control group design in particular, might be a better option. Another problem is with quality control. According to Denzin (1978), in order to guarantee the quality of a research, one needs to consider the four types of triangulation: data triangulation (various data sources), theory triangulation (different theories), methods triangulation (multiple data collecting methods) and researcher triangulation (more than one researcher). In the current study, methods triangulation was not satisfied. So, the involvement of another researcher would be necessary to

increase confidence in the conclusion.

APPENDIX A.   QUESTIONNAIRE I

Part one: Demographic Information
(1) Gender
(2) Age
Part two: motivation change
After a semester your English learning motivation has undergone which of the following change:
Not demotivated ( )   Slightly demotivated ( )
Demotivated to some degree ( )   Seriously demotivated ( )
Part three: demotivating factors
The following are statements intended to find out factors contributing to the demotivation for language study. For each of the statements, please choose your answer by ticking the appropriate box in the table below:

Demotivating factors for English study	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1. I hear that English is so widely learnt that it is not as competitive as before.					
2. My friends do not like learning English.					
3. I always get low scores in tests.					
4. Sentences in the English texts are difficult to understand.					
5. I find it difficult to memorize English words and phrases.					
6. Texts in English course books are too easy.					
7. There is a lack of authentic English environment in the process of learning.					
8. I do not like my classmates.					
9. I don't know how to learn autonomously.					
10. The English teacher's pronunciation is poor.					
11. The English teacher ridicule students' mistakes in their answers。					
12. English class hours are not sufficient.					
13. I seldom have chances to communicate in English in the class.					
14. Audio-visual facilities in the classroom are seldom used.					
15. I have made efforts to learn English but without achievement.					
16. Out-of-class English activities are rarely organized.					
17. The English teacher shows no emotion and enthusiasm while giving lectures.					
18. The English teacher favors some students.					
19. Topics of the English passages in the course book are too old.					
20. Excessive new words emerge in the textbook.					
21. The content of the passages in the course book is not close to life.					
22. I have so many things to do that I do not have time to learn English					
23. There are too many students in the English class.					
24. Students do not cooperate in the English class.					
25. English learning task is too heavy.					
26. Most English lessons focus on translation.					
27. Most English lessons focus on grammar.					
28. The English teacher is always engaged in giving lectures without interacting with students.					
29. The English teacher does not give feedback on students' learning punctually.					
30. The English teacher gives lectures at a quick pace without considering whether students can catch up or not.					
31. The English teacher sticks to one single instructing method.					
32. The English teacher's explanations are difficult to understand.					
33. I do not like the English teacher's appearance and manners.					
34. There is no sufficient equipment in the classroom (such as no adequate lighting and warming and cooling facilities).					
35. The teaching is arranged at an unreasonable pace.					
36. I am too lazy to spend time on English study.					
37. I have no interest in English at all.					
38. I am addicted to the Internet and lose interest in English.					
39. I am in love with someone and have no desire to learn English.					

Please explain briefly if you are demotivated for other reasons.
Part four: open-ended question
Why has your English study motivation not changed? Please state the reason in brief.

APPENDIX B.   QUESTIONNAIRE II

Part one: Demographic Information
(1) Gender
(2) Age

Part two: the influence of TBLT on study motivation and language skills

The following are statements intended to find out the perceived effect of TBLT in the Comprehensive English class. For each of the statements, please choose your answer by ticking the appropriate box in the table below:

statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1. I was more willing to speak English.					
2. I was more attentive in the Comprehensive English class.					
3. I had more expectations for my own performance and progress.					
4. I could get a sense of achievement from learning English in this course.					
5. I always participated actively in the in-class tasks.					
6. I could finish all the before-class tasks assigned.					
7. Every time, I was clear of the theme of the tasks.					
8. Compared with the traditional language teaching method, TBLT is more interesting.					
9. I was willing to exchange ideas with my classmates in the group discussion.					
10. I could learn things while trying to finish tasks.					
11. I enjoyed interacting with my teacher and classmates.					
12. I could gain confidence and a sense of belonging in the atmosphere created with the adoption of TBLT.					
13. I have made progress in retrieving information online through the completion of before-class and in-class tasks.					
14. I have improved my communication skills through group discussion and result presentation.					
15. I have improved my reading and writing abilities through finishing tasks of working out the outline of passages and summarizing the main idea of each paragraph in these passages.					
16. I have strengthened the ability of reasoning by answering the questions designed by the teacher concerning the content of the passages.					
17. I have got a better understanding of Western cultures via the discussion of Western cultural elements.					
18. I was aware of my own weaknesses and the direction in which to improve through the oral practice of the second part of IELTS speaking test.					
19. I have improved my reading skills by finishing IELTS reading tasks.					
20. I could better solve certain IELTS reading questions under the guidance of the teacher.					
21. I have bettered my overall writing proficiency by writing essays concerning the topics of IELTS writing task two.					
22. I have improved my writing skills in terms of outline, argumentation and sentence and lexical variety through the revision of the first draft of each piece of writing.					
23. I have tried to use newly-learnt words, expressions and sentence patterns in each unit while writing the essay concerning the same topic with this unit.					

Part three: open-ended questions.

1. Do you prefer the traditional language teaching method which focuses on grammar and vocabulary or the Task-Based Language Teaching approach which emphasizes meaning and interaction? Why?

2. Among all the tasks designed in this course (reading, writing, listening and speaking), which do you think is of greater help to you? What problems have you ever come across in the process of finishing the tasks?

3. What suggestions do you have of the further improvement of the teaching method in the Comprehensive English course?

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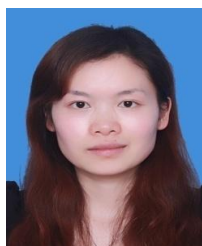
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