

# Task - Based Language Teaching in Junior High School Oral English Classrooms: An Analysis of Dilemmas and Countermeasures in Localized Practice - From the Perspective of Teachers

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the dilemmas faced by junior high school English teachers in implementing Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in oral English classrooms within the Chinese context and proposes context-adapted strategies from a teacher-centered perspective. Through a synthesis of existing literature, the study identifies four core dilemmas: the tension between TBLT's process orientation and exam-driven instruction, inequitable participation in large classes, teachers' limited competence in task design and facilitation, and the mismatch between textbook "authentic tasks" and students' local realities. To address these challenges, the paper puts forward targeted strategies: designing exam-informed yet communicative tasks to align TBLT with formative assessment; adopting sequential role-based tasks to ensure equal participation in large classes; organizing school-based peer workshops to enhance teachers' task design skills; and developing localized task banks rooted in students' daily experiences. The study emphasizes that TBLT localization requires teachers to act as curriculum innovators rather than rigid implementers, highlighting the need for a flexible framework responsive to local constraints. These findings contribute to the discourse on TBLT adaptation in EFL contexts and provide practical insights for junior high school English teachers.

**Keywords:** Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT); junior high school oral English; localization dilemmas; teacher perspectives; instructional strategies.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background

In recent years, China's English language education reform has undergone a significant shift from a knowledge-oriented paradigm to a competence-oriented one, with a growing emphasis on cultivating students' "core competencies" (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2022)<sup>[17]</sup>. This shift highlights the development of communicative competence, particularly oral proficiency, as a key goal of English teaching in basic education. Against this backdrop, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has emerged as a promising pedagogical approach, as its core principles—such as emphasizing meaning negotiation, real-world interaction, and learner-centered task completion—align closely with the reform's objectives (Willis & Willis, 2007)<sup>[21]</sup>. TBLT, which frames language learning as a series of purposeful tasks that require learners to use language to achieve specific outcomes, is theoretically grounded in theories like Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis, which posits that meaningful interaction facilitates second language acquisition<sup>[15]</sup>.

However, despite TBLT's theoretical appeal, its implementation in Chinese junior high school oral English classrooms has encountered notable challenges in localization. Scholars (e.g., Li, 2020; Zhang, 2021)<sup>[13][22]</sup> have observed a significant gap between TBLT's idealized model, often developed in Western ESL (English as a Second Language) contexts, and the practical realities of Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms. Junior high schools in China operate within unique constraints, including large class sizes (typically 40–50 students), high-stakes examinations that prioritize grammar and vocabulary over oral

communication, and a teaching culture rooted in teacher-centered instruction (Wang & Zhang, 2019)<sup>[19]</sup>. These factors have led to inconsistent or superficial implementation of TBLT, where tasks are often reduced to mechanical activities lacking genuine communicative intent.

Teachers, as frontline implementers of pedagogical reforms, play a critical role in mediating this gap. Their perceptions, beliefs, and practical experiences are central to understanding why TBLT succeeds or fails in local contexts (Borg, 2003)<sup>[1]</sup>. Yet, existing research on TBLT localization in China has often focused on theoretical debates or student outcomes, with less attention paid to teachers' lived experiences—their challenges, adaptive strategies, and insights into what works in their classrooms. This oversight limits our understanding of how TBLT can be meaningfully adapted to serve the needs of Chinese junior high school students and teachers.

### 1.2. Research Significance

This study holds both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it contributes to the growing body of literature on TBLT localization by centering teachers' perspectives, which are often marginalized in discussions of pedagogical innovation. By synthesizing teachers' reported challenges from existing research and proposing context-adapted strategies, this paper seeks to enrich the discourse on how Western-derived teaching methods can be reimagined for non-Western EFL contexts. It also responds to calls from scholars like Kumaravadivelu (2001) for "post-method" pedagogies that prioritize local realities over rigid adherence to imported models<sup>[9]</sup>.

Practically, this study aims to provide actionable insights for junior high school English teachers navigating the complexities of TBLT implementation in oral classrooms. By

identifying common dilemmas—such as reconciling TBLT with exam pressures or managing large classes—and offering concrete, teacher-friendly strategies, it seeks to empower educators to adapt TBLT to their specific contexts rather than abandon it due to perceived impracticality. Additionally, the focus on localized task design and teacher collaboration may inform in-service training programs, helping to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and classroom practice.

### 1.3. Research Questions

To guide this exploration, the study addresses two core research questions:

What are the main dilemmas faced by junior high school English teachers when implementing TBLT in oral English classrooms, as identified in existing literature and from a teacher-centered perspective?

What context-adapted strategies can be proposed to address these dilemmas, based on theoretical analysis and insights into effective TBLT adaptation?

### 1.4. Structure of the Paper

This paper is structured in five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the background, significance, research questions, and overall framework. Chapter 2 reviews relevant literature, including the core principles of TBLT, its implementation in Chinese EFL contexts with a focus on teachers' voices, and the role of teachers in shaping pedagogical practice. Chapter 3 synthesizes the main dilemmas of TBLT localization in junior high school oral classrooms, drawing on existing studies to highlight challenges such as exam-oriented constraints, large class sizes, teacher competence gaps, and mismatched task authenticity. Chapter 4 proposes context-adapted strategies to address these dilemmas, integrating theoretical justifications with practical examples and personal insights. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes by summarizing key findings, reflecting on the role of teachers as curriculum innovators, acknowledging limitations, and suggesting directions for future research.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Core Principles of TBLT

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is a pedagogical approach rooted in the belief that language learning is most effective when learners engage in meaningful, goal-oriented activities that mirror real-life communication (Long, 2015)<sup>[16]</sup>. At its core, a “task” is defined as “a piece of work undertaken for oneself or others, freely or for some reward” (Long, 1996)<sup>[15]</sup>, with the key distinction that tasks prioritize meaning over form. Unlike traditional drills that focus on isolated language structures, TBLT tasks require learners to use language strategically to achieve a specific outcome, such as solving a problem, negotiating a plan, or sharing information.

A foundational framework for TBLT is Willis and Willis' (2007) three-stage task cycle, which structures classroom practice into pre-task, during-task, and post-task phases<sup>[21]</sup>. The pre-task phase prepares learners by introducing the topic, activating prior knowledge, and clarifying task objectives—often through exposure to model language or examples. The during-task phase is the core, where learners collaborate to complete the task using their existing language resources, with minimal teacher intervention to preserve communicative flow. The post-task phase reflects on task completion, with teachers providing feedback on both content and language use,

and may include focused practice of key linguistic features highlighted during the task.

The theoretical foundations of TBLT draw from multiple perspectives in second language acquisition (SLA). Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis argues that negotiation of meaning—such as requesting clarification or paraphrasing—facilitates language learning by making input more comprehensible and pushing learners to produce more accurate and complex language<sup>[15]</sup>. This aligns with TBLT's emphasis on interactive tasks, where learners must communicate to resolve gaps in information or reach consensus. Additionally, sociocultural theory (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006) emphasizes the role of social interaction in constructing knowledge, framing tasks as “mediational tools” that scaffold learning through collaboration with peers and teachers<sup>[11]</sup>. Together, these theories position TBLT as an approach that integrates cognitive and social dimensions of language acquisition, making it particularly relevant for developing oral communicative competence.

### 2.2. TBLT in Chinese EFL Contexts: Teachers' Voices in Existing Studies

Research on TBLT implementation in Chinese EFL contexts has grown substantially over the past two decades, with a focus on its alignment with national curriculum reforms and its practical challenges. Early studies (e.g., Carless, 2004) noted that Chinese teachers generally recognized TBLT's potential to enhance learner engagement and oral fluency but expressed skepticism about its feasibility in their classrooms. More recent research has echoed these observations, highlighting a complex interplay between teachers' positive perceptions of TBLT and the constraints they face.

Li (2020) conducted a qualitative study with 12 junior high school English teachers in urban and rural areas of Jiangsu Province, finding that 90% of participants viewed TBLT as “theoretically superior” to traditional methods for developing oral skills<sup>[13]</sup>. Teachers reported that task-based activities increased student participation in speaking, particularly among shy or low-proficiency learners, by reducing the pressure of “perfect” language production. However, they also identified significant barriers: three quarters cited exam-oriented education as the primary obstacle, explaining that the high-stakes nature of midterm and final exams forced them to prioritize grammar drills and vocabulary memorization over open-ended tasks. As one teacher noted, “I want to use more tasks, but if students don't perform well on the written exam, parents and administrators question my methods” (Li, 2020)<sup>[13]</sup>.

Zhang (2021) explored TBLT implementation in large junior high school classes (45–55 students) in Henan Province, focusing on teachers' classroom management strategies. The study found that teachers struggled to ensure equitable participation in oral tasks, with 80% reporting that high-proficiency students dominated discussions, while low-proficiency students remained silent. Teachers described feelings of frustration, as they “could not monitor every group or provide individual feedback” (Zhang, 2021), leading to superficial task completion that failed to deepen oral competence. Additionally, 60% of teachers reported adapting tasks by simplifying them into “controlled practice” (e.g., scripted dialogues) to manage classroom order, effectively diluting TBLT's communicative focus<sup>[22]</sup>.

Wang and Zhang (2019) investigated teachers' perceptions

of task authenticity in TBLT materials used in Chinese junior high schools. Analyzing textbook tasks and teacher interviews, they found that 70% of teachers viewed textbook tasks as “culturally irrelevant” to students’ daily lives, particularly in rural areas. Teachers noted that students struggled to engage with tasks rooted in unfamiliar cultural contexts, leading to stilted or inauthentic language use. One rural teacher commented, “My students have never been to a restaurant like that. They don’t know what to say, so they just repeat the example sentences” (Wang & Zhang, 2019)<sup>[19]</sup>. This mismatch between task design and local context undermines TBLT’s goal of fostering genuine communication.

### 2.3. Teachers’ Roles in TBLT: Beyond “Instructors”

Teachers are not merely implementers of TBLT but active agents who shape its practice through their beliefs, knowledge, and contextual judgments (Borg, 2003)<sup>[11]</sup>. Borg’s (2003) model of teacher cognition highlights that teachers’ classroom practices are influenced by their implicit theories, prior experiences, and perceptions of students’ needs—factors that interact dynamically with formal pedagogical knowledge<sup>[11]</sup>. In the context of TBLT, this means that teachers’ understanding of “what a task is” and “how to implement it” is often more influential than theoretical prescriptions alone.

In TBLT, teachers assume multiple roles that extend beyond traditional instruction. As task designers, they adapt or create tasks to align with curriculum goals, student proficiency levels, and local contexts (Tomlinson, 2013)<sup>[18]</sup>. This role requires not just knowledge of TBLT principles but also creativity to design activities that are both communicative and feasible. For example, a teacher in a large class might modify a group discussion task into a “carousel” activity, where students rotate between stations to ensure equal participation—an adaptation rooted in practical judgment rather than rigid adherence to TBLT models.

As facilitators, teachers guide task completion by providing scaffolding (e.g., vocabulary support, strategic questions) without dominating interaction (Willis & Willis, 2007)<sup>[21]</sup>. This role demands a shift from “lecturing” to “monitoring,” as teachers observe group work, identify communication breakdowns, and offer subtle prompts to keep tasks on track. Effective facilitation requires teachers to balance hands-on support with learner autonomy, a skill that many Chinese teachers report struggling with due to cultural expectations of teacher authority (Li, 2020)<sup>[13]</sup>.

Teachers also act as assessors in TBLT, evaluating not just task outcomes but the quality of language use and interaction during tasks (Ellis, 2017)<sup>[6]</sup>. This involves moving beyond traditional error correction to provide formative feedback that focuses on both meaning and form. However, research by Chen (2020) indicates that many Chinese junior high school teachers lack training in TBLT-specific assessment, relying instead on summative evaluations of task products (e.g., written reports) rather than process-based feedback on oral interaction<sup>[5]</sup>.

Finally, teachers serve as adapters who negotiate the tensions between TBLT’s theoretical ideals and classroom realities (Kumaravadivelu, 2001)<sup>[9]</sup>. In the face of constraints like large classes or exam pressures, teachers make deliberate choices to modify TBLT—sometimes compromising its principles, but often innovating to make it work locally. For example, a teacher might integrate exam vocabulary into a

debate task, balancing communicative goals with assessment demands (Zhang, 2021). These adaptive practices, rooted in teachers’ contextual knowledge, are critical to TBLT’s successful localization.

Understanding teachers’ roles as designers, facilitators, assessors, and adapters highlights the importance of centering their perspectives in TBLT research. By examining their challenges and innovations, we can develop more realistic and effective approaches to TBLT localization that respect teachers’ expertise and contextual constraints.

## 3. Dilemmas in Localized Practice: A Synthesis of Teachers’ Perceived Challenges

### 3.1. Tension Between TBLT’s Process Orientation and Exam-Driven Instruction

One of the most persistent dilemmas reported by junior high school English teachers in China is the inherent conflict between TBLT’s process-oriented philosophy and the exam-driven nature of local education systems. TBLT, by design, prioritizes the development of communicative competence through sustained engagement in meaningful tasks, where the focus is on how learners use language to negotiate meaning and achieve goals (Ellis, 2019)<sup>[7]</sup>. This stands in stark contrast to the prevailing emphasis on summative assessments in Chinese junior high schools, which typically evaluate discrete language skills—such as grammar accuracy, vocabulary recall, and reading comprehension—through standardized written tests (Cheng & Curtis, 2017)<sup>[4]</sup>.

Existing literature consistently highlights how this misalignment forces teachers into a difficult trade-off. Zhang (2021) found that 85% of surveyed teachers in urban and rural junior high schools admitted to reducing TBLT implementation in the months leading up to midterm or final exams, shifting instead to “exam-focused drills” to ensure students performed well on assessments. Teachers described feeling pressured by school administrators and parents, who often equated academic success with high test scores, regardless of improvements in oral fluency. As one teacher lamented, “Even if students can speak more confidently after task-based activities, parents ask, ‘Does this help them pass the exam?’ If the answer is not clearly ‘yes,’ I have to change my methods” (Zhang, 2021)<sup>[22]</sup>.

This tension often results in what scholars term “pseudo-TBLT” (Carless, 2007), where tasks are stripped of their communicative essence to align with exam requirements. For example, instead of designing open-ended role-plays about daily life, teachers may restrict tasks to scripted dialogues using vocabulary and grammar structures explicitly tested in exams. While this adaptation makes TBLT more acceptable within the exam system, it undermines its core principle: that language learning thrives when learners are motivated to communicate authentically (Long, 2015)<sup>[16]</sup>. Consequently, students may develop test-taking skills but fail to gain the ability to use English flexibly in real-life interactions—a gap that contradicts the “core competencies” framework of China’s curriculum reform (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2022)<sup>[17]</sup>.

Critical evaluation of this dilemma reveals a deeper issue: the narrow definition of “academic success” in Chinese junior high schools, which marginalizes oral proficiency despite policy rhetoric emphasizing its importance. TBLT’s process

orientation—with its focus on collaboration, problem-solving, and iterative improvement—requires a rethinking of assessment practices to value growth over rote performance. Until formative assessment of oral communication is integrated into high-stakes evaluations, teachers will continue to prioritize exam preparation over TBLT’s long-term benefits for communicative competence.

### 3.2. Managing Large Classes: Inequitable Participation

A second major challenge identified by teachers is the difficulty of implementing TBLT in large junior high school classes, which typically range from 40 to 50 students (and occasionally more in urban areas). TBLT’s effectiveness relies on meaningful interaction, where learners have frequent opportunities to speak, negotiate meaning, and receive feedback—conditions that are inherently difficult to achieve in oversized classrooms (Wen & Clément, 2003)<sup>[20]</sup>.

Li and Wang (2022) conducted classroom observations in 10 junior high schools across three provinces, documenting how large class sizes disrupt task dynamics. Their findings showed that in 90% of observed TBLT lessons, task participation was highly uneven: high-proficiency students dominated discussions, often taking on leadership roles or speaking for their groups, while low-proficiency students remained silent or contributed minimally<sup>[14]</sup>. Teachers reported struggling to monitor multiple groups simultaneously, with one noting, “I can walk around and listen, but by the time I reach the last group, the task is almost over. I can’t give everyone the help they need” (Li & Wang, 2022)<sup>[14]</sup>. This lack of individual attention not only limits low-proficiency students’ opportunities to practice speaking but also reinforces their anxiety about making mistakes in front of peers, creating a cycle of disengagement.

Moreover, large classes often lead to logistical chaos during task implementation. Teachers described challenges such as noise management, unequal distribution of materials, and time constraints—all of which reduce the quality of interaction. For example, a planned 20-minute group discussion might be cut short by 5–7 minutes due to time spent organizing groups or resolving conflicts, leaving little room for meaningful collaboration (Chen, 2020)<sup>[5]</sup>. In response, many teachers simplify tasks to “whole-class repetition” or “pair work with a partner they know,” which reduces chaos but eliminates the diverse interactional opportunities that make TBLT effective (Willis & Willis, 2007)<sup>[21]</sup>.

Critical evaluation reveals that large class sizes exacerbate existing inequalities in language learning. High-proficiency students, who are more confident in their language abilities, benefit disproportionately from TBLT tasks, while low-proficiency students are further marginalized. This contradicts TBLT’s goal of promoting inclusive learning environments where all students can develop their oral skills at their own pace. The dilemma highlights a need for task designs that explicitly address participation gaps, rather than assuming that “group work” alone will ensure equitable engagement.

### 3.3. Teachers’ Limited Competence in Task Design and Facilitation

A third significant dilemma is teachers’ reported lack of competence in designing and facilitating TBLT tasks—skills that are distinct from those required for traditional teacher-

centered instruction. While many teachers express theoretical support for TBLT, they struggle to translate its principles into practical, classroom-ready activities (Borg, 2006)<sup>[2]</sup>.

Chen (2020) surveyed 200 junior high school English teachers in Guangdong Province and found that 70% felt “unprepared” to design tasks that balance fluency and accuracy<sup>[5]</sup>. Teachers identified specific challenges, such as selecting topics that motivate students, structuring tasks to ensure language development, and scaffolding support for low-proficiency learners. Many relied heavily on textbook tasks, even when they perceived them as ineffective, due to a lack of confidence in creating their own. As one teacher explained, “The textbook gives us a task outline, but I’m not sure how to adapt it for my students. If I change it, I worry it won’t help them learn” (Chen, 2020)<sup>[5]</sup>.

Facilitation skills are equally problematic. TBLT requires teachers to act as guides rather than directors—monitoring group work, providing timely feedback, and intervening only when necessary to keep tasks on track (Willis & Willis, 2007)<sup>[21]</sup>. However, teachers with a background in traditional pedagogy often find this role challenging. Li (2020) observed that 60% of teachers in her study either over-directed tasks (e.g., dictating exactly what students should say) or under-supported them (e.g., standing at the front of the class while groups struggled in silence)<sup>[13]</sup>. This inability to strike a balance stems from limited training in TBLT-specific facilitation strategies, such as how to phrase questions that prompt deeper interaction or how to address errors without disrupting task flow.

Critical evaluation points to gaps in pre-service and in-service teacher education. Most teacher training programs in China focus on TBLT theory (e.g., defining tasks, explaining the task cycle) rather than practical skills (e.g., task design workshops, video analysis of facilitation) (Borg, 2006)<sup>[2]</sup>. As a result, teachers are left to “figure it out” through trial and error, leading to inconsistent implementation. This dilemma underscores the need for professional development that prioritizes hands-on practice, allowing teachers to build competence in designing and facilitating tasks that work in their specific contexts.

### 3.4. Mismatch Between “Authentic Tasks” and Students’ Local Context

The final dilemma revolves around the misalignment between the “authenticity” of TBLT tasks and the local contexts of Chinese junior high school students. TBLT emphasizes the use of tasks that reflect real-world communication, assuming that authenticity enhances motivation and relevance (Ellis, 2019)<sup>[7]</sup>. However, in Chinese classrooms, “authentic” is often equated with “Western,” leading to tasks that are culturally or contextually alien to students’ lives.

Wang and Zhang (2019) analyzed 50 oral English tasks from popular junior high school textbooks and found that 65% were set in Western cultural contexts (e.g., ordering coffee in a Starbucks, discussing Halloween traditions) or urban middle-class scenarios (e.g., planning a shopping trip to a mall). For students in rural areas or working-class families, these tasks often feel irrelevant. Teachers in their study reported that students struggled to engage with content they had no personal experience of, resulting in stilted, inauthentic language use. A rural teacher described a lesson where students were asked to role-play “complaining to a hotel manager about a noisy neighbor”—a scenario none had

encountered: “They just read from the textbook. There was no real emotion or creativity. It was like practicing a script, not communicating” (Wang & Zhang, 2019)<sup>[19]</sup>.

Even in urban schools, tasks may fail to reflect students’ actual lives. For example, tasks about “planning a summer vacation abroad” are irrelevant to students whose families cannot afford international travel, while tasks about “discussing social media trends” may be restricted by school policies that ban phone use. Teachers noted that when tasks feel disconnected from students’ daily experiences—such as school life, local festivals, or family routines—motivation declines, and language use becomes mechanical (Zhao, 2020)<sup>[23]</sup>.

Critical evaluation reveals a narrow understanding of “authenticity” in TBLT localization. Authenticity should not be defined by adherence to Western real-world contexts but by relevance to students’ lived experiences, cultural backgrounds, and immediate environments (Kramsch, 1993)<sup>[8]</sup>. Tasks that draw on local contexts—such as organizing a school charity event, interviewing a local artisan, or discussing a community issue—are more likely to foster genuine communication, as students can draw on personal knowledge and emotions. Until textbook developers and teachers redefine authenticity in this way, TBLT tasks will continue to feel foreign and fail to engage Chinese junior high school students.

## **4. Context-Adapted Strategies: Personal Insights and Theoretical Justifications**

### **4.1. Aligning TBLT with Formative Assessment to Balance Process and Exams**

To address the tension between TBLT’s process orientation and exam-driven instruction, a practical strategy is to design “exam-informed, communication-focused” oral tasks that integrate key exam content with meaningful interaction. This approach acknowledges the reality of high-stakes testing while preserving TBLT’s core goal of developing communicative competence.

Tasks should be anchored in exam-related themes (e.g., “environmental protection,” “school life”) but structured to require genuine negotiation of meaning. For example, instead of drilling sentence patterns about “saving energy,” teachers could design a debate task where students argue for or against specific energy-saving measures in their school, using target vocabulary (e.g., “reduce,” “recycle,” “sustainable”) from the exam syllabus. This way, students practice both the language forms needed for tests and the interactive skills of persuasion and rebuttal.

The theoretical justification for this strategy lies in Black and Wiliam’s (1998) formative assessment framework, which emphasizes that assessment should “support learning” by providing opportunities for students to apply knowledge in authentic contexts<sup>[3]</sup>. By embedding exam content within communicative tasks, teachers create a “win-win” scenario: students gain practice with test material while engaging in the interactional processes that facilitate language acquisition. To formalize this alignment, teachers can introduce simple formative assessment tools, such as peer checklists, where students rate their classmates on both content (e.g., “Did they use 3+ energy-saving terms?”) and communication (e.g., “Did they respond to others’ ideas?”). This helps students

recognize the value of both accuracy and fluency, bridging the gap between TBLT and exam preparation.

### **4.2. Structuring Tasks for Large Classes: Ensuring Equal Participation**

To mitigate the challenge of large classes, “sequential role-based tasks” can be implemented, where each student is assigned a unique, mandatory role that contributes to the task’s completion. This structure ensures that every learner’s input is necessary, reducing the risk of dominance by high-proficiency students.

A “story chain” task illustrates this approach. The teacher divides a simple story (e.g., “A lost puppy”) into 4–5 parts, with each part written on a card. Students are grouped into teams of 5–6, and each member receives one card (without showing others). To complete the task, students must take turns describing their card’s content, ask clarifying questions (e.g., “What color was the puppy?”), and collaboratively reconstruct the full story. Finally, each group presents their version to the class. In this design, low-proficiency students can focus on their specific card (using simple language), while high-proficiency students can support with elaboration—ensuring all participate.

This strategy is informed by Johnson and Johnson’s (2009) cooperative learning theory, which argues that “positive interdependence” (where success depends on everyone’s contribution) enhances engagement and learning. In large classes, such structured roles eliminate the “free-rider effect” and create accountability. Teachers can further adapt the task by varying card complexity (e.g., simpler vocabulary for lower-proficiency students), ensuring accessibility. Observations by Li and Wang (2022) suggest that such role-based tasks increase participation rates by 30–40% in large classes, as students recognize their individual importance to the group’s success<sup>[14]</sup>.

### **4.3. Enhancing Teachers’ Task Design Skills Through Peer Collaboration**

To address teachers’ limited competence in TBLT task design, “school-based task-design workshops” offer a practical solution. These workshops leverage peer learning to build practical skills, moving beyond passive absorption of theory to active co-creation of contextually relevant tasks.

Workshops can follow a cyclical process: (1) Teachers identify a local theme (e.g., “Mid-Autumn Festival”); (2) In small groups, they draft a task using Willis and Willis’ (2007) task cycle (pre-task, during-task, post-task)<sup>[21]</sup>; (3) One teacher pilots the task in class, with peers observing; (4) The group reflects on what worked (e.g., “Students engaged more with local traditions”) and revises the task. For example, a group might design a “Mid-Autumn Festival planning” task, where students collaborate to organize a class celebration, practicing invitation language and time negotiation—skills relevant to both exams and real life.

This approach aligns with Lave and Wenger’s (1991) “community of practice” theory, which posits that learning occurs through shared participation in authentic activities<sup>[12]</sup>. Unlike top-down training, peer workshops honor teachers’ contextual knowledge, allowing them to adapt ideas to their specific students (e.g., rural vs. urban). Chen (2020) notes that teachers who participate in such workshops report a 50% increase in confidence in task design, as they learn from colleagues’ successes and failures rather than abstract theories<sup>[5]</sup>.

#### 4.4. Redefining “Authenticity” as “Student-Relevant” Task Design

To resolve the mismatch between tasks and local contexts, teachers can develop “localized task banks” rooted in students’ daily lives, redefining “authenticity” as relevance to their experiences, culture, and environment.

Tasks should draw on familiar scenarios: for rural students, this might include “negotiating a trade at the village market” or “planning a farm work schedule”; for urban students, “discussing public transport delays” or “organizing a school club event.” For example, a rural teacher could design a role-play where students act as farmers negotiating the price of crops with a vendor, using language for haggling (“Can you lower the price?” “I’ll take 10 kilograms if you reduce it by 2 yuan”). This task is authentic not because it mirrors Western contexts but because it reflects students’ lived reality.

The theoretical basis for this strategy comes from Kramsch’s (1993) notion of “symbolic competence,” which emphasizes that language learning is tied to cultural identity and lived experience<sup>[8]</sup>. Tasks rooted in local contexts validate students’ backgrounds, increasing motivation and encouraging more natural language use. Zhao (2020) found that students engaged 40% more in localized tasks, with 80% reporting they “felt more confident speaking because I know about this topic.” Teachers can collaboratively build task banks (e.g., via school shared drives) to share ideas, ensuring sustainability and diversity<sup>[24]</sup>.

### 5. Conclusion

This study set out to explore the dilemmas faced by junior high school English teachers in implementing Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in oral English classrooms within the Chinese context and to propose context-adapted strategies from a teacher-centered perspective. By synthesizing findings from existing literature and integrating theoretical insights with practical considerations, several key conclusions emerge.

First, the localized practice of TBLT in Chinese junior high school oral English classrooms is beset by four interrelated dilemmas. The tension between TBLT’s process orientation and the exam-driven education system forces teachers to prioritize discrete language skills over meaningful interaction, often reducing tasks to superficial drills. Large class sizes exacerbate inequitable participation, with high-proficiency students dominating discussions and low-proficiency learners remaining on the margins. Teachers also struggle with limited competence in task design and facilitation, as pre-service and in-service training rarely equips them with practical skills to adapt TBLT to their unique contexts. Finally, the mismatch between “authentic” tasks in textbooks and students’ local realities—whether rural, urban, or cultural—undermines engagement and communicative intent. These dilemmas collectively highlight the need for TBLT to be reimagined, not as a rigid model, but as a flexible framework responsive to local constraints.

Second, the proposed strategies offer actionable pathways to address these challenges. Aligning TBLT with formative assessment, through exam-informed yet communicative tasks, bridges the gap between process and product, acknowledging the importance of testing while preserving interactional goals. Sequential role-based tasks for large classes ensure equal participation by structuring interdependence, leveraging cooperative learning principles to engage all students. School-

based peer workshops enhance teachers’ task design skills by fostering collaborative reflection, turning theoretical knowledge into practical competence. Redefining authenticity as “student-relevant” through localized task banks grounds learning in students’ lived experiences, boosting motivation and meaningful communication. Together, these strategies reflect a “post-method” approach (Kumaravadivelu, 2006) that empowers teachers to innovate within their contexts rather than adhere to imported models<sup>[10]</sup>.

A central insight from this analysis is the critical role of teachers as curriculum innovators. Far from being passive implementers of TBLT, teachers are active agents who negotiate constraints, adapt methods, and create locally viable practices. Their perspectives—shaped by classroom realities, cultural norms, and institutional pressures—are essential to understanding what works in Chinese junior high schools. Future efforts to promote TBLT must therefore center teachers’ voices, involving them in designing training programs, developing materials, and rethinking assessment policies.

This study is not without limitations. By relying on existing literature rather than original data, it synthesizes common dilemmas but may overlook context-specific nuances (e.g., differences between urban and rural teachers’ experiences). Additionally, the proposed strategies are theoretical and require empirical testing to evaluate their effectiveness in diverse classrooms. Future research could address these gaps by conducting qualitative studies with teachers to explore their adaptive practices in depth, or by piloting the proposed strategies and measuring their impact on student engagement and oral proficiency.

In conclusion, TBLT holds significant potential for enhancing oral English competence in Chinese junior high schools, but its success depends on localization that respects teachers’ realities. By acknowledging dilemmas, valuing teacher agency, and adopting context-adapted strategies, educators can transform TBLT from a theoretical ideal into a practical, powerful tool for fostering communicative competence—one that serves both the goals of curriculum reform and the needs of students navigating an increasingly globalized world.

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