

Developing Chinese Student Teachers’ Understanding of Task-based Language Teaching by Online Collaborative Discussion

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Abstract

The study examines how online collaborative discussion contributes to Chinese student teachers’ evolving understanding of task-based language teaching (TBLT). The study analyzed online collaborative discussion from an intact class of master’s students of Teaching Chinese as an International Language on the Moodle discussion forum for 3 weeks. This study demonstrates how student teachers built up their understanding of the theoretical constructs of TBLT via thematic analysis. Furthermore, this study showed how the cumulative and exploratory talk repaired student teachers’ misconceptions and deepened their understanding via discourse analysis. The student teachers raised questions, provided explanations, exchanged perspectives, and elaborated on each other’s opinions. The finding underlines the role of exploratory talk in knowledge development and construction. This study suggests that teacher educators need to demonstrate questioning and critique strategies to Chinese teachers that can trigger cognitive conflicts in them to foster exploratory talk for improving the quality of online collaborative discussion.

Keywords: Chinese as an international language, online collaborative discussion, online teacher education, task-based language teaching

1. Introduction

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is a well-established pedagogy in the second language (L2) education. The effect of TBLT on eliciting authentic communication to foster communicative competence has gained its popularity in diverse socio-cultural contexts (Shintani 2014; Zhu 2020). Prior research has investigated the perceptions and practice of TBLT in Chinese teachers of English (Carless 2002; Carless 2007; Deng and Carless 2009; Lin and Wu 2012; Zheng and Borg 2014). These studies showed that Chinese teachers had conceptual constraints on what TBLT is. This insufficient understanding resulted in distorted teaching practice. Learning TBLT has played an essential role in the professional development of teachers of Chinese as a Second Language (CSL) because they need to face the challenge of teaching learners from the western culture.

To develop the understanding of TBLT in CSL teachers, this study engaged a class of master's students of Teaching Chinese as an International Language in the online collaborative discussion on Moodle discussion forum. The teachers were required to conduct offline collaborative activities, respond to researcher-initiated questions, and interact with their classmates on the discussion forum. The data from the discussion forum were analyzed: (1) to explore to what extent CSL student teachers were engaged in online collaborative discussion; (2) to identify misconceptions and the developmental trajectories in student teachers' understanding of TBLT; and (3) to examine how the cumulative talk and exploratory talk contributed to the knowledge development. An investigation on this issue can shed light on effective strategies for online teacher education.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Task-Based Language Teaching

TBLT has been grounded from theories of second language acquisition (Long 2015), such as interaction hypothesis (Long 1981) and output hypothesis (Swain 1995). Research into TBLT has revealed its positive effects on eliciting high-quality interaction, increasing learning motivation and engagement, and fostering communicative competence in L2 or foreign language (FL) learners

(Bryfonski and McKay 2019). The theoretical and empirical support has enabled TBLT to become a prevalent pedagogy in L2 education (Long 2015). Recently, TBLT has been increasingly implemented in teaching Chinese as an L2 (Han 2018). Research with a focus on empowering Chinese L2 teachers with pedagogical knowledge of TBLT has drawn increasing attention from the field.

Ellis (2003) reported that TBLT uses a task as a basic unit in teaching practice to foster communicative competence of L2 learners. A task should reflect a real-life activity in which learners need to use language for reasoning, synthesizing, categorizing, differentiating, and evaluating information (Robinson 2001). Long (1985) defined a task as “the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in between”. Skehan (1996) illustrated that a task should have a “some sort of relationship to the real world”. To operationalize this feature, researchers propose that a task entails a certain type of gap (Carless 2003), such as an information gap or an opinion gap. The gap can be purposefully designed by distributing unequal information to different learners, which motivates students to construct and express meaning rather than memorize linguistic forms.

A task should also have a communicative outcome because the use of language in real-life situations always has a practical justification (Bygate, Skehan and Swain 2013). Ellis used the word “non-linguistic” to define a communicative outcome, indicating that a communicative outcome should serve some real-life purposes, such as buying food in a supermarket or booking a hotel on the internet. To reflect a real-world activity, a task entails a gap and a communicative outcome to motivate authentic communication among teachers and learners. The process can elicit negotiation of meaning in interaction, which is conducive to L2 acquisition.

2.2 Chinese Teachers’ Understanding of TBLT

Previous studies on Chinese teachers of English reported several conceptual constraints regarding TBLT (Littlewood 2007; Butler 2011). Zhang (2007) conducted multiple case studies of three primary English language teachers in China. On the basis of the Chinese translation of “task” (*renwu*), a teacher

equated a task with learning objectives, which include learning vocabulary and sentence structures. This finding was also reported in Deng and Carless' (2009) study on a primary English teacher in a different region. When describing her conceptual understanding, the teacher defined a task as the learning objective and failed to articulate the communicative features of the task. Research has also shown that the Chinese teacher overemphasized the role of pair work/group work in TBLT. Zheng and Borg (2014) investigated three secondary English language teachers and found that the teachers believed that a task was characterized by engaging students to talk with one another. A teacher even equated TBLT with pair/group work. The above findings were further supported by Lin and Wu's (2012) survey on 136 English teachers of junior high schools in Taiwan. The finding showed that 69.8% of the teachers reported that they did not know what TBLT was, and 86% believed that a task was equated with an exercise.

Recent research on teachers of CSL reported similar problems. Peng and Pyper (2019) investigated the adoption of a task by eight CSL teachers in classroom practice with foreign learners at a university in Mainland China. The researchers found that free from the pressure of examinations, the participating teachers made efforts in applying tasks in fostering the communicative competence of CSL learners. However, the task used by the teacher did not fulfil the criteria of information gap. No required information exchange was present in the interaction even though the activity engaged students to talk to one another. The results from prior studies suggest that the teaching practice did not fulfil the criteria of TBLT due to a lack of understanding of the communicative elements.

2.3 Online Collaborative Discussion

Studies on teacher face-to-face collaboration have found its positive effect on developing teachers' pedagogical knowledge and classroom practice (Yuan and Mak 2018; Sato, Mutoh and Kleinsasser 2019; Rao and Yu 2019). Online collaboration, a widespread of online teacher education that is supported by technological tools, such as Moodle and Whatsapp (Ernest et al. 2013; Zhang, Wen and Liu 2019), has become popular. Researchers have explored strategies to engage teachers into telecollaborative activities (Chen 2012; Shin 2016; Tseng,

Lien and Chen 2016). However, the challenge is about how to foster online collaborative discussion among teachers because they are likely to post their opinions without interacting with each other. This phenomenon is termed as “disjointed conversation” by Marbouti and Wise (2016). Lefstein et al. (2020) indicated that teacher collaborative discussion that facilitates learning is featured in revealing problems, reasoning, explaining, and exchanging perspectives. Main (2007) pointed out that training on collaborating skills was lacking in preservice teacher education. Zhang et al.’s (2019) study on student teachers’ knowledge construction showed that their participation in online collaborative discussion was uneven across groups, with some student teachers seldom interacting with others.

To unveil the nature of collaboration, a strand of research has focused on illustrating collaborative discourse features (Shin 2016; Delahunty 2018; Mercer 2019; Zarrinabadi and Ebrahimi 2019; Ulla and Perales 2020). Delahunty (2018) examined online collaborative discourse of 16 university students and three lecturers. The findings revealed three patterns of collaboration, namely, independent talk, cumulative talk, and exploratory talk. Independent talk referred to the statements of students that were not attended to, which occupied a large percentage of online postings. Cumulative talk involved elaborations from interlocutors but lacked criticality. Exploratory talk referred to learners critically engaging in knowledge construction, which involved exchanging perspectives. The findings demonstrated how the cumulative talk and exploratory talk contributed to the students’ knowledge development. The study emphasized the role of exploratory talk for students to move beyond common knowledge to generate new knowledge, indicating that students’ critical engagement in collaboration was essential in developing conceptual understanding.

3. Research Questions

Previous studies on language teacher have demonstrated that face-to-face collaboration had positive effects on teachers’ professional development (Yuan and Mak 2018; Sato, Mutoh and Kleinsasser 2019; Rao and Yu 2019). With the development of technological tools, computer-supported collaboration in

in-service and pre-service teachers have been widely studied (Chen 2012; Ernest et al. 2013; Shin 2016; Tseng, Lien and Chen 2016). Findings from prior research revealed that online collaborative learning provided opportunities for teachers to critically exchange opinions and construct knowledge via oral and written communication, which facilitated problem-solving and deepening pedagogical knowledge. Although numerous studies have focused on teachers of English as an L2, research that investigates CSL teachers learning an innovative L2 pedagogy remains scarce. Therefore, this study aims to examine how online collaborative discussion facilitates CSL teachers in developing knowledge of TBLT. An investigation on this issue can uncover CSL teachers' misconceptions and identify developmental trajectories in their understanding. The findings can provide insights into effective strategies for online teacher education to CSL teachers. To achieve the research objective, this study aims to address the following three research questions:

1. How did the cumulative and exploratory talk in Chinese student teachers' collaboration contribute to their understanding of the "gap"?
2. How did the cumulative and exploratory talk in Chinese student teachers' collaboration contribute to their understanding of the communicative outcome?
3. How did the cumulative and exploratory talk in Chinese student teachers' collaboration contribute to their knowledge of key constructs of TBLT and the interrelated relationship?

4. Method

4.1 Participants

The researcher, who was also the instructor of the course, conducted online teaching to deliver TBLT to one intact class of 60 students, with 52 female and eight male students, aged from 22 years old to 36 years old. Fifty-five students were from Mainland China, four were Hong Kong students, and one was from Taiwan. Fifty-nine students received undergraduate education and below in their own country, with one exception who obtained her bachelor's degree from

Canada. This student was excluded from the study as the focus is on Chinese student teachers who were educated by the traditional education system, resulting in 59 participants in total. Forty participants studied Teaching CSL or Chinese Language and Literature as their first major; five participants studied English; and 14 participants studied other education-related subjects, such as education management. Sixteen participants had more than 1 year of teaching experience, and the other 43 had not taught before.

4.2 Procedure and Data Collection

The researcher conducted three synchronous online lectures for 3 weeks with a total of 6 hours. The topics included the definition, principles, design, and procedure of TBLT. Before each lecture, the student teachers were required to read relevant materials by themselves, perform the tasks/activities offline with their peers, and respond to the questions on the forum. The researcher required the student teachers to perform two tasks (a reasoning task and a problem-solving task) in English (their L2) offline and upload the recordings of the oral interaction on the Padlet. Subsequently, the researcher asked the participants to perform task judgement activities (Activities A and B). Activity A was a reading–dialogue-activity but was labeled as “role play”, in which language learners were required to read the dialogue in pairs. Then, the participants needed to exchange characters and read the dialogue again. Activity B was a debate activity on a controversial topic. These two activities are frequently used in L2 teaching and are easily confused with a task because both engage language learners in talking with one another.

Eleven questions were provided to elicit student teachers’ discussion on the forum, including the predetermined ones and the ones that were generated from the discussion. Questions 1 to 3 aim to elicit student teachers’ initial understanding of the constructs of TBLT. Questions 4 to 5 required students to reflect on the two tasks they performed offline, which intended to deepen their understanding of TBLT with specific examples. In response to questions 6 to 11, the student teachers needed to post their opinions on task judgement activities, which helped them in distinguishing a task from other language activities. The

researcher monitored the online discussion of the whole class and provided guidelines for collaborative discussion without interfering with their responses. The written texts on the forum were exported for qualitative analysis. In terms of the ethical consideration, the student teachers were asked for their consent to use online discussion texts for research purposes after the grades were released to avoid any conflict.

Table 1: Rationale for Discussion Questions

Rationale	Questions
Elicitation of initial understanding of the constructs in TBLT	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is your understanding of TBLT? 2. What is a “gap” in a task and why do we need a “gap” in a task? 3. What is a ‘communicative outcome’ in a task and why do we need a ‘communicative outcome’ in a task?
Reflection on performance of two tasks and demonstrating understanding of TBLT with specific examples	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Please reflect on the reasoning task and explain how this task facilitates the development of communicative competence? 5. Please reflect on the problem-solving task and explain how this task facilitates the development of communicative competence?
Reflection on task judgement activities and making distinctions between a task from other language activities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Is Activity A a task? 7. Could you explain the reason? 8. Is Activity B a task? 9. Could you explain the reason? 10. What is your understanding of negotiation of meaning? 11. How does TBLT facilitate the development of communicative competence?

4.3 Data Analysis

The researcher scanned through the data to locate the content that was relevant to the research questions (Berg and Lune 2017) and organize the data in

a chronological order to capture the changes in the student teachers' understanding. Then, the researcher performed a thematic analysis by applying the theoretical constructs of TBLT to guide the coding, such as "applying language in real-life settings" (Ellis 2003; Nunan 2004). Meanwhile, the researcher used the repeatedly mentioned words or phrases that emerged from the data as the codes, which enabled explorations of misconceptions and the student teacher-constructed understanding. For example, the participants repeatedly mentioned that "the communicative outcome was to express/exchange ideas"; then, the code "oral interaction as the communicative outcome" was used to represent the data (Saldaña 2016). After the cyclic and recursive processes of coding, the researcher combined codes into themes according to the semantic relationships. For instance, the codes "increasing learning interest" and "reducing anxiety" were semantically related to learning motivation and were combined into the theme as "increasing learning motivation". The themes were organized according to the research questions and presented in terms of initial understanding and constructed understanding to identify developmental trajectories.

In the collaborative discourse, the researcher first calculated the number of responses to each question and used the function of Moodle to visualize the developmental changes in interaction patterns. Thereafter, within the findings of thematic analysis, the researcher qualitatively described collaborative discourse by adopting Delahunty's (2018) categorization of talk (independent talk, cumulative talk, and exploratory talk) and examined how the participants constructed knowledge in collaborative discussion. The independent talk refers to the student teachers' posts that were not responded by other student teachers. The cumulative talk includes student teachers' posts that were elaborating on each other by indicating agreements but without exchanging different perspectives; for example, "I agree with you, ...(elaboration)". The exploratory talk includes the student teachers' posts that were showing different opinions and exchanging ideas by raising a question or indicating a disagreement, such as "I have some doubts, so do you agree...".

First, the discussion of participants spanned for 3 weeks to increase the reliability, and their understanding of TBLT was elicited from multiple resources (responding to questions and reflections on task judgement activities). Second, the researcher asked the participants to clarify their points when ambiguity was detected on the forum, which warranted the interpretation of the data. Third, a second researcher, who was familiar with the theories in L2 education, was involved in the coding. The definitions and examples of the codes were first discussed and clarified between the researchers. A small portion of data was coded together by both researchers at the beginning to detect divergence, which was then resolved through discussion. Thereafter, the data independently were coded by both researchers, and the agreement reached 90.71%.

5. Results

5.1 Chinese Student Teachers' Participation in Online Collaborative Discussion

In Table 2, a total of 646 responses to 11 questions on the forum were generated, ranging from 26 to 95. The researcher divided the questions into two groups: Q1 to Q5 and Q6 to Q11 to examine the changes in the interaction patterns. The reason is that the researcher noticed that the student teachers seldom interacted with each other from Q1 to Q5. Then, the researcher demonstrated a series of interacting strategies, such as questioning the terminologies in others' posts, asking for clarification, or critiquing others' opinions by providing opposite examples. Figure 1 shows that the researcher used the function of Moodle to visualize the interaction patterns. The central blue bubble represents the researcher, and the small bubbles around denote the individual student teacher in the class. The size of the bubble depends on the number of posts the student teacher wrote on the forum, including the ones initiated by the student teacher and the ones that he/she responded to the peers. The more posts the student teacher wrote, the bigger the bubble is. The line between two bubbles indicates the interaction, and the arrow represents one bubble replying to the other bubble by using the reply function in the forum. The left graph reveals the interaction pattern of the student teachers in Q1 to Q5. Most

arrows are directed to the central blue bubble, indicating that the student teachers dominantly responded to the researcher's questions in Q1 to Q5. Only few arrows are directed to the other orange bubbles, implying that they seldom responded to their peers' statements. The right graph shows the interaction pattern of student teachers in Q6–Q11. Many arrows are directed to the orange bubbles, suggesting that the interaction among the student teachers greatly increased in Q6–Q11. The findings show that from Q6, the student teachers were more engaged in peer interaction. This notion implies that the introduction of interacting strategies facilitates online collaborative discussion. Another reason could be that questions on task judgement activities elicited different opinions among the student teachers, which is illustrated in the following sessions.

Table 2: Number of Responses to the Questions.

Questions	No. of responses	No. of student teachers
Q1	59	54
Q2	64	53
Q3	60	50
Q4	58	55
Q5	55	53
Q6	68	53
Q7	26	21
Q8	95	50
Q9	74	46
Q10	33	24
Q11	54	41
Total	646	59

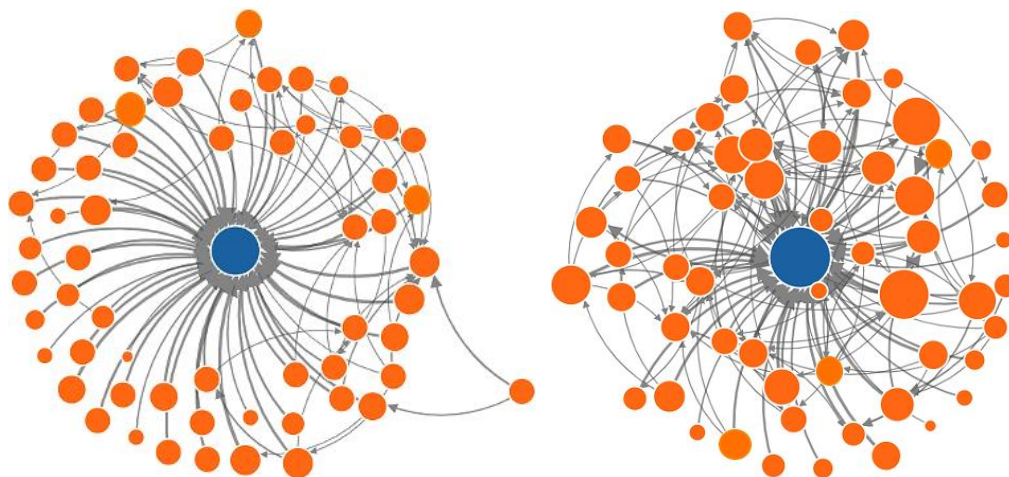


Figure 1: Interaction Patterns

5.2 Chinese Student Teachers' Construction of Knowledge of the "Gap"

5.2.1 Initial Understanding

The thematic analysis revealed general trends in the initial understanding of the student teachers. In Excerpt 1, S50 explained that the "gap" could stimulate information exchange because speakers needed to obtain the missing data to complete a task. The student teachers also analyzed that the "gap" elicited interactive discourse, such as explanation, justification, and negotiation of meaning, all of which could foster oral communicative competence. Moreover, the student teachers explained that the "gap" drove interlocutors to focus on meaning, which reduced learning anxiety and increased learning motivation. The responses exemplify student teachers' comprehension of the reading materials.

Excerpt 1.

S50: When communicating, interlocutors have different information, to get to know the information of the other people, or to make other people understand when I intend to express, [we] need to communication and exchange, to achieve a communicative outcome; this fosters oral interaction.

The misconception of the “gap” was also detected as evidence in Excerpt 2. S28 pointed out that the “gap” was an innate nature of individuals by emphasizing that the gap was caused by the variations in the information people received, and it “will never disappear”. This response externalized her intuitive understanding of the terminology, which extended the meaning of the “gap” in a task to involve any individual differences. Ellis (2003) pointed out that the important function of a gap lied in promoting authentic communication between speakers. To realize this function, the gap should be purposefully designed, such as assigning unequal information to different learners. Therefore, to interpret “gap” as individual differences is not consistent with the theoretical definition. However, this misconception did not trigger interaction among the student teachers at this stage, exemplifying the feature of independent talk.

Excerpt 2.

S28: Between individuals there existed all kinds of the gap, and the gap will never disappear because every communicator has differences, besides, the communicator every day absorbs information from the outside world that is dramatically different, and with other communicators, the formed gap will be enlarged.

5.2.2 Constructed Understanding

The interaction increased when the student teachers were further engaged in the task judgement activity in which they needed to differentiate a task from other oral activities. Majority of the student teachers agreed that Activity A (reading a scripted dialogue) was not a task. The student teachers explained that the activity neither entailed any gap nor the communicative outcome, as shown in Excerpt 3. S2 first clarified the definition of a task — “has a very specific communicative outcome”, and then analyzed the activity against the criterion. The explanation indicated that the student teachers could tell the difference between a reading-in-pairs activity and a task by referring to the theoretical definition of TBLT. S10 used “I basically agreed with S2’s opinion” and “also” to express her confirmation with the previous statement. This response exemplifies the characteristics of cumulative talk.

Excerpt 3.

S2: Activity A is not a task. A task has a very specific communicative outcome, in Activity A, students only need to repeat the content of the text, and role-play is to practice grammar, vocabulary, sentence structures, even after the conversation is sentence-making to achieve language purpose.

S10: **I basically agree with S2's idea.** I also thought Activity A is not a task.

Following the cumulative talk, S8 asked a question: whether language learners might have varying understanding of the character and can thus be treated as an opinion gap even if the learners were only required to read the prescribed dialogue. This question showed a different perspective to interpret the activity, demonstrating the exploratory talk. Her understanding that this activity had an opinion gap was in align with the misconception of the “gap” at the initial stage — the gap included any individual differences.

In response to S8, S11 used negative phrases, such as “has nothing to do”, “not interactive”, and “no shared communicative outcome”, to indicate a different opinion, continuing the exploratory talk. She pointed out that although the learners had varying understanding of the character, this gap elicited neither the use of internal linguistic knowledge nor the interaction between speakers because the communicative outcome did not require them (Excerpt 4). Moreover, “understandings of the character have nothing to do with the activity” and “there is no space for the speakers to perform”, implying that shortening the gap did not contribute to the outcome of the activity. These discourse features exemplify the exploratory talk in which the new knowledge that the gap did not stand alone but functioned together with the communicative outcome was generated.

Excerpt 4.

S8: In exchanging characters, the learners will have different opinions towards the understanding of the character, won't they?

S11: The “gap” in understandings of the character **has nothing to do** with the activity because the purpose of this activity is that the learners

reading the dialogue, the more exact as the original script the better, this can hardly make learners revise the dialogue to integrate their linguistic knowledge; second, even one speaker can add in his language based on personal understanding, this can hardly engage the interlocutor, [because the activity was] **not interactive, no shared communicative outcome** for both sides...; third, the linguistic forms of performing the dialogue is strictly controlled, though they have their own understanding of the characters, there is **no space** for the speakers to perform.

The collaborative discussion externalized the student teachers' misconception, elicited explanation, and improved their understanding of the "gap". In addition to the initial understanding, the student teachers emphasized that the "gap" should be closed to achieve the communicative outcome. The gap should elicit learners' internal linguistic system and interaction. This criterion facilitates the exclusion of those individual differences that may exist in speakers but do not contribute to the communicative outcome as the "gap".

5.3 Chinese Student Teachers' Construction of Knowledge of the Communicative Outcome

5.3.1 Initial Understanding

The data suggested several patterns in the initial understanding of the student teachers regarding the communicative outcome. Majority of the student teachers reasoned that the communicative outcome served a real-life purpose and could provide opportunities for learners to apply what they had learnt in class to real-world situations. This feature was perceived as the most salient feature of the communicative outcome or TBLT in general. The student teachers explained that the communicative outcome provided a purpose for the interaction and made learners focus on the task. Meanwhile, many student teachers explained that the communicative outcome could direct the attention of learners to focus on meaning, which increased learning motivation. Only a few student teachers mentioned that the communicative outcome could serve to evaluate the learning outcomes. The responses at this stage again exemplify the feature of independent

talk.

5.3.2 Constructed Understanding

The interactions among the student teachers increased in the task judgement activity. In the thematic analysis, majority of the student teachers tended to judge that Activity B (the debate activity) was a complete task. All student teachers identified the opinion gap in the activity. Some student teachers interpreted that this opinion gap automatically contributed to the communicative outcome. For example, S21 interpreted that the debate topic specified the content of the discussion and provided a direction for interaction (Excerpt 5). S51 further explained that the gap generated communicative outcome, that is, the opinion gap made speakers automatically exchange ideas. From the perspective of the student teachers, the opinion gap justified the existence of the communicative outcome. Besides, the student teachers believed that interaction/communication was the communicative outcome, which included “exchanging perspectives on an opinion” and “expressing opinions”.

This understanding is treated as a misconception. Willis and Willis (2001) reported that a language is a tool for achieving an outcome via the exchange of information. Ellis (2003) highlighted the role of the communicative outcome in assessing the completion of a task, which cannot be achieved by interaction itself. Therefore, interaction and communicative outcome should be two different constructs. This concept can be further supported by the fact that the decision-making task was more widely studied in the literature rather than the debate task. In the decision-making task, interaction is treated as an approach to achieve a decision (Robinson and Gilabert 2007; Llanes, Gilabert Guerrero and Barón Parés 2009). The lack of the communicative outcome made the interaction optional, which may result in the passive engagement of some learners (Doughty and Pica 1986). The feature of cumulative talk is evidenced in Excerpt 5. S51 repeated part of S21’s opinion to express his agreement and added his understanding.

Excerpt 5.

S21: Activity B is a task. First, the content of discussion originates from real-life, has some relationship with the real world. [Activity B] has a specific communicative outcome, has specific content of discussion and directions for answers.

S51: **I agree with you that “has some relationship with the real world”**...the gap can generate a communicative outcome.

S4: A communicative outcome is two people exchanging perspectives on an opinion. S18: ...expressing opinions is kind of a communicative outcome

The misconception raised interaction among the student teachers. S12 asked S18 to provide evidence in supporting her claim (Excerpt 6). She stated that “I have some doubts” and “do you agree” to indicate her disagreement, which exemplifies the exploratory talk. Then, S18 explained that in real-life settings, people chatted for the sake of discussion, and a casual conversation always ended up with exchanging ideas/opinions, which clarified that interaction itself could be the purpose of communication in real life. This explanation externalized how the student teacher applied the previously learnt knowledge — “a task was comparable to the real-world activity” — into analyzing the features of a given activity.

S18 further clarified that from a pedagogical perspective, interaction could not be counted as the communicative outcome because it could not reflect the result of the interaction. She summarized that interaction was counted as the communicative outcome in real-life situations but not as one in a pedagogical setting. This understanding was in alignment with Nunan’s point that a task in the classroom was pedagogical in nature, although its origin was from the real world (Nunan 2004). The exploratory talk elicited the student teachers’ elaboration on the misconception and explanation, which helped them refine the context to which the theoretical construct applies. The findings suggest that the feature of “reflect real-life language activity” and the pedagogical nature of a task should be clarified in training.

Excerpt 6.

S12: With regard to S18 “expressing opinion is kind of a communicative outcome”, **I have some doubts...so do you agree** that “expressing one’s idea is a communicative outcome”? could you provide an example to explain?

S18: The reason why I think is a communicative outcome, I put it back to the real-life setting, discussing a problem with friends, for example, the contemporary social issues, I think we express our opinions or stances to each other (to let other people know what I am thinking) this is the purpose of our conversation (not hoping to stand at which side after our conversation finishes).

If put in other settings or pedagogical activities, like what you said, the speaker expressed his opinion in order not to be thrown away [in the balloon debate activity], then at that time expressing opinions, explaining a point of view to other people were not communicative outcomes, because after expressing opinions (explaining points of views) there is another purpose. So, need to consider different situations.

In continuation of the discussion (Excerpt 7), in response to S51, S30 first questioned the point “the gap can generate a communicative outcome”. She expressed that the communicative outcome existed at the beginning of communication. She used the “spot the difference” task as an example and analyzed that this activity had an information gap because an individual learner was given a different picture from his partner. She clarified that this gap could not guarantee the occurrence of interaction because the students could mainly describe the content of the picture without listening to each other. She emphasized that the communicative outcome — find the differences between the two pictures — was the factor that successfully elicited interaction. Therefore, the gap could not justify the existence of the communicative outcome. These two constructs were closely related to each other but different in nature. S30 demonstrated her reasoning skills by clarifying the relationship between the gap,

the communicative outcome, and interaction, which features the exploratory talk.

Excerpt 7.

S30: The student here said ‘the gap can generate a communicative outcome’

I have some doubts. My understanding is: the communicative outcome appeared at the beginning of two interlocutors’ communication...if there is no clear communicative outcome, namely without a communicative outcome for direction, the interaction may not happen. Just like the teacher gave two different pictures, if there is no communicative outcome in instruction, just ask the students to describe the content of the pictures, [this] cannot make them actively utilize internal language system. As a result, students may randomly talk about what they see, will not carefully listen to the other student’s [oral] description.

The collaborative discussion resulted in the evolvement of understanding of the communicative outcome in the student teachers. The student teachers distinguished the communicative outcome from the gap and the interaction and understood that interaction was the process by which speakers achieve the communicative outcome. Moreover, the student teachers emphasized that the gap and communicative outcome were designed to elicit interaction. After the misconception is clarified, the student teachers frequently used “concrete”, “visualizing the result of interaction”, and “evaluating interaction” to characterize the communicative outcome, which was not brought into attention initially.

5.4 Chinese Student Teachers’ Construction of Knowledge of the Key Constructs in TBLT and Their Interrelated Relationship

On the basis of the previous discussion, the researcher raised further questions to elicit the student teachers’ explanation of the relationship among information gap, communicative outcome, interaction, communicative competence, and negotiation of meaning of TBLT because they are key concepts in TBLT. The discussion was triggered by S46’s question on the difference

between interaction and negotiation of meaning (Excerpt 8), which initiated the exploratory talk. In response, S54 clarified that the interaction included negotiation of meaning and information exchange without negotiation of meaning. Some student teachers posted specific examples to illustrate the difference, accumulating the common knowledge of the two constructs. Then, S33 furthered the discussion by talking about the function. She stated that interaction without negotiation of meaning cannot achieve the communicative outcome, which induced a different perspective. S39 raised two questions. The first question did not elicit responses from other students, thereby missing the opportunity for clarifying the concepts of negotiation of meaning and communicative competence. In response to S39's second question, S8 explained that interacting behavior itself could improve communicative competence. The interaction with negotiation of meaning could better foster oral communicative competence. To elaborate S8, S51 explained that negotiation of meaning could improve the accuracy of linguistic forms because the speaker or the interlocutor will correct linguistic forms when the meaning is not conveyed. To support her opinion, S51 presented a dialogue in which the speaker initially used the wrong word “明天 tomorrow”. After the interlocutor expressed a confirmation check “明天?” to indicate a communication breakdown, the first speaker corrected the word into “明年 next year”. The example demonstrated that the negotiation of meaning led to the correct linguistic form. The cumulative and exploratory talks assisted the student teachers in clarifying the difference between interaction and negotiation of meaning and their roles in L2 acquisition and development of communicative competence.

Excerpt 8.

S46: What is the difference between the negotiation of meaning and interaction? Could you give an example?

S54: I felt that the authentic interaction was very complex, could include the negotiation of meaning, and also include simple answers and information exchange without negotiation of meaning.

S33: The communicative competence is a premise for designing a task, the information gap is the essential condition to foster interaction, and interaction without negotiation of meaning cannot achieve the communicative outcome.

S39: **May I ask**, you said: “interaction without negotiation of meaning cannot achieve the communicative outcome”. Then the interaction without negotiation of meaning is also without communicative outcome? **Can** this type of interaction foster oral communicative competence?

S8: I think as there is interaction, the learners are practicing, this behavior can improve oral communicative competence, but compared with those without negotiation of meaning, interaction with negotiation of meaning can better foster oral communicative competence.

S51: A-I am going to Beijing tomorrow. 我明天去北京。

B-Tomorrow? 明天？

A-Oh no, next year. 哦不，明年。

The interaction with negotiation of meaning can correct the errors of oral discourse from the speaker to a certain extent.

As the discussion progressed, a student teacher began to summarize the accumulative knowledge by drawing up a conceptual map. The conceptual map was revised, added, and clarified by exploratory talk among the student teachers. Figure 2 presents the version that was built on the previous versions, which demonstrates student teachers’ constructed understanding of TBLT. In the model, the student teachers clarified the following: (1) The “gap” and the communicative outcome were designed conditions to elicit interaction. (2) The information gap should be shortened to achieve the communicative outcome. (3) The communicative outcome should visualize the result of oral interaction. (4) The interaction was the process by which speakers achieve the communicative outcome and negotiation of meaning took place in interaction. (5) Communicative competence enables L2 learners to perform the interaction and could be fostered by the interaction. By this definition, the student teachers

differentiated TBLT from other oral activities and established an understanding of how TBLT facilitated L2 acquisition and communicative competence.

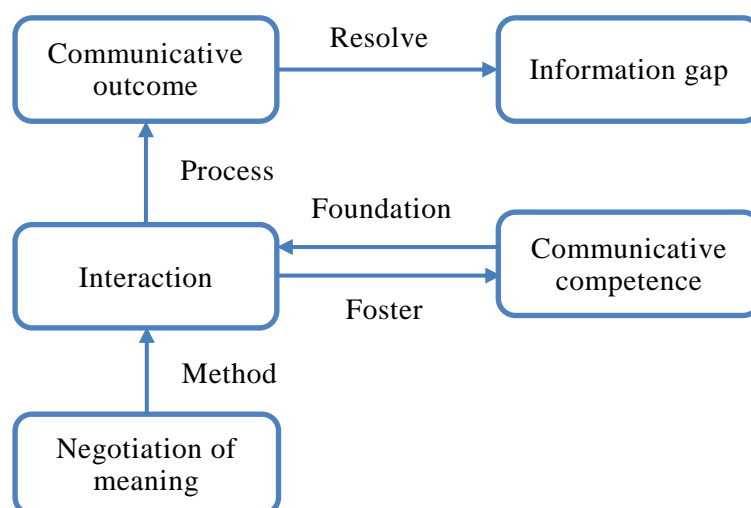


Figure 2: Conceptual Map

6. Discussion

This study examined how Chinese student teachers developed understanding of TBLT in accordance with the literature. Previous studies showed that Chinese teachers lacked awareness of the communicative elements in a task and had difficulties in understanding how these elements triggered authentic communication and negotiation of meaning (Carless 2002, 2003, 2007; Lin and Wu 2012; Zheng and Borg 2014; Peng and Pyper 2019). This study identified developmental trajectories in their understanding as a contribution to the literature. Moreover, this study externalized the student teachers' misconceptions and specified their conceptual constraints. For example, one student teacher interpreted that the "gap" included any individual difference and the communicative outcome included talking with each other by applying intuitive understanding. This finding explained why Chinese teachers believed that activities that engaged learners into pseudo communication were a realization of TBLT, as found in Zheng and Borg's study (2014). Furthermore, this study argues

that these misconceptions provide concrete referents that student teachers can notice, discuss, and clarify. The process enables teachers to depart from their intuitive understanding and shift toward the expert's definition. To facilitate their understanding, student teachers should be guided to discuss interactive language activities that are similar to but different from a task, such as role-play with a focus on forms or a debate activity without a communicative outcome. The teacher educator should underline authenticity and pedagogical nature of a task to the student teachers.

To corroborate prior research (Shin 2016; Horn, Garner, Kane and Brasel 2017; Delahunty 2018; Lefstein et al. 2020), this study revealed the positive effects of online collaborative discussion on the knowledge development in CSL teachers. However, this study found that Chinese student teachers did not initially critique or question the ideas of one another or offer different perspectives, as the data shown in the Results section. The student teachers mainly responded to the researcher's questions without attending to other students' responses. Even after the researcher's initial encouragement, the student teachers tended to elaborate on the opinions of one another, such as "I agree with X's opinion, I would like to add a few more points", which demonstrated cumulative talk. The reason could be that in the Confucius heritage culture, learners are expected to respect the authority of teachers and are seldom required to challenge other people's opinions (Hu 2002, 2005; Ho 2020).

Moreover, this study found that the student teachers' interaction increased in task judgement activities because these activities triggered questions and different perspectives among them. Meanwhile, the researcher also guided student teachers to interact with one another by introducing questioning and critique strategies. Consequently, the exploratory talk increased in discussion. The exploratory talk included critical response, explanation, clarification, and exchanging different perspectives, all of which continuously activated and externalized the prior knowledge of the student teachers, illuminated the features that were not brought into recognition previously, and improved their understanding of TBLT. For instance, the student teachers progressively understood that the "gap" should be closed via interaction to achieve the

communicative outcome, which helped them clarify the relationship among these theoretical constructs. The findings imply that teacher educators should design activities that can trigger cognitive conflicts, including different perspectives or challenging questions (Hendriks and Maor 2004), and demonstrate questioning and critique strategies to the Chinese language teachers to foster exploratory talk in the discussion.

7. Conclusion

This study investigated how Chinese student teachers constructed knowledge of TBLT in 3 weeks. The results demonstrated that the knowledge of Chinese teachers regarding TBLT can be improved by online collaborative discussion, especially by the exploratory talk that engaged teachers by critically exchanging ideas with one another. The cognitive processes assisted the teachers in differentiating TBLT from other oral activities and established an understanding of how TBLT facilitated L2 acquisition and communicative competence. However, this study does not involve teaching practice from these student teachers. Future research can investigate how the teacher with a deep understanding of TBLT plays the role of an active agent in adapting TBLT for diverse sociocultural contexts. Given the widespread online teacher education globally, online collaboration plays an increasingly important role in teacher development. The study results suggest that teacher educators should design activities that can trigger cognitive conflicts among Chinese language teachers and instruct them to employ exploratory talk in collaboration to enhance the quality of collaboration. Research in the future may consider investigating the factors that affect the quality of collaboration in Chinese language teachers by a quantitative method.

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華語文教學研究

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通過在線協作討論促進國際漢語實習教師 對任務型教學法的理解

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摘要

本研究旨在探索在線協作討論如何促進母語為中文的國際漢語教師對任務型教學法的理解。本研究分析了國際漢語教學專業的研究生在 Moodle 論壇上為期三個星期的討論。通過主題分析，研究展示了實習教師關於任務型教學法核心概念的理解過程。通過話語分析，研究呈現了積累型話語和探索型話語如何幫助實習教師修正迷思，逐步建立起對任務型教學法的深層認識，在這一過程中實習教師能夠提問、解釋、交換意見以及擴展同儕的觀點。以上發現反映了探索型話語在知識發展和建構中的作用。研究建議教師培訓者可以向母語為中文的教師展示提問和批判的策略，以激發認知衝突，促進探索型話語，進而提高在線協作討論的質量。

關鍵詞：任務型教學法 在線協作討論 在線教師教育 國際漢語教師