

GRAMMAR IN ACTION: A TASK-BASED APPROACH TO PORTUGUESE LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

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Abstract

The task-based teaching approach, rooted in communicative language teaching, has gained prominence in second language acquisition. Advocating that language learning is best facilitated through the completion of communicative tasks, this method has captured the attention of language educators worldwide.

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the field of Portuguese grammar teaching. Basic Portuguese grammar courses are integral to Portuguese majors in Chinese universities. However, there is a dearth of research exploring the application of the task-based teaching method to Portuguese grammar instruction in the Chinese higher education context. Presently, traditional teaching methods dominate Portuguese grammar classrooms, which can be discouraging for many students.

In light of this situation, there is a compelling need to introduce the task-based teaching method into the realm of grammar instruction for Portuguese. This paper aims to bridge this gap by investigating the potential benefits and challenges of implementing a task-based approach in Portuguese grammar classes, shedding light on a novel pedagogical approach that could enhance the learning experience for Chinese university students studying Portuguese as a second language.

Introduction

The task-based teaching approach, which emerged in the 1980s, has become a hot topic in the field of second language acquisition. Task-based teaching method belongs to communicative teaching method, which advocates that using language to complete communicative tasks can promote language learning.

In recent years, more and more attention has been paid to the study of Portuguese grammar teaching. The course of Portuguese basic grammar is one of the important courses for Portuguese majors in colleges and universities in China. However, no research has been found to apply this teaching method to Portuguese grammar teaching in Chinese universities. Nowadays, the Portuguese grammar class, which takes the traditional teaching method as the main mode, has deterred many students. In view of this situation, it is necessary to apply task-based teaching method to grammar classroom.

1. Task-Based Teaching Method

The task-based approach developed on communicative approach has gradually changed the perspective of language teaching at home and abroad. In order to enable students to naturally acquire a new language, it

emphasizes that language should be “learned by doing”, with the goal of completing meaningful language communication tasks jointly by teachers and students, to tap learners' language use potential and stimulate language creativity ^[1].

Chinese foreign language majors lack the context of the target language, and their access to foreign language information is limited. Even many learners only take learning a foreign language as an examination tool. The task-based approach has been recognized and advocated by linguists and foreign language teachers in China since it was proposed. The introduction of this new teaching method plays an important role in changing the inefficient “cramming” foreign language classroom in China and injects new vitality into foreign language teaching in China. The task-based approach focuses on the use of language, rather than simply based on the form of language. It requires learners to use the language they have learned to solve communication problems in real life. Teachers choose teaching content close to students' life and complete the task through the interaction between students and students and between teachers and students.

2.1. Definition

According to Cai Lanzhen (2001) ^[2], “task-based teaching method means that in classroom teaching, students and teachers jointly complete certain tasks to enable second language learners to naturally learn and acquire language, expand the Chinese language system and promote foreign language learning progress.” In general, task-based teaching method is to use “tasks” throughout “teaching”, and acquire knowledge by means of cooperation and interaction in the process of performing tasks, fully mobilize learners' initiative and naturally feel, explore, understand and apply the target language in practice.

2.2. Task

“Task” is an important concept throughout the whole language teaching theory. It is closely related to teaching design, textbook development, teaching assessment, etc. Since the task-based teaching method was proposed, the definition of “task” has been hotly discussed in the academic circles at home and abroad. Nunan (1989:10) ^[3] believes that “task” is what is done in the classroom using the target language, including the understanding, operation, application and interaction of language. It is worth noting that the task should have complete meaning and be able to act independently as a communicative activity. Skehan (1998) ^[4] summarized the characteristics of the “task”: the task is based on meaning; the problems in the task need to be solved through language communication; there is some connection between tasks and activities in the real world; the task should be completed first; evaluate the task according to the teaching results.

3. Characteristics of Portuguese Grammar Teaching in Chinese Universities

Grammar teaching has been neglected by some second language teaching researchers. Portuguese majors in colleges and universities in China generally offer basic grammar courses in sophomores or juniors. By sorting out the grammar knowledge they have learned, they can digest the relevant contents of basic Portuguese courses, and also pave the way for learning translation, interpretation and other courses in the future.

Generally, students have mastered most of the basic grammar before the Portuguese grammar class. The grammar course can help students systematically sort out the grammar knowledge they have learned and carry out targeted written exercises, which helps to consolidate the grammar foundation and improve the Portuguese level. However, China's colleges and universities generally have problems in teaching methods, teaching content, practical application and other aspects, which lead to a significant reduction in learning efficiency.

3.1. Single teaching method

Although the teaching of Portuguese is deeply influenced by western teaching theories, many teachers have introduced communicative methods, task driven methods and other methods into the classroom, and the classroom atmosphere has become more active, the grammar classroom is still dominated by traditional teaching ideas, continuing the “top-down” teaching mode, that is, the old teacher is the main teaching method, and students passively accept knowledge, ignoring the applicability and situational nature of language knowledge.

3.2. The teaching content is boring

Grammar teaching is highly theoretical. If it is only scripted and lacks practical exercises such as teacher-student and student interaction, it will not only make students unable to digest the grammar points they have learned in time, but even make them feel tired after a class and have a resistance to grammar learning. Most Portuguese teachers put the theoretical explanation of grammar knowledge in the first place, ignoring the interaction and the cultivation of grammar application ability, resulting in boring teaching content and low interest of students.

At the same time, grammar knowledge is trivial. Taking the “21st Century Portuguese Textbook” as an example, the same type of grammar knowledge is often distributed in different units, and students generally respond that the grammar content is not systematic, which is not conducive to memory.

3.3. *Emphasize theory and despise practice*

Grammar teaching runs through the whole process of learning, especially in the early stage of students' learning. The key to foreign language learning is to lay a solid foundation in grammar, and the problem is how to teach. The traditional grammar course focuses on presenting grammar rules directly to students. Through full explanation, students can master grammar knowledge as much as possible.

Although teachers will arrange sentence pattern exercises in due time, such as translating sentences and replacing sentences of the same type, the sentences in these exercises are often independent and lack of context. Learners cannot express their personal ideas through practice, but only mechanically practice grammar rules through repeated practice, ignoring the important role of practice, which cannot help students to really apply what they have learned to the actual situation, that is, they cannot use language to express meaning.

4. Application of Task-Based Teaching Method in Portuguese Grammar Teaching

In recent years, the academic research on Portuguese teaching methods has shown an upward trend. Fan Wenting and Han Ying (2017)^[5] discussed the methods applicable to Portuguese teaching in China. They believed that the teaching mode needed to comprehensively consider the teaching objectives, teaching contents, teaching objects, teaching materials and training programs. In addition, the traditional teaching method alone cannot meet the needs of the society. We should combine communicative teaching method, task-based teaching method, vocabulary teaching method and other methods in teaching. Shao Wanbi (2018)^[6] took the Portuguese reading course as an example and mentioned that “the teacher centered classroom should be transformed into a student-centered classroom”. Rui Mengqing (2020)^[7] emphasizes the role of context in Portuguese grammar teaching and improves learners' ability to output grammar knowledge to different social scenes. Generally speaking, most Portuguese language teaching researchers believe that a good language output environment should be created for students and classroom interaction should be encouraged.

This section will present the Portuguese virtual unfinished in the past as a case to show how the taskbased teaching method can be applied in the college Portuguese grammar classroom.

4.1. *Instructional objective*

Master the basic usage of the virtual unfinished tense in the past, while completing the relevant written exercises, minimize the time for deflection thinking, and skillfully apply it to practical practice and real life. Of course, this is the most basic requirement for language learning. Further, the goal should be to cultivate language sense and improve the overall level of Portuguese.

4.2. *Tasks design*

“Authenticity” and “information gap” are important preconditions for task design. The so-called “task” can occur in daily real language communication situations, and both parties provide unknown information to each other to avoid boring mechanical training.

Virtual form is a special verb form. On the one hand, it means that the action or behavior transmitted by the speaker is not authentic or deterministic; on the other hand, although it has authenticity in some contexts, it expresses some subjective emotions of the speaker. Virtual learning has always been the key and difficult point of Portuguese grammar learning. The lack of virtual learning in Chinese grammar and the differences between Chinese and Portuguese ways of thinking have caused various difficulties for Chinese students in virtual learning. The traditional Portuguese grammar teaching generally follows the methods of “teachers speaking, students practicing” and “topic sea tactics”, lacks interactive exercises such as dialogue, and ignores the training of students' application ability. Task based teaching method can make up for these shortcomings to a certain extent.

4.2.1. *Background and tasks*

You and your family took a 5-day vacation to Algarve Province in southern Portugal. Your originally planned trip was perfect. However, after check-in, you found that the sanitary conditions of the hotel were very poor. The air conditioner could not operate normally due to years of disrepair, and you could not have a good rest every night. The scheduled schedule was completely disrupted, so you decided to complain to the hotel. You need to write to the person in charge of the hotel to inform them of your dissatisfaction, and the person in charge of the hotel wants to negotiate and settle with you.

The task is for student A (not limited to one person) and student B to act as the person in charge of the passenger and the hotel respectively, and negotiate freely on the above issues with the ultimate goal of reaching a settlement. Students are required to use virtual as much as possible when they have not completed the task in the past, the task object is the sophomores majoring in Portuguese.

4.2.2. Form

The task will be carried out in the form of letter writing and dialogue.

Based on the above background, first of all, student A (not limited to one person) needs to write to the person in charge of the hotel (student B) to state his problems and dissatisfaction. After reading student A's complaint letter, student B decided to reply with a view to solving the problem through consultation. Then the two men conducted negotiations and consultations in the form of face-to-face communication.

4.2.3. Process

(1) Assigning tasks. In order to create a real and natural communication environment, teachers try to use Portuguese to assign tasks. If necessary, they can use gestures, movements and expressions to help ensure that every student knows how to complete the task. Then divide the students into groups (2-3 people).

(2) Collecting relevant information. Firstly, this task is carried out around the topic of "Travel in Algarve", so students should have a certain understanding of the Province of Algarve. For example, where is Algarve located? What tourist attractions are there? What are the specialties? At the same time, it is also necessary to accumulate relevant vocabulary to pave the way for actual practice. Then, students should be guided to inquire the writing mode and elements of complaint letters through reading, Internet and other ways, and cultivate students' autonomous learning ability.

(3) Teacher explanation. The teacher can extract the key words and sentence patterns and write them on the blackboard or use a projector to show them to the students, explain to the students the matters needing attention in writing the complaint letter and the tips for completing the task, and encourage the students to ask questions.

(4) Writing a letter. According to the task requirements, student A (not limited to one person) needs to write a complaint letter to student B. After reading the letter from student A, student B will write back.

(5) Group activities. In this link, the teacher needs to patrol in the classroom, urge each student to practice, and answer questions for students in time. Of course, the teacher should also silently record all kinds of problems and errors in the practice of students, and summarize them at the end of the class.

(6) Group presentation. According to the class time, groups can be selected to perform on the podium. The performance starts with "reading letters" from both sides. Encourage students to boldly read out what they have written, not afraid of making mistakes, not afraid of pronunciation, and show the most confident state. Then freely display according to the requirements of the task. This link has two main purposes. One is to check the students' practice results and task completion, and find out the advantages and disadvantages; The second is to let students practice in motion and learn knowledge while learning it; Third, say goodbye to "dumb language" and increase self-confidence in learning.

(7) Evaluation and encouragement. After the presentation, the teacher summarizes the grammar points involved in the task (mainly the virtual unfinished past), and makes comments on each group one by one to explain the problems and difficulties encountered by students in the activity. At the same time, praise and reward the excellent team.

4.3. Reflection and Prospect

This link is crucial. It requires teachers to be able to observe students' individual differences, especially for students' errors in the process of language use. After the completion of the task, it is also necessary to evaluate it. By summing up the students' opinions, it is necessary to comprehensively summarize the design, implementation and results of the task, so as to provide the basis for better carrying out the follow-up task.

5. Conclusion

The task-based teaching method advocates letting students master the learning initiative and embodies the people-oriented concept, which is a unique teaching method in Portuguese classroom.

No matter how to use task-based teaching method, teachers should pay attention to students' own needs. First of all, learning interest is very important. To stimulate learners' interest in learning and give full play to students' subjective consciousness can not only promote the smooth development of teaching activities, but also maximize the teaching effect. Secondly, it is clear that the purpose of grammar teaching is to cultivate learners' ability to

flexibly use the knowledge they have learned, rather than simply following the book. Finally, according to the students' individual differences, we should reasonably select and design tasks, understand their essence, guide students to observe and think about grammar phenomena independently, and actively solve grammar problems. However, although the task-based teaching method has the outstanding effect that the traditional teaching method cannot bring, we cannot completely apply it to the university classroom in China. Teachers should deeply study the theory of task-based teaching, make appropriate improvements in teaching methods in combination with the actual situation in China, and always walk on the road of exploring the localization of Task-based Teaching in China. At the same time, it should be noted that choosing task-based teaching method does not mean abandoning other teaching methods. Teachers should innovate teaching methods according to the actual situation and constantly improve the Portuguese teaching system.

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