

# Embracing the Integration of TBLT and CLIL: Design, Justify, and Evaluate a Practical EAP Lesson Plan

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## Abstract:

While the Ministry of Education of China advocates a pedagogical shift from traditional grammar-translation method toward communicative language teaching for EAP courses in China, some public secondary schools are still reluctant to the change due to the huge influence of high-stakes tests, negatively affecting those students who call for courses cultivating all-inclusive English abilities to prepare for studying abroad. To address this issue, this paper designs a task-based language teaching (TBLT) and content and language integrated learning (CLIL) lesson plan following Willis's and Meyer's models. The study analyses the literature to provide a rationale and present a comprehensive evaluation discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the design. The discussion shows that such an integrated course benefits students' overall English skills, communicative skills, and meaning-making capacity through classroom interaction, simulation, scaffolding, and the immersion of authentic materials. However, it may be challenging to implement in a real context due to the considerations of language focus, learners' English competence, implicit learning, contextual conditions, political consistency, and teacher training.

## Keywords:

Lesson plan  
Task-based language teaching  
Content and language integrated learning

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, English language education has been accorded great importance in China<sup>[1]</sup>. This paper presents an overview of a lesson from an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course designed to prepare students for future study abroad in a private educational

institution. To achieve higher grades in the *Gaokao*, the Chinese National College Entrance Examination, which focuses more on students' receptive literacy with insufficient oral proficiency evaluation, Chinese secondary school students are equipped with more advanced reading and listening skills compared to their

writing and speaking abilities<sup>[2-3]</sup>. This uneven focus on the exam can hinder public school students who long to improve their integrated English ability for studying abroad. Therefore, to address the issue of evaluation, school courses, and students' needs, this extra-curricular EAP course aims to improve the academic writing and speaking skills of secondary school graduates, whose English is at the B1 level according to CEFR, in Songjiang, Shanghai<sup>[4]</sup>. Students attend this course once a week, and each lesson contains twenty students and lasts ninety minutes.

The lesson consists of a 5-minute overview, a 40-minute writing lesson, a 5-minute recess, and a 40-minute speaking lesson. The study uses content and language integrated learning (CLIL) as the approach and task-based language teaching (TBLT) as the methodology. For the writing lesson, the study will mainly justify the choices of the TBL framework of Willis<sup>[5]</sup>. Meanwhile, the speaking lesson will be discussed based on Meyer's model for successful CLIL teaching<sup>[6]</sup>.

This paper will discuss the rationale of the lesson plan and evaluate its strengths and weaknesses according to related literature.

## 2. Rationale

Since the 1970s, language teaching has shifted toward the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach, which focuses on learners' needs for meaning-making<sup>[7]</sup>. A decade ago, the term "task" gradually replaced communicative activity, leading to the emergence of a task-based approach. The definition of "task" has been a long-term argument among researchers. Long defines it as a target task, which is broad, non-technical, and non-linguistic, while some other researchers refer to the term "pedagogical perspective" in Nunan's work<sup>[8]</sup>. Willis suggests that pedagogical tasks aim to encourage learners to use the target language for a communicative purpose, therefore achieving an outcome through the exchange of meanings. Nunan's definition of "task" shares some characteristics with Willis', considering the process of language learning but preferring the use of grammatical knowledge to express meaning. This idea also aligns with the Principled Communicative Approach (PCA), a weak form of CLT, which pays attention to form, teaches

a graded list of linguistic features, and trains students with both functional tasks and grammatical exercises. In contrast, as a strong form of CLT, TBLT is more learner-centered and experimental, paying less attention to form and training students through completing tasks. It guides students with a graded list of tasks and focuses on the interactive or communicative use of language<sup>[9]</sup>. Therefore, considering the characteristics of TBLT, the study follows Willis' definition and framework for its less focus on form and flexible usage of language structures. This means that learners can use language structures according to the requirements of the task and their preferences, without using the language forms taught in advance. In this course, secondary school graduates have already learned basic grammatical knowledge, so teachers need not to prepare students extensively in this respect, but to assist students in using the appropriate form in a specific context to convey ideas or meanings to others.

In the first 5 minutes, the teacher conducts a rapid review of the content of the previous lesson by asking students questions. On a macro level, the purpose of the overview is to ensure the coherence and flow of the course. On a micro level, the overview provides students with a transition to predict and connect the knowledge they have learned and will be learned<sup>[10]</sup>. However, reviewing the previous lesson is not an essential activity for some other subjects, including science and engineering, aiming to solve problems<sup>[11]</sup>. Considering EAP learning requires knowledge transition, the plan retains this part, believing that question-asking can engage students in active learning, problem-solving, and self-regulatory learning<sup>[12]</sup>.

According to Willis, the TBL framework contains three main components: pre-task, task cycle, and language focus. In the pre-task phase of the writing task, the teacher introduces the task and asks students to induce the structure of the introduction part in argumentative writing from other writing examples. The ultimate goal of language instruction is to enable learners to do rehearsal tasks through language use<sup>[13]</sup>. Similarly, the pre-task language activities in the speaking lesson aim to engage all learners in exploring language and conveying meaning through tasks instead of manipulating language through learning language form. Therefore, instead of directly pointing out the typical tenses and useful words that

students need to notice, the plan designs a task through a game called dictogloss for learners' noticing keywords and underlying interlanguage reconstruction <sup>[14]</sup>.

In the task cycle, the planning stage can increase the accuracy and complexity of the task <sup>[15]</sup>. Willis points out that students are divided into mixed-level classes with both quicker learners and slower learners due to individual cognitive ability differences. Therefore, weaker learners benefit from hearing the opinions of stronger students. At the same time, quicker learners also get fast improvement in the process of leading and explaining ideas to weaker learners. Information sharing among peers is a manifestation of the gap principle of TBLT since it fills the information gap when students transfer information from a text they read to others <sup>[16]</sup>. Students then negotiate and find out the complementary set of information to complete an activity. Information-gap tasks are easier than reasoning-gap tasks and opinion-gap tasks, making them more suitable for students with medium English competence <sup>[17]</sup>. Additionally, according to Willis, the lesson plan incorporates brainstorming to involve all students in topics and promote richer task interaction. It also uses mind maps to sort out ideas and organize information coherently. In this phase, the teacher acts as a guide, monitor, and timekeeper rather than the sole source of knowledge, providing scaffolding and feedback when needed to facilitate learning.

In the post-task phase, each group provides mutual comments on each other's reports. Then the teacher gives tactful and positive feedback on both content and language form and use. Initially, peer corrective feedback (CF) and teacher CF are employed <sup>[18]</sup>. Being an incidental phenomenon, peer CF even includes more non-directive feedback and praise compared to expert reviews <sup>[19]</sup>. Serving as an ideal alternative to direct grammar instruction, teacher CF supported by clear evidence can effectively facilitate L2 development <sup>[20]</sup>. Addressing linguistic forms during an interaction also facilitates communicative competence <sup>[21]</sup>. Furthermore, positive feedback from the teacher can stimulate students' confidence, augment motivation, and deepen their understanding of knowledge. However, in this phase, the teacher has to strike a balance between the roles that she feels appropriate and those demanded by students. Second, the phase focuses on language form,

but those form-focused activities fail to detract from the task's main focus on meaning. Language form acts as a vehicle for conveying meaning. After using a wider language repertoire to express themselves during the task, students implicitly gain salient language knowledge through all the preceding activities. Therefore, when the teacher comments, the new or corrected forms can be more effectively consolidated and integrated into students' interlanguage structure <sup>[22]</sup>. Moreover, instead of directly giving corrections, the teacher leaves the errors for students to actively suggest suitable ways of correction. This step is the outcome of the development of communicative ability, which encourages learners to be more independent in autonomous language use <sup>[23]</sup>.

After discussing the rationale of the lesson plan based on TBLT, the article will have a word with the reasons for choosing CLIL and how CLIL is applied in the plan.

As an "umbrella" term, CLIL performs as an approach related to various teaching methods including TBLT, and the non-CLIL environment is difficult to find at present <sup>[24-25]</sup>. Therefore, in this lesson, it could be hard to separate TBLT and CLIL in this context since the 4Cs framework is fused into the lesson plan. To achieve better integration, the lesson plan follows Meyer's model for successful CLIL teaching mixing CLIL and TBLT.

The forty-minute speaking class is designed as a demo class to simulate the real situation of a documentary studio. Students mimic documentary presenters to give a presentation about a historical figure. Using language in authentic and interactive settings can benefit communicative skills, which is a significant part of cognition in CLIL <sup>[26]</sup>. Considering rich input, students watch historical-figure-related English documentaries to search for valuable information to finish the task. The historical and cultural knowledge embodied in the documentaries demonstrates the cultural dimension of the 4Cs framework <sup>[27]</sup>. Meanwhile, it may improve students' intercultural awareness, the core of CLIL, since using authentic materials contributes to a deeper understanding of differences and similarities between cultures <sup>[28]</sup>. The choice of authentic materials also constitutes rich input for designing challenging tasks that foster creative thinking, encourage interaction, and strengthen output.

Another strategy of Meyer's model focuses on rich

interaction and pushed output. In the planning phase of the speaking lesson, students prepare tasks through group discussion since interaction in the learning context is fundamental to learning. In the holistic task phase, low-order thinking gradually evolves into high-order thinking <sup>[29]</sup>. For example, students' ability starts from remembering, understanding (explaining, classifying, and comparing) and applying to evaluating and generating. This is to say, their thinking processes (cognition) and language knowledge advance simultaneously.

Regarding scaffolding learning as mentioned above, the role of teachers in this lesson is re-evaluated. A learner-centered class enables teachers to provide the necessary scaffolding, motivation, and professional error correction, which are related to the content and context of the lesson. According to Meyer, scaffolding reduces the cognitive and linguistic load of the content and motivates students to complete tasks through appropriate and supportive structuring. Following this opinion, this plan pushes language and content output by pointing out errors and giving useful expressions in the post-task commenting phase. This process encourages learners to deepen their thinking and active involvement in language and thinking, therefore achieving "language through learning."

In the task phase of acquiring historical knowledge and skills, students also personalize learning by creating personal understanding and developing speaking skills. For instance, students gain a brand-new understanding of the content and personal experience of presenting through individual learning, group discussion, reporting, thinking, and commenting. Putting language focus on the post-task phase is the result of the "language of learning", which refers to accessing basic concepts and skills relating to the subject theme or topic. This is to say, it is important to use appropriate skills and knowledge related to the unique content and context. Halliday's systemic functional linguistics points out the notion of register, namely using appropriate language in a particular context <sup>[30]</sup>. When students are accomplishing their tasks, there are different methods according to the linguistic demand of the content and context. In the lesson, students use their integrated knowledge rather than specific grammatical or lexical knowledge learned in the class. Therefore, without the need to learn particular language knowledge at the

beginning, students focus on enhancing their unique language of the topic that can be used in the task.

### 3. Evaluation

The strengths of the lesson plan have already been discussed above. Regarding TBLT on a macro level, tasks are tools for engaging learners in meaning-making and creating the conditions for language acquisition <sup>[31]</sup>. Although the main focus is on meaning, Ellis suggests that TBLT still retains language form to be the vehicle in the context of meaning-making. Learning language forms in the post-task phase can effectively consolidate and integrate new forms into an existing interlanguage. On a micro level, the learner-centered lesson encourages learners to treat language as a tool for making meaning instead of as an object for studying and practicing. As for CLIL, the 4Cs framework encourages students to personalize knowledge and skills, especially their competence in conceptualization and communication <sup>[32]</sup>. Therefore, after the lesson, students will be able to enhance mainly speaking and academic writing skills. Meanwhile, their listening and reading comprehension competence can also be improved through pre-class activities. Additionally, the plan creates contexts where learners can utilize their linguistic resources in communication, thereby cultivating their linguistic and interactional competence, including communicative, corporative, and high-order thinking abilities. Since culture is part of the 4Cs framework in CLIL, students will have the opportunity to improve their intercultural awareness through the approach of the lesson.

However, TBLT suffers considerable criticism in that it radically departs from traditional language teaching approaches based on a linguistic syllabus, so the lesson also has some weaknesses.

To begin with, the lesson plan puts language focus in the post-task phase since Willis encourages students not to be trapped in typical language patterns, but to use integrated language knowledge in tasks <sup>[5, 33]</sup>. In this case, as tasks are output-based, Littlewood criticizes that it is inappropriate to apply input activities in tasks since authentic speaking tasks could be difficult for learners with low language proficiency and may cause minimal demands on linguistic competence <sup>[34]</sup>. In this context,

before the lesson begins, students are individually exposed to several authentic materials for rich input. However, since their English is only at the B1 level, the complicated pre-task activity and challenged materials may still be challenging for them to learn. Meanwhile, successful learning by authentic materials requires students with proficient self-direct and differentiated learning ability, which are excessive demands for students in this class.

Furthermore, TBLT is suitable for environments with rich acquisition instead of environments with poor acquisition, where a more structured approach is required<sup>[35]</sup>. Unlike the framework of Willis which puts language focus in the post-task phase, the framework of Ellis puts it in all phases. Ellis also claims that if linguistic accuracy and meaning-based tasks are well integrated, TBLT could also be suited to acquisition-poor classes, such as foreign language (FL) classes, in which students already have a good command of grammatical knowledge and will achieve better output with teachers' scaffolding. However, following the TBL framework of Willis, the plan focuses on meaning, thereby minimizing the teacher's instruction of language form in the task. Therefore, the situation described by Swan may still occur in the lesson since China is more monolingual compared to some bilingual or multilingual countries such as India and Luxembourg.

Being output-based, the framework of Willis may also face a problem called the attrition of infrequent words. According to Swan, some students implicitly learn new knowledge through communication or interaction in tasks. If some structures or vocabularies hardly occur in tasks, students may easily forget them for being not salient and frequent. In this perspective, TBLT is inferior to traditional structure-based approaches.

It is also inappropriate to use TBLT in a context where the "high-stakes language tests encourage discrete-point teaching and memorization." Therefore, researchers advocate task-supported teaching. Sheen and Swan argue that there is inadequate research to prove that TBLT is more effective than traditional teaching and learning methods<sup>[36]</sup>. For example, although the Ministry of Education in China enacted a new secondary curriculum to cultivate students' communicative competence and the traditional teaching pedagogy has been gradually replaced by a focus on the development of communication skills,

TBLT still faces miscellaneous obstacles<sup>[37]</sup>. Luo and Yi point out that China still lacks professional and systematic training for teachers<sup>[38]</sup>. At the same time, the unbalance of students' English level, unbalance in local education, and insufficiency of educational funds still exist. Due to those problems and the incomplete educational system that gives priority to exam-oriented education, TBLT needs to be redefined in the Chinese context by integrating a variety of teaching methods and cultivating school-based textbooks.

Similarly, as an all-inclusive term, CLIL faces some criticism. Coyle suggests that CLIL pedagogy lacks cohesion and a particular model concerning the different conceptualization of CLIL<sup>[39]</sup>. This is to say, CLIL has no specific model for all contexts, so it requires teachers with proficient language competence to use appropriate pedagogical tools in different contexts. Additionally, as an umbrella term covering a lot of grounds, CLIL should be considered in most teaching and learning activities. Therefore, CLIL is so general that it lacks practical or theoretical utility. For example, although this lesson plan is based on TBLT, it is more or less influenced by CLIL, so it could be hard to apply unique pedagogical tools to this general approach. Therefore, choosing appropriate pedagogical tools in a CLIL class could be sophisticated for considering contexts.

As culture is a vital part of CLIL, the lesson plan considers the improvement of learners' intercultural awareness through authentic materials of different cultures and teachers' scaffolding. Crozet et al. add that teachers need to improve their intercultural perspective through professional training, such as discourse training before the course begins<sup>[40]</sup>. However, the institution might not have enough resources to train those teachers to improve intercultural awareness, contributing to their lack of enough experience to help students achieve that goal.

CLIL has been promoted by the local government in Shanghai in the late 1990s<sup>[41]</sup>. However, Wei and Feng claim that the policy seems like a one-off endeavor since regional policy insufficiently sustains CLIL provision<sup>[42]</sup>. Additionally, few schools encourage CLIL, and stakeholders' beliefs are mismatched with formal language policy. Therefore, the effectiveness of the CLIL class can be maximized when policies are consistent with people's language practices and beliefs<sup>[43]</sup>.

## 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, following the TBL framework of Willis and Meyer's model for successful CLIL teaching, the lesson plan integrates TBLT and CLIL. After justifying each sequence of the lesson plan according to the literature, the study evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of the plan. On the one hand, TBLT faces criticism due to the consideration of language focus, learners' English ability, implicit learning, and real context. Therefore, it is significant to adapt TBLT to the unique Chinese context by integrating TBLT with other useful teaching methods

and cultivating school-based textbooks. On the other hand, as CLIL is an all-inclusive term with no typical model, the class requires the consistency of policies as well as people's language practices and beliefs, and it needs trained teachers with high English proficiency to choose appropriate pedagogical tools according to the specific context and content. If the teacher of the lesson has a thorough understanding of TBLT and CLIL and the factors above can be achieved, the class will successfully improve students' English ability, especially writing and speaking skills.

### Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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