

A Review on the International Task-Based Language Teaching in Recent Ten Years: A Scientometric Analysis Based on CiteSpace

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Abstract

This paper presented a scientometric analysis of task-based language teaching using CiteSpace based on the research literature retrieved from the Web of Science core collection between 2011 and 2021. CiteSpace is employed to analyze the data, as it minimizes subjectiveness and increases credibility. A total of 626 bibliographic records related to task-based teaching were systematically visualized and examined to identify the number of papers, high influential literature, high cited authors, research frontier and hot spots. The findings are as follows: 1) From the perspective of the total number of documents issued, the research on task-based language teaching is gradually increasing all over the world; 2) The topics that have been published and cited mainly focus on the interpretation of the theories related to task-based language teaching, its application in the second language classroom and its interdisciplinary research trend; 3) Research frontiers and hot topics mainly focus on classroom teaching and pay attention to students' language acquisition. The results of the study have implications for the research of Task-based Language Teaching in China.

Keywords: task-based language teaching (TBLT), CiteSpace, scientometric analysis, research hotspots and trends

1. Introduction

Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT), evolved within the communicative language teaching approach, is regarded as a new trend in language teaching and learning. According to Ellis (2012), "TBLT is an approach that emphasizes holistic learning, it is learner-driven and it entails communication-based instruction. It contrasts with traditional approaches (such as present-practice-production-PPP), which are based on discrete learning, are teacher-centered

and emphasize form and accuracy" (pp. 197-198). This approach also provides English language teachers with an educational framework to change their role to facilitators (Willis, 1996). Task-based language teaching originated from communicative language teaching approach and developed on the basis of a rich second language acquisition theory and research. Task-based language teaching has brought deep and profound influence on the foreign language teaching and research since the

1980s. The task-based language teaching emphasizes the teaching ideas of “learning in the process of doing tasks”, which has attracted the attention of second language acquisition (SLA) researchers, curriculum developers, educationalists, teacher trainers and language teachers worldwide. The term was coined, and the concept developed, by SLA researchers and language educators, largely in reaction to empirical accounts of teacher-dominated, form-oriented second language classroom practice. As a pedagogy, TBLT is a teaching approach that takes communicative and interactive tasks as the core in the teaching links of syllabus design, textbook development, lesson planning, classroom teaching and teaching testing. The representative figure of this pedagogy is N. S. Prabhu and M. H. Long. The former began to put the communicative pedagogy into practice in Bangalore, India in the late 1970s, and published *Procedural Syllabus* in 1984, published *Second Language Pedagogy* in 1987. The latter published *A Role for Instruction in Second Language Acquisition: Task-based Language Training* in 1985. Thereafter, the theory of is constantly revised and improved by M.H. Long. In the process, Long has developed many new applied linguistic concepts and research methods, such as “Interaction hypothesis”, “needs analysis” and “focus on form” and so on.

The past three decades have witnessed a surge of interest in TBLT which is evidenced by numerous published monographs, edited volumes, and articles and special issues in major SLA and Language Teaching journals (Bygate, 2016; Ellis, 2003; García Mayo, 2007). This growing interest could be in part ascribed to the inherent qualities of tasks; namely, having a primary focus on meaning, inducing learners to draw on their linguistic and cognitive resources, and being outcome oriented in the sense that learners are required to use language to accomplish some sort of real-world activity (telling a story, solving a problem, giving directions, etc.) (Ellis 2003). These characteristics have rendered tasks indispensable instruments for not only teaching and assessing languages but also for researching into language learning processes. In other words, tasks pervade many aspects of language teaching research and practice but they may take on different forms and could be used under various guises—i.e., real-world tasks which promote situational authenticity or pedagogic tasks which foster

interactional authenticity in the classroom (Bygate, 2016). After the development of more than 30 years, it has become one of the most important methods of contemporary foreign language teaching. With the rapid development of task-based language teaching research, scholars have reviewed and analyzed task-based language teaching theory research and practices (e.g., Ellis, 2009; Ma & Jiang, 2020). In the paper of Ellis (2009), this study began by offering a definition of ‘task’ and by emphasizing that there is no single ‘task-based teaching’ approach. It then evaluated a number of criticisms of TBT, drawing on recent critiques by Widdowson, Seedhouse, Sheen, and Swan. It is argued that many of these criticisms stem from a fundamental misunderstanding of what a ‘task’ is, and of the theoretical rationales that inform task-based teaching. These criticisms also reflected a failure to acknowledge that multiple versions of task-based teaching exist. In particular, it is argued that task-based teaching need not be seen as an alternative to more traditional, form-focused approaches but can be used alongside them. The paper concluded with an examination of a number of genuine problems with implementing task-based teaching, as reflected in evaluation studies. In the study of Ma and Jiang (2020), their paper mainly sorted out how opinions differ by reviewing the research on the approach in the past three decades and the recent developmental trends of cross-disciplinary studies in the fields such as language testing and computer-assisted language teaching. However, these researches mainly focused on the differences on the theories and development orientation of different researchers. The previous review studies applied the traditional literature review methods, and the number of literatures collected and analyzed was limited. In contrast, scientific metrology software CiteSpace can be used to draw a series of visualized scientific mapping knowledge domains on a large collection of papers, which is objectively and accurately presenting the general picture of the dynamic development of the discipline. Although some scholars applied this method to the field of linguistics and foreign language teaching (Xiao, 2017), which used CiteSpace to sort out and summarize the pragmatics papers in the 2006-2015 core collection of Web of Science from the four dimensions of publication volume, citation, academic schools and research hotspot

and trends, the review of task-based language teaching research was rarely done using this scientific measurement methods.

In this regard, this paper proposed to investigate the papers that are contained in the core collection of Web of Science from 2011 to 2021. It adopts CiteSpace to draw a cooperation network, co-citations and terms clustering map to show the international development progress in task-based language teaching research field in the past ten years and is expected to have a more comprehensive understanding on the development trends of task-based language teaching, thereby hoping to give some implications to task-based language teaching in China. This article mainly explores the following issues:

- 1) What are the characteristics of international task-based language teaching on the distribution of regions, institutions and authors?
- 2) What are the high-influential papers and highly-cited authors in the field of international task-based language teaching?
- 3) What are the forefront of research and research focuses of international task-based language teaching in recent years?

2. Research Tools and Data Collection

The analytical tool used in this study is the scientometric analysis software CiteSpace 5.8.R3, which can demonstrate the evolution and development history in this field on a citation network map (Chen, 2017). It can not only show the current situation of a research field, but also highlight some specific important research papers in the development of the field. The data in this paper were mainly collected from Web of Science core journals, and the search criteria were "Task-Based Language Teaching", "task-based language teaching", "task-based teaching" or "TBLT" in "Title" or "Topic"; this paper set the time span as 2011-2021. The research categories are limited to "linguistics", "language linguistics", "educational education". The literature type is limited to "articles" and "books". In the process of collecting literature papers, some of the papers that is not about task-based language teaching are deleted. Finally, 626 valid data records are generated.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 The Distribution of Published Papers

According to Li and Chen (2018), a critical method to measure the research advancement of a certain field is to chart the distribution of publications over time. For this review, to understand the overall trend of task-based language teaching, a preliminary search was conducted with the limitation of time scope between 2011-2021. As shown in Figures 1, 2 and 3, the size of nodes and labels in the network represents the number of publications by countries, institutions or authors, respectively. The more publications, the larger the node. The connection between nodes indicates a cooperative relationship between countries, institutions, or authors. According to the graph, it can be seen that the distribution of articles in the field of task-based language teaching research in the past decade has shown three trends. Firstly, in terms of the total number of articles published, the United States reached to the highest number of articles in the past decade, with 153 articles, followed by China (90 articles), Spain (44 articles), Iran (35 articles), Australia (31 articles), the United Kingdom (29 articles), Canada (28 articles), and Japan (21 articles). This shows that the research on task-based language teaching is widely distributed internationally, and there is a dense network of research cooperation among the above countries. Secondly, task-based language teaching is mainly concentrated in different colleges and universities, and the top ten publishing institutions are all universities. Thirdly, according to the statistics of author publication volume, the top ten authors in the past decade are Youjin Kim (8 articles), Rod Ellis (5 articles), Craig Lambert (5 articles), Caroline Payant (4 articles), Paul Leeming (4 articles), Lara Bryfonski (4 articles), Natsuko Shintani (3 articles), Nicole Ziegler (3 articles), Andrea Revesz (3 articles), and Anas Awwad (3 articles). From the perspective of research fields, these high-yield authors mainly engage in research on second language acquisition (SLA), language teaching, foreign language teaching methods, teacher education, and other aspects.

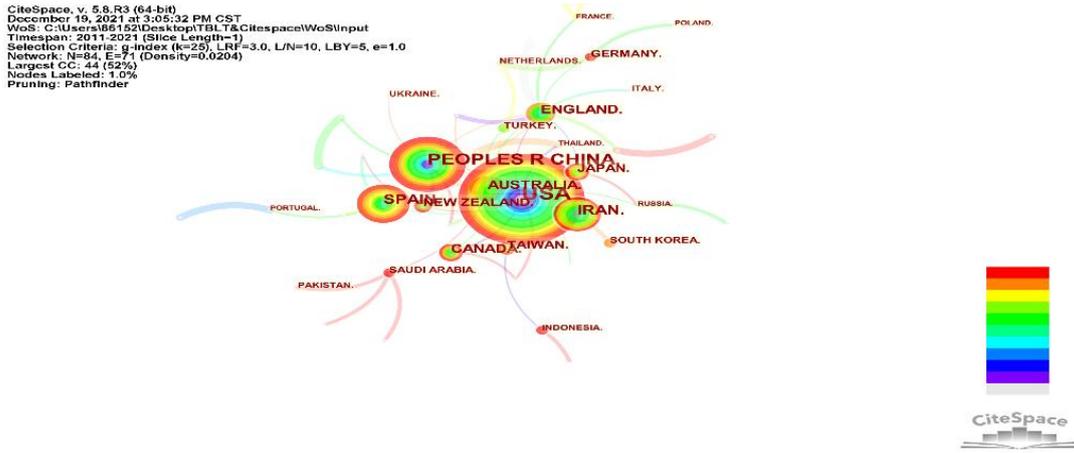


Figure 1. Knowledge map of national cooperation in international task-based language teaching and research from 2011 to 2021

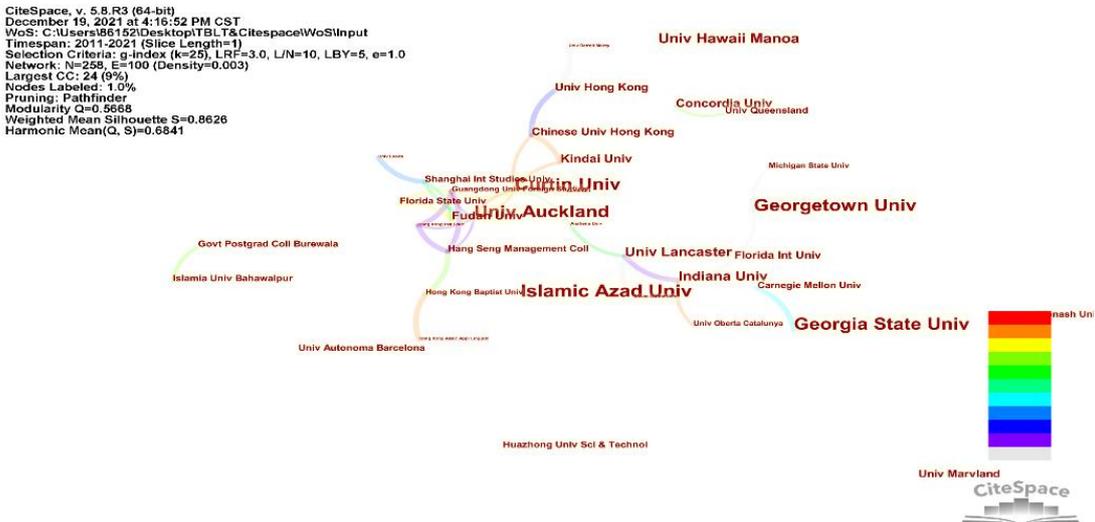


Figure 2. Mapping of international cooperation on task-based language teaching between institutions from 2011 to 2021



Figure 3. Knowledge map of international task-based language teaching authors' cooperation in research from 2011 to 2021

3.2 Analysis of Co-Citation of Literature

The co-citation analysis, which could form an overview network of the relevant literature through constructing networks of cited references (Chen, 2017), was carried out. Several types of visualizations, mainly including cluster view, timeline view, and time zone view can be generated on CiteSpace. In this study, the cluster view of the co-cited references is adopted for the analysis. This study utilized CiteSpace software to extract paper titles from cited literature and obtain the distribution of highly influential literature in the field of task-based language teaching. The determination of high-impact

literature is mainly based on three data indicators generated by CiteSpace: citation frequency, centrality, and mutation value. The higher the frequency of citations are, the greater the influence of the literature will be. Literature with high centrality is called a turning point and have an important leading role in research in a certain field (Chen, 2006). A high mutation value indicates a surge in citation in the literature during the research period. As follows, Table 1 lists the top ten literature and authors ranked in terms of total citation frequency in international task-based language teaching research from 2011 to 2021. These literature and authors mainly exhibit the following characteristics.

Table 1. Top 10 Highly Cited Literature and Authors in International Task Based Language Teaching Research (2011-2021)

Rank	Papers & Books	Authors
1	Second language acquisition and task-based language teaching	Long, M.H.
2	In Defense of Tasks and TBLT: Nonissues and Real Issues	Long, M.H.
3	Evaluating TBLT: The case of a task-based Spanish program	Gonzalez-Lioret, M.
4	Position paper: Moving task-based language teaching forward	Ellis, R.
5	Tracking 'learning behaviours' in the incidental acquisition of two-dimensional adjectives by Japanese beginner learners of L2 English	Shintani, N.
6	Research into practice: The task-based approach to instructed second language acquisition	East, M.
7	Approaches and methods in language teaching (3rd ed.)	Rodgers, T. S.
8	Learner-generated content and engagement in second language task performance	Lambert, C.
9	Towards a modular language curriculum for using tasks	Ellis, Rod.
10	Taking Technology to Task: Technology-Mediated TBLT, Performance, and Production	Ziegler, N.

According to Chen (2017) and Cao and Zhao (2019), citing articles convey additional information that can help us understand the emerging trends of a field. The research topics of highly cited literature focus on the theoretical interpretation of task-based language teaching and empirical research related to task-based teaching methods. Among the top ten highly cited articles in Table 1, there are 4 empirical studies on task-based language teaching (i.e., 1, 3, 5 and 8). These four articles have conducted in-depth research on the role of task-based language teaching in promoting learners' oral and various language proficiency levels, vocabulary acquisition, task performance, and learning motivation in second language learning.

Among all of these studies, five articles have been conducted about the theoretical explanations on task-based language teaching (i.e., 1, 2, 4, 6 and 9). The most frequently cited book that elaborates on task-based language teaching by Long (2015) offers the rational argument for this particular approach with supporting evidence from theory, research and classroom experience, followed by a step-by-step description of how to implement task-based language teaching for those interested in doing so. This book also shows the linkage between theory and research findings in SLA. These five articles elaborate on the theoretical basis of task-based language teaching from different perspectives, respond to some

doubts and misunderstandings existing in the academic community about task-based language teaching, further explain some concepts in task-based language teaching, and actively seek a more comprehensive method for the implementation and application of task-based language teaching. The seventh highly cited document is a book by Rodgers, T.S. (2014) on language teaching. In this book, Rodgers explains more than ten language teaching methods and schools, including task-based language teaching, from the perspectives of background, language theory, learning theory, instructional design, and teaching steps. The final 10th highly cited article is a theoretical literature on computer science and technology and task-based language teaching. The article introduces the mutual promotion between science and technology and task-based language teaching, and provides suggestions for the future development of task-based language teaching using technology as a medium.

3.3 Author Co-Citation Analysis

Author co-citation analysis identifies highly cited authors in a particular field and generates researcher clusters, thereby identifying research themes and the distribution in this field (Li & Chen, 2018). From the perspective of citations, scholars with high citation frequency between 2011 and 2021 mainly include: Rod Ellis, Skehan P, David Nunan and Long Michael. They are all highly cited authors, and works of Rod Ellis and Long Michael are also highly cited articles. Although the research results of some highly cited authors do not appear in the top ten highly cited literature, they are cited frequently.

3.4 Frontier and Hot Spot Analysis of International Task-Based Language Teaching Research

Research frontiers refer to the emerging theoretical trends or emerging new topics, and research hotspots refer to topics that scholars in the field focus on and pay common attention to in a specific period (Li & Chen, 2018). In this paper, a collection of 626 articles was analyzed and formed 8 statistically significant clusters, with each representing a frontier research topic. According to the results of cluster analysis, combined with the important node literature in the timeline knowledge map, the frontier themes of international task-based language pedagogy research include classroom teaching (Bryfonski, L., 2021), task complexity, language acquisition, second language acquisition, accuracy,

education, performance and communication. As a popular teaching method, task-based language teaching focuses on the classroom and teaching, and pays attention to the effect of teaching and students' language acquisition and use. Different from research frontiers, research hotspots refer to topics that scholars in the field focus on and common concern in a specific period (Li & Chen, 2018). Through terminology analysis and literature citation surge analysis, we have obtained the research hotspots of international task-based language teaching in recent years. The hot research topics mainly focus on negotiation, language fluency, language complexity, second language acquisition, classroom, etc.

In general, the frontiers and hotspots of international task-based language teaching research have the following characteristics. On the one hand, the research hotspots are closely related to the frontier topics, focusing on teaching activities, paying attention to the task complexity of task-based language teaching, and exploring different aspects of task-based language teaching for students' second language learning. Long's (2015) article is the most frequently cited, in which task-based SLA is systematically demonstrated. Early research in the field of TBLT focused on the advancement of TBLT (Ellis, 2009), language performance in L2 task complexity (Robinson, 2011), teacher performance and in-service education (East, 2012), experiential learning (Kolb, 2014), and empirical findings of L2 learning (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 2014). Recent emerging trends can be detected in papers published by Ellis (2018), and Huang et al. (2017). They investigated deep learning, reflections of TBLT, and neural networks respectively, which demonstrate that besides the language arena. On the other hand, the discussion of task complexity has become the focus of research, based on the frontier and research hotspots in recent years, it can be seen that researchers attach great importance to the research of task complexity. Task is the central link of task-based language teaching and the major way of the teaching method implementation. Its complexity regulation and application are related to the application of teaching methods and teaching effects, and is of great significance to the design of tasks in the teaching process.

Besides the emerging trends that have been

discussed, new trends with more specific perspectives are also detected. First, scholars pay increasing attention on L2 learners' oral development, including training for speaking fluency (Suzuki, 2021), promoting conversational interaction (Fang et al., 2021), and advancing oracy teaching while employing literacy practices (Shakhsi Dastgahian *et al.*, 2020). Writing proficiency is another emerging focus. Carver and Kim (2020) examined grammar learning in collaborative writing tasks. Li and Vuono (2019) and Kim et al. (2020) studied written corrective feedback. In addition, as mentioned earlier, technology-assisted learning is a crucial emerging trend. Fang et al. (2021) pointed out that mobile-assisted TBL has positive effects on learners' overall linguistic development. Other new emerging trends include cognitive ability on L2 development (Li *et al.*, 2019), learning contexts, and task-based teaching approach (Shakhsi Dastgahian *et al.*, 2020)

4. Conclusion

To reiterate, a scientometric analysis of task-based language teaching was conducted using CiteSpace for the literature that was retrieved from the WoS core collection between 2011 and 2021. A total of 626 bibliographic records related to task-based language teaching were systematically combed to examine the distribution of paper publication, the highly cited papers and authors and the research hotpots in this field. This paper concluded the following findings. Firstly, from the perspective of publication volume, the United States and China have the largest number of publications, but the number of publications in other countries around the world has gradually increased, and the research on task-based language teaching is distributed globally. Secondly, the relevant analysis of this study shows that language teaching activities in the second language classroom are still an important topic of task-based language teaching, focusing on the language acquisition of second language learners. Thirdly, in recent years, the interdisciplinary research of task-based language teaching, for example, the combination of task-based language teaching and computer-assisted language teaching, have gradually received attention. Fourthly, with the continuous development of task-based language teaching research, task-based language teaching has gradually penetrated into the teaching

environment of different types of learners, especially the teaching environment of English as a foreign language, and the research topics including task types, task complexity, feedback modes and teacher concepts.

It is worth noting that some researchers have also discussed the development of task-based language teaching in English teaching in China, and pointed out the relevant problems in the implementation of teaching. However, relatively speaking, studies on task-based language teaching have potential room for development in China, and there is little research on task-based language teaching theory, most of which only involves the application analysis and empirical study of task-based language teaching.

This study is not without limitations. First, as mentioned earlier, although multiple tools, including VOSviewer, CiteSpace, etc., are available to conduct scientometrics analysis, CiteSpace was used in this study to extract the distribution of paper publication, highly influential papers and emerging trends and hotpots of the task-based language teaching. Different results may be generated if other tools were employed. Second, in the prediction of potential trends, inevitable deviations may exist. Future research could address the limitations to verify the findings of the study.

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