

# Investigating Contradictions in an EFL Teacher Professional Learning Community Focused Systematically on TBLT

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## Abstract

Drawing on activity theory and activity systems analysis, this study explores the contradictions in starting, sustaining, and developing an EFL teacher professional learning community (PLC) focused on implementing TBLT (task-based language teaching) as a curriculum innovation; the strategic actions taken to tackle the contradictions; and how in the course of resolving these contradictions, teachers' cognition and actions in relation to TBLT are transformed. Three levels of contradictions were identified and resolved in the community of inquiry. The findings may provide implications for the feasible in-service teacher education agenda focused on enacting the pedagogical innovations of TBLT.

## Keywords

Contradictions; Professional Learning Communities; Activity Theory; TBLT; Curriculum Innovation; Expansive Learning; Teacher Education.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, Task-based language teaching (TBLT) has been viewed as “a new orthodoxy” (Littlewood, 2004, p.39), that is, a pedagogic approach in which a task is defined as “an activity in which a person engages in order to attain an objective, and which necessitates the use of language” (Van den Branden, 2006, p.4). In this learner-centered and experiential pedagogy, teachers transform from a monologist on isolated linguistic elements to the crucial role of the mediator of language learning to scaffold and motivate students (Van den Branden, 2016), the change agent to implement the situated task-based approaches culturally acceptable and feasible for the learning environment (Carless, 2007; Van den Branden, 2016), and the “action researcher” and “reflective practitioner” (Burns, 2009). While there has been increasing empirical evidence of the effectiveness of TBLT instruction to foster students' language acquisition in authentic educational contexts (East, 2016; Newton & Bui, 2017; Shintani, 2016; Van den Branden, 2006), how teachers could be best facilitated through teacher education programmes to successfully implement TBLT principles in the classroom remains under-researched (Newton, 2016). The purpose of the present study is to explore a Professional Learning Community (PLC) for English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers based on the university-school partnership, whose prior concern is to implement curriculum innovation of Task-based language teaching (TBLT) in rural primary schools in the Chinese context. Drawing on the theoretical framework of activity systems analysis, this study aims to examine the contradictions in starting, sustaining, and developing the PLC; the strategic actions taken to tackle the contradictions; and how in the course of resolving these contradictions, teachers' cognition and actions in relation to TBLT are transformed.

## 2. Literature Review

The literature on three topics forms the basis of this study: TBLT, PLCs, Activity Theory and Activity systems analysis.

### 2.1 TBLT

According to Skehan (1998, p.95), “a task is an activity in which meaning is primary; there is some kind of communication problem to solve; there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities; task completion has some priority; the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome”. Given teachers’ misunderstandings (Ellis, 2009) and considerable uncertainty (East, 2012) about task-based approach, practitioners’ deviations from the pedagogical guidelines (e.g. Andon & Eckert, 2009; Zheng & Borg, 2014), and various contextual constraints impeding teachers’ enactment of TBLT approaches (e.g. Carless, 2004; Zhang, 2007), an ongoing, reflective, sustained, grounded, and practice-oriented TBLT-related teacher education programme is seen as pivotal in addressing teachers’ practical and theoretical concerns, providing them with the interactional support and guidance to help enhance their confidence and professional expertise to optimally achieve students’ target language development by using tasks (Adams & Newton, 2009; Van den Branden, 2006, 2016).

There have been various levels of challenges for adopting TBLT in Asian educational contexts (Adams & Newton, 2009; Butler, 2011; Carless, 2007, 2009; Littlewood, 2007; Zheng & Borg, 2014). The reported inhibiting factors of the broader use of tasks include shades of interpretation resulting in “the confusing or even contradictory variations of TBLT” (Carless, 2007, p.596), classroom management problems with large class sizes, the wide range of students’ English proficiency levels (Carless, 2007; Zheng & Borg, 2014), incompatibility of TBLT with the high-stakes examination (Littlewood, 2007), scarcity of teaching resources at disposal (Butler, 2011), and teachers’ preference for the presentation-practice-production (PPP) model of teaching (Carless, 2009). In China, since the utilization of task-based learning was advocated in the national English curriculum for senior secondary education by the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE, 2001), TBLT has evolved into a prominent trend in basic education through initiating the curriculum innovation which is learner-centered, competence-based, and quality-oriented (MOE, 2011; Wang & Zhang, 2014). However, studies have indicated that there exists an implementation gap between the pedagogic guidelines of TBLT and task-in-action in the Chinese primary schools (Ding, 2012), especially in rural areas where the effectiveness of curriculum innovation is severely undermined by factors such as under-resourced English learning environment; incompetence and inexperience of teachers to design, implement and evaluate tasks due to their limited language proficiency; low status of the subject of English compared with other main courses; and the vast distance between textbook contents and students’ personal experiences outside school (Peng, 2010; Tao, 2019).

A growing number of empirical studies have demonstrated the necessity and potential effectiveness of practice-oriented, community-based teacher education programmes to address these issues and resolve the tension as pointed out by East (2014, p.272) between “encouraging TBLT as innovation and moderating TBLT in practice in the light of genuine constraints”. In a longitudinal implementation study in Flanders, Belgium, Van den Branden and his team researchers have found the team-based training strategies combining theoretical instruction with the introduction of task-based syllabus, inspired by concrete classrooms and supplemented with class observation and feedback, a great success to cultivate teachers’ expertise to enact TBLT principles as educational innovation (Van den Branden, 2006). In New Zealand, East (2014, 2016) revealed that the teacher education programmes informed by a reflective practitioner approach as the mediator of innovation enabled to forge the development of teachers’ understandings about TBLT and further enhanced the successful enactment of TBLT principles in response to contextual realities. In Germany, Andreas Muller Hartmann and Marita Schocker (2017) concluded that a long-term, cyclical in-service training based on the community of inquiry was especially helpful in facilitating teachers’ development in intercultural communicative competence and transferring the expertise to concrete practice in task-based teaching. And in the Chinese context, Zhu (2020)’s study illustrated that a teacher education

initiative being both top-down and bottom-up, driven by collaborative action research and empirical evaluation, facilitated teachers' task implementation in the EFL basic education. The above studies mainly focused on the teachers as key figures in these created communities of inquiry with a dedicated focus on TBLT, on their change of beliefs and actions to make TBLT principles tangible in the dynamic educational contexts. However, empirical research has shown that multidimensional tensions exist in these teacher training programmes. For instance, while some of the contextual challenges and non-contextual constraints reported in the previous literature had been addressed through ongoing facilitative feedback from teacher educators, teachers' manipulation of the task syllabus tended to be problematic with regard to task complexity, maintenance of control, group work, and differentiating between students, diverging from the task outcomes intended by the syllabus developer (Van den Branden, 2006). Besides, teachers' exam anxiety remained a thorny issue even after the intensive coaching (Zhu, 2020) and some Flemish teachers refrained from implementing the syllabus with "post-coursal" depression, after undesirable outcomes (Peeters & Van den Branden, 1992, as cited in Van den Branden, 2006). Moreover, studies corroborated that contradictions emerged when teachers had to cope with lack of sustained efforts from supportive agents, the extra burden of the teacher development programmes imposed on their already demanding job, and competing goals between innovation initiators such as policymakers and headteachers, and implementers such as school teachers, resulting in a sharp reduction in the potential effectiveness of task-oriented teacher education programmes (East, 2012; Van den Branden, 2006). Little attention has been devoted to the process of developing these endeavours, especially with regard to the emerging and resolution of contradictions that may forge this process. Understanding these contradictions could help us explore the dynamics and complexity of teacher learning situated in these programmes, and shed light on the mechanism of practicable, feasible, and effective teacher education endeavours. To address this need, this study intends to explore the contradictions in the collaborative university-school partnership, which aims to promote rural primary school teachers' expertise to successfully enact tasks in the classroom.

## 2.2 PLCs

The past three decades have witnessed a shift from the positivistic paradigm to an interpretative or situated paradigm in the field of second language teacher education (Johnson, 2006), with the latter emphasizing that teacher learning is a continuous collaborative and dialogic process embedded in the sociocultural contexts (Johnson, 2015). In line with this paradigm shift, teacher professional learning communities (PLCs) has gained momentum as a model of teacher education. Emerging from the notions of Dewey (1929), Stenhouse (1975), and Schon (1983) on collective enquiry, self-evaluation and reflective practitioner, the concept of PLC suggests "a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way" (Stoll et al., 2006, p.223). Current literature has mainly focused on the nature, impacts, and influencing factors of PLCs. Scholars in multiple studies have identified the five essential characteristics as inextricably operating to achieve the outcomes of communities, that is, shared values and goals, the consistent focus on student learning, reflective dialogue, deprivatization of practice, and collective professional inquiry (Lomos et al., 2011; Snow-Gerono, 2005; Stoll et al., 2006). And empirical research on the impact of PLCs converged on the claim that PLCs had a positive effect on teaching practice, student learning, and school culture (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Lomos et al., 2011; Vescio et al., 2008). Recent studies have also indicated that PLCs could contribute to the implementation of curriculum innovation (Tam, 2014; Yan & Yang, 2018) and help cultivate pedagogical/instructional knowledge, facilitate the application of theory, build teacher identity, and promote teacher autonomy and efficacy among participating teachers (Prenger et al., 2019; Qi & Wang, 2018; Wang & Zhang, 2014). Concerning influencing factors and challenges of PLCs, researchers emphasized institutional and individual affordances as essential to promote and sustain the learning of all professionals (Cheng & Wu, 2016; Hairon & Tan, 2016; Stoll et al., 2006). And lately, studies revealed that in coping with globalization and higher education demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, frameworks such as networked between-school PLCs (Chapman, 2014; Prenger et al., 2019)

and pull-push mechanism (Wen & Zhang, 2019) have been proved effective to collective knowledge creation.

Contingent upon this shift towards integrating teacher learning into communities of inquiry, TBLT-related teacher education endeavours highlighted the role of group dynamics and teamwork in optimally developing teachers' professional expertise, enhancing student learning, and implementing the task-based curriculum reforms (Andon & Eckert, 2009; Van den Branden, 2006). Studies show that a myriad of community-based inquiry tools was exploited by teachers to mediate the TBLT innovation, including collaborative action research and empirical evaluation (e.g., Zhu, 2020), exploratory practice (e.g., Muller-Hartmann & Schocker, 2017), critical reflection (e.g., East, 2014, 2016), constructivist-based approach in collaborative learning activities (Ogilvie & Dunn, 2010), and intensive problem-oriented, interactional coaching (Van den Branden, 2006). These collaborative endeavours have been shown to present the essential characteristics of PLCs, which promoted teachers' understanding of, and enactment of TBLT through cognitive and social connectedness.

The above studies expand our knowledge about the affordances and dynamics of PLCs. However, empirical evidence reveals that contradictions occur when individual teachers, school districts, and universities share competing value systems; when teachers juggle with heterogeneous rules and responsibilities between the PLC and their routine working context; and when teacher educators face the dilemma between practical engagement of the PLC and academic productivity of the university appraisal system (Yamagata-Lynch & Haudenschild, 2009; Yan & Yang, 2018). Researchers have paid little attention to these contradictions experienced by stakeholders from different institutions in the process of creating, sustaining, and developing PLCs. Therefore, the study intends to contribute to this field by exploring the contradictions in a collaborative teacher education initiative focused on TBLT.

### 2.3 Activity Theory and Activity Systems Analysis

The notion of goal-oriented "activity" as mediation of the individual through signs and psychological tools originated from Vygotsky (1978), who proposed that the basic unit of analysis of human higher cognitive development should be the "activity" itself. This mediated action triangle, as shown in Fig. 1, was referred to as the first-generation activity theory which captures individuals interacting with the social dimensions of the environment. The second-generation activity theory was based on Leontiev's work (1978), which highlighted the collective activity and elaborated on the notions of object and goal. Engeström (1987) expanded the activity system by incorporating three institutional components, *community*, *rules*, and *division of labour*, which defined the norms, conventions, and expectations of participants embedded in the collective social activities to achieve the object. Based on the possibility of the same subject engaging in different activity systems, Engeström (1996) further extended the model and introduced the third-generation activity theory in which the minimum unit of analysis is two interacting activity systems. As Figure 2 reveals, the "knotworking" of joint activity systems represents dialogue, multiple perspectives, and interrelations between activities under investigation. The interaction between the individual activity and joint activities would generate contradictions, which produce conditions for deep learning and transformation.

The activity systems analysis can be employed to summarize institutional change, demonstrate developments in teacher learning, and identify contradictions that afford opportunities for developments in educational contexts (Yamagata-Lynch & Haudenschild, 2009). According to Engeström (1993), the activity system is not a static complex, but a "creative, novelty-producing formation" (as cited in Lantolf, 2006, p. 68). In other words, new patterns of activity and new forms of knowledge may emerge in the course of resolving contradictions through what Engeström (2001) referred to as "expansive learning".

The interrelated triangular representation of the third generation activity theory provide a heuristic framework for studying the sustainment and development of the TBLT-related teacher PLC. The basic triangle of subject, tool, and object describes the goal-orientedness of PLC activities, mediated by material resources and theoretical/practical methodology formats in the coaching sessions. The

community, rules, and division of labour highlight the collectiveness and social connectedness of PLC participants who share the same object, the regulations that structure the operation of PLC, and the negotiated vertical distribution of powers and responsibilities among the PLC members. In addition, the interacting activities bound by the shared object (object 3) provide conceptual tools to address collaborative dialogue between different participants of the PLC, multiple positionings among them, and, most importantly, the interrelation between the central activity system of TBLT-oriented PLC and its adjacent activity system of primary school teachers' regular teaching practice. The interaction of different elements will trigger contradictions within and between activity systems, which produce conditions for transformational learning and reform of practice among the participating members, and organizational development of the PLC. In sum, activity theory conceptualizes PLC members and their institutional context as a holistic unit of analysis, acknowledging the complexities involved in the professional development activities. Therefore, to examine the contradictions in the development of an EFL teacher PLC, this study draws on the principles of activity theory as a research tool to explore the intersection of activities shared between rural primary school teachers, and the university researcher and teacher educator. The guiding research questions are:

1. What contradictions (if any) are generated in starting, sustaining and developing the PLC focused systematically on TBLT?
2. How are these contradictions tackled and resolved?
3. What influence does the PLC have on the teachers' beliefs in, and their implementation of, TBLT as a pedagogical innovation?

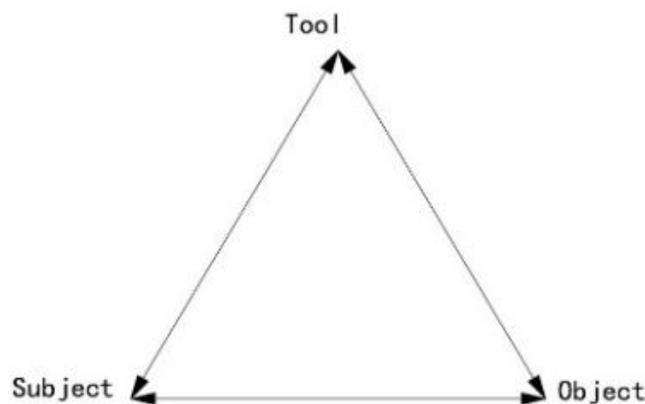


Figure 1. Vygotsky's mediated action triangle (Engeström, 1987)

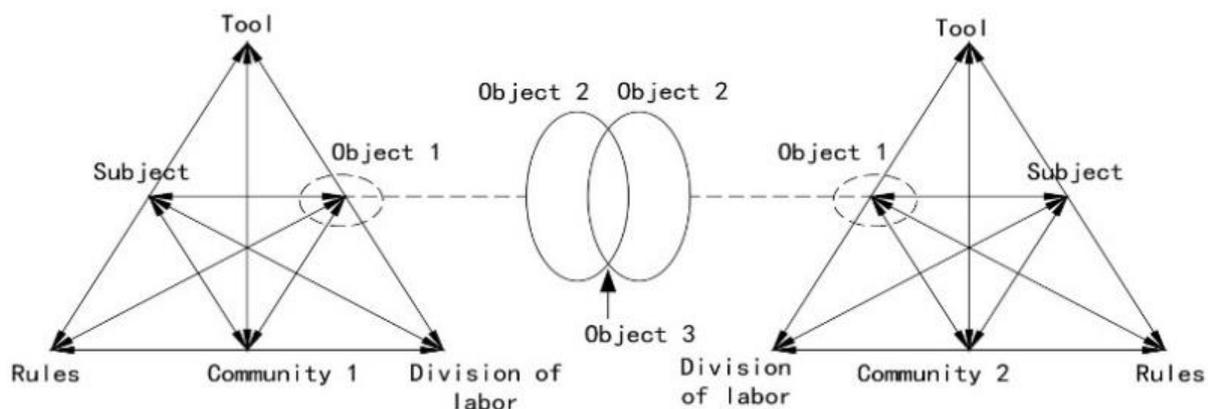


Figure 2. Third-generation activity theory model (Engeström, 2001)

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Context

In 2019, a new round of rural primary school teacher project under the National Cultivation Plan was initiated to support teacher professional learning and implementing curriculum innovation in rural areas in Zhejiang. Professor Liu, a university researcher and teacher educator, co-initiated one of the teacher education programmes in this project, a university-school partnership programme aimed to promote teachers' understanding and implementation of task-based language teaching. The programme was conducted in a collaborative action research manner, spanning two academic years. Different from the traditional top-down approach of knowledge transmission, the participating teachers were empowered to design, implement, and reflect on task-based teaching, while the researchers scaffolded teachers in theorizing from practice, and mediated between pedagogical guidelines of TBLT and practices in classrooms through observation, feedback, and evaluation. Participating in these practice-oriented activities, the university researcher and school teachers have been establishing their PLC.

According to the researcher's observation of PLC activities and interaction with participating members, some conflicts emerged during the process, which imposed tensions on the development of the PLC. For instance, although the participants shared the common object to push forward the English curriculum innovation in the rural areas, they shared different values that conceptualize what sort of activities are most effective to achieve the goal. The teacher educator highlighted evaluation of teacher's practice via observation and feedback, while some teachers found the experience stressful when they failed to enact tasks congruent with TBLT principles. On the other hand, they preferred seminars that afforded pedagogical guideline-based quick fixes to their regular classroom practices. In addition, planning a TBLT lesson in the action research cycle required enormous amount of time and energy from both parties, which added extra burden in the participants' daily work settings. And during the interview session, some teachers complained about their individual needs not fully attended to in the plenary workshops and their self-esteem and autonomy not fully cultivated. Moreover, from school teachers' perspectives, they faced contradictory situations when trying to assimilate the innovation in their regular classrooms, for fear of divergence from the teaching norms of other experienced teachers, and expectations from students to learn linguistic elements. All the above-mentioned tensions in the activity system of the PLC become the potential constraints to achieve the goal of promoting the innovation in rural primary school settings.

#### 3.2 Participants

The participants in this qualitative study include a university researcher, 10 in-service rural primary school EFL teachers, and one teaching research officer as a liaison between the two parties. The university researcher, Professor Liu, received her bachelor's degree in the major of education from a normal university in Zhejiang Province, and then pursued her master's and doctoral degrees on the concentration of curriculum and pedagogy from a renowned university in Shanghai. She has been the teacher educator in the National Cultivation Plan for eleven years, with rich experience in educating teachers in the compulsory educational settings to work effectively to implement the new curriculum. The university researcher and ten EFL teachers are the primary participants and the teaching research officer is the secondary participant of this study. These ten EFL teachers from five different primary schools have been chosen based on purposive sampling, ranging in experience from 3 to 20 years. They have been following the curriculum innovation in the basic education described earlier, teaching grade five of primary school students in rural districts of Zhejiang Province, and using the new innovative English textbooks. Among them, there were 4 novice teachers, 5 experienced teachers, and 1 expert teacher. By exploring the tensions in this ongoing PLC, the present study intends to find out whether and how the "theory-practice gap" in the TBLT-related teacher education endeavours could be bridged, and what are the characteristics of a feasible teacher education agenda to promote the utilization of TBLT.

### 3.3 Data Collection and analysis

This study will take a longitudinal case study approach (Merriam, 1998) to investigate the development and transformation of the PLC in its sociocultural context. Over two academic years, various sources of data will be collected, including interviews, observations, informal interactions with university researchers and participating teachers, and other related documents. The myriad of data from different perspectives will not only facilitate in-depth analysis of the process of sustaining and developing the PLC but also allow data triangulation to ensure validity.

Semi-structured interviews will be conducted face to face with the university researcher and primary school teachers three times respectively, each lasting for approximately 1.5-2 hours. These in-depth interviews mainly target at the sociocultural background of the PLC, the tensions brought out by those conflicts during professional development activities from both parties' perspectives, how are they resolved, and its influence on the PLC members. The interviews will be audiotaped with permission and transcribed for comparison and contrast. Moreover, data of informal interactions with the university researcher, participating teachers, and the teaching research officer through casual conversations, phones, QQ messages, and email exchanges will be recorded in the researcher journals.

Non-participating observation will be used to record the activities of the collaborative action research PLC for a total of 15 times, each lasting for 2-3 hours. The activities include plenary workshops on theories of TBLT and action research, teachers' enactment of tasks in the classroom, and group meetings on experience exchange, all of which will be video-taped. The video recordings will be supplemented with the researcher's observation field notes and research journals.

Other important documents will be used to provide a holistic view of the development of the PLC, including the university researcher's papers and action research reports, school teachers' reflective journals on task implementation, lesson plans, teaching materials, and researcher journals and contact summaries.

Data analysis is based on the Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The goal of data analysis is to report on thematic findings that could address the research questions, namely, the contradictions within the central activity system and between the central and adjacent activity systems, how they are tackled, and their influence on teachers' beliefs and practices. Open and descriptive coding will be used as a starting point to identify the native concepts from the transcripts of interviews and other qualitative documents. Based on repetitive reading and comparative analysis of the initial set of codes, we merge our codes and eliminate the redundant ones. Categories will be established to identify the overarching and recurrent themes from the descriptive codes that are related to the research questions. Then through theoretical framework analysis and researchers' interpretation of the codes, analytic codes will be established, namely, the patterns that conceptualize the process how members of the PLC experience the contradictory situations, resolve the contradictions, and realize transformation in their beliefs and practices. The coding will be conducted in an iterative and reflective manner. Nvivo 11, the qualitative research software will be used to sort, compare and review relevant coded items and identify the themes and patterns relevant to the research questions. Besides, the preliminary coding analysis will go through data triangulation, checked by both research members and PLC participants, to ensure validity.

## 4. Findings

The study found that the development of the collaborative teacher education initiative focused on TBLT was an "expansive learning" process driven by contradictions. The various levels of contradictions facilitated the transformation of the activity. The construction and resolution of various levels of contradictions will be discussed below.

### 4.1 The primary contradiction and its resolution

The primary contradiction existed within the constituent component of the central activity system. In the activity system of the collaborative PLC focused on TBLT, the subjects from two institutional

systems had conflicting beliefs towards task-based language teaching and learning in the instructed context. Professor Liu, who is evaluated by the university's appraisal system of academic publication, is responsible for the generating, disseminating, and illustrating of educational theories. As an expert researcher of TBLT, she shared with the teachers during the first seminar that TBLT as a language pedagogy had some defining traits. For example, according to Skehan (1998, p.95), "a task is an activity in which meaning is primary...the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome". When designing and implementing the task-based syllabus for the primary school students, Professor Liu advocated that the traditional teaching model of Present-Practice-Produce (PPP) should be relinquished and explicit grammar instruction before the communicative practice be eschewed. Based on the empirical findings, Professor Liu recommended the Focus on Form approach to integrate grammar teaching, during which the teachers illustrate the linguistic elements in the post-task phase after the students notice and encounter the linguistic difficulties in the task input phase or during output activities. In addition, Professor listed the affordances of the Focus on Form approach generated from research to motivate the primary school teachers to incorporate this approach into the task-based syllabus, such as "pushed output, peer interaction and negotiating of meaning, and learner engagement" (Newton, 2018).

In contrast, primary school teachers are the frontline practitioners who immerse themselves in the teaching practice. They are embedded in the authentic teaching context of teaching English to young learners in rural areas of China. Having attended several seminars led by Professor Liu, they were aware that Focus on Form is a weaker form of TBLT theoretically, which integrates meaning focus with grammar learning. However, they believed that Focus on Form was incompatible with their school learning environments, making it difficult to be enacted. As teacher Chen claimed,

In the acquisition-poor environment of our rural primary school, the students barely have opportunities to communicate in English after class and have an extremely limited repertoire of linguistic knowledge. The normal English class is mediated by the time constraints of 40 minutes, and it is difficult for the students to "notice" the linguistic elements by themselves. (interview)

As a result, Professor Liu and the frontline primary school teachers had different beliefs on the conceptualization and implementation of the pedagogic approach of task-based language teaching in the situated instructed context. And the primary contradiction existed between the subjects of the central activity system who possessed different basics of subject content knowledge and practical experiences.

However, it was the challenge from those frontline teachers and the emergence of the primary contradiction that pushed Professor Liu to reflect on her teaching pedagogy. "As a university researcher, how can I help facilitate the implementation of curriculum innovation among rural primary schools?" With this question in mind, Professor Liu immersed herself in the learning environment of this rural primary school. She observed the English classes, attended the lesson plan discussions, and reviewed the students' English assignments. Through those immersions, Professor Liu explored the basic education from the perspective of an "insider", which motivated her to construct a particular pathway for the professional development of those teachers. Based on the experience, Professor Liu had a better awareness of the English proficiency of the school students, which made it difficult for them to notice the linguistic elements under time restraints. Professor Liu struggled with the idea of "how grammatical accuracy should be attended to in the task-based language teaching and learning" with the local practitioners, and co-constructed with the frontline teachers the integration of the Focus on Form with explicit grammar teaching under different circumstances. That is, when students could not notice the linguistic elements by themselves, the teacher will scaffold and direct the students' attention to the grammar elements followed by explicit instruction. Thus, by reconciling the grammar instruction with the task-oriented classroom in the authentic instruction context, Professor Liu motivated the primary school teachers to embrace the curriculum innovation of task-based language teaching. Through reflection, observation, and analysis, the primary level of contradiction in this activity system was resolved.

## 4.2 The secondary contradiction and its resolution

Different from the traditional teacher education rationals with the expert or researcher imparting theories and the frontline teachers the passive recipients of knowledge, the teacher education agenda for the PLC in this study is through action research. The object of the PLC is to raise teachers' cognition of TBLT and facilitate the primary school teachers' successful enactment of task-based language teaching principles within language curriculum innovation. However, several issues and obstacles emerged during the cycle of action research. Conceptualized as an effective teacher development tool for practitioners to promote teacher autonomy and bridge the gap between theory and practice, the action research has several steps including problem identification, reflection and investigation, making action plans, implementation and data collection, analysis, reflections, evaluations, and writing up and sharing (Burns, 2011). The teacher education programme in this study began with the plenary workshops, where the university researcher Professor Liu introduced task-based language teaching from the perspective of theory, research, and practice. Trainings were also offered to teachers on how to conduct action research. In addition, two renowned experts from the prestigious universities in China were invited to give lectures and seminars about action research. At the first stage, the primary school teachers were quite excited about their new identity "teachers-as-researchers". Each of them identified their respective problems in their educational practice through their reflection and investigation. For example, Grace (pseudonym) identified "how to motivate students' oral output during task performance" as her practical pedagogical problem, and Nick (pseudonym) would want to facilitate underachieving students' participation in the group presentation. During the second phase of action research, the teachers made action plans, implemented the plans, and collected data through in-depth interviews or questionnaires. However, transforming from the first exciting stage to the second time-consuming stage, several issues occurred. Some teachers found it difficult to persist when they met problems of research techniques like data analysis. Unfamiliar with the iterative process of data analysis, Grace juggled with the huge amount of the data, finding it impossible to retrieve the relevant themes and patterns inductively from them. Emily (pseudonym) had problems with the quantitative method regarding grouping for experimental research. Both of them thought that it was the researcher's task to undertake the data analysis, which seemed unreasonable to Professor Liu. Moreover, due to the time pressure and heavy workload from the routine activity system of daily teaching practice, some teachers nearly dropped out from this action research PLC. As Nick elaborated below,

Theoretically and pedagogically, an action research agenda sounds perfect. But it does not fit into the reality of our rural primary school English teachers who are confronted with large amounts of low-proficiency students, and we need hands-on guidance.

Besides, Grace claimed that "we are overwhelmed by a large amount of data, and don't know where to begin with" (interview).

Thus, the secondary contradiction emerged between the mediating tool of action research for teacher professional development and the object of the successful enactment of TBLT within the curriculum innovation. Several strategic actions were taken to tackle this problem. To begin with, the university researcher had a deep reflection on the process of the action research agenda. She realized that to design and implement a task-based syllabus was too demanding a task for the teachers based on a limited resource pool. Thus, she put forward in the next session of the seminar the combination of theoretic coaching with the introduction of a task-based syllabus, which was much favored by the school teachers. As Jessy (pseudonym) put it, "as long as I have the task-based syllabus at hand to refer to and comply with, I don't feel so anxious..." (interview). Moreover, given the fact that teachers prefer smooth transitions to the innovative pedagogic practice, and theoretical declarative knowledge does not result in the procedural knowledge immediately (Van den Branden, 2006), the constructed syllabus was not imposed on the school teachers. By contrast, teachers were the "active agents", and they could implement the syllabus in an eclectic approach when they felt a need to incorporate the explicit grammar instruction. This strategic solution gave the teachers a sense of ownership while

relieving the demanding burden of designing a task-based syllabus. During the seminar, teachers' specific problems during the action research process, ranging from the broad ones concerning the TBLT theories and research methodology to the trivial ones like "how to offer corrective feedback during students' task performance", "how to sequence tasks regarding task complexity", and "how to raise the students' linguistic performance regarding fluency, accuracy, and complexity" also aroused Professor Liu's attention. She discussed with the teaching research officer and decided that those practical issues and contextual constraints must be solved respectively. Previous research indicated that teachers would refrain from implementing the curriculum innovation when facing these practical issues because they thought it was too much trouble (Van den Branden, 2006). She suggested combining group coaching with individual coaching based on the needs analysis. In this way, teachers' specific problems could be timely attended to during the coaching session and teachers felt that they were taken seriously. Furthermore, in the implementation stage, Professor Liu observed the school teachers' enactment of the task-based syllabus in the classroom with their full consent and offered them timely evaluation and feedback. Professor Liu and the teaching research officer also organized sessions for community-based evaluation, during which the colleagues would evaluate their task-based syllabus implementation based on peer observation. Online platforms like DingDing were employed to hold seminars where experienced school teachers shared their successful enactment of the action research, including some of the research techniques like data analysis strategies. According to Van den Branden (2006), the school teachers tend to accept the feedback and evaluation from their colleagues more than the external teacher educator for the reason that they believe their colleagues' pedagogic rationale and schedule have been testified in the real contextual environment of the instructed classroom.

Thanks to the recursive dialogue, negotiation, and reflection among the university researcher, school teachers, and the teaching research officer, the action research agenda became feasible and applicable. School teachers were the active participants, stakeholders, and reflective practitioners in the action research. While facilitating the teachers' reflections on task effectiveness, the university researcher enhanced the communicative ability and the competence to transfer theory to practice. The secondary contradiction was resolved.

### **4.3 The tertiary contradiction and its resolution**

The tertiary contradiction resided between the central activity system and its neighboring activity systems. Some teachers reported that they felt depressed after the intensive coaching sessions when they went back to their own classrooms because of the disparity in teaching philosophy between their daily teaching practice and that of the action research. Nick claimed that "I really would want to put the theoretical pedagogy of TBLT into practice. However, in our daily teaching contexts, due to the washback effects of assessments, differentiated level of pupil's language learning expectations, and pressure from colleagues who conform to the traditional way of language teaching, it is really difficult for me to try out this innovation" (interview). Moreover, the demanding workload from school teachers' routine teaching, including preparing for the lesson materials, grading students' assignments, taking part in differentiated levels of meetings, etc., appeared a big obstacle for teachers to persist in their action research which also needed them to exert their full effort. In the same vein, the university researcher also felt frustrated by the fact that spending too much time in the practical activities may be detrimental to her final assessment in her activity system of university teaching and researching which is judged by her academic publications.

The resolution of the contradictions is often accompanied by the participants' reflections. With the developmental stages of the action research, the subjects began to reflect on the whole process. The school teachers and the teaching research officer believed that their ongoing, practice-oriented action research was embedded in the broad societal and educational contexts in which the learner-centered, competency-based curriculum innovation was advocated in basic education. For the wider implementation of the content and rationale behind TBLT in the daily teaching practice, support from all parties was needed, including the school headmaster, curriculum developers, frontline teachers,

educational policymakers, etc. Taking into account these teachers' needs, the school headmaster held a series of discussions with different parties involved to provide institutional support for the teachers to adopt the educational innovations in their daily educational contexts. For example, in the area of language education, plenary workshops were designed in the initial phase for all language teachers to raise their cognition of task-based language teaching. In addition, task-based assessments were developed which focused on students' ability to interact and negotiate meaning during task performance. One striking effect of the above-mentioned policy was that the school teachers could perceive and implement tasks in ways congruent with the theoretical tenets they have learned from the action research PLC. For the university researcher professor Liu, she realized that educational practices could afford treasures of resources for academic research. For example, during the teacher education programme, Professor Liu collected a large number of qualitative resources including teacher interviews, field notes, and teacher reflective journals, which contributed to her understanding of teachers' transformation in cognition and practice towards TBLT. Vice versa, scientific and systematic academic research could facilitate practitioners' reflection and the establishment of a new model. By crossing the boundary of different activity systems, the tertiary contradiction was resolved and a new model of practice was consolidated.

## 5. Conclusion

The development of the teacher PLC focused systematically on TBLT in this study is an "expansive learning" cycle driven by the construction and resolution of contradictions. Different from the traditional way of knowledge acquisition which focuses on the accumulation of existing theories and rules, "expansive learning" emphasizes the innovation of knowledge and activities during the interaction of multiple activity systems. The subjects of learning also change from the individuals in the traditional rationale to the collaborative community of inquiry. The subjects in this study are the university researcher, teaching research officer, and frontline primary school teachers who possess differentiated practical experiences, the repertoire of knowledge, and personal identity and traits. The collective objects to establish an activity system aimed at implementing the curriculum innovation of task-based language teaching make them cooperate. The object of the activity system in this study is also different from that of traditional learning which is merely the acquisition of existing knowledge and skills. For example, at the initial phase, Professor Liu was not aware of what a feasible and applicable action research agenda might look like for the in-service school teachers. However, it is the dynamics and complexity of the mediating tool and object that make the subjects constantly reflect on the process and propose an applicable action research schedule. Besides, different from the vertical accumulation of skills and knowledge, the expansive learning cycle focuses on the iterative cycle of resolution of contradictions. This cycle emphasizes the horizontal integration of knowledge and skills which begins from the questioning of the extant practice.

Drawing on activity theory, this study described and analyzed the contradictions confronted by an action research PLC focused systematically on TBLT and how the PLC members tackled the contradictions by expansive learning. First of all, the expansive learning cycle has significant implications for understanding teacher professional development. Different from the traditional teacher education rationale, it is whether the teachers could face the complexity and uncertainty of the learning process, and how the community members cooperate to change the situation and generate new knowledge that matters. Secondly, the identification and analysis of the contradictions faced by the action research PLC could help researchers clarify the factors influencing the teacher collaboration programs individually and institutionally, providing implications for nurturing future teacher PLCs. Thirdly, this study demonstrated the value of activity systems analysis in the research of foreign language teacher education. This method provides the basic analysis unit and academic discourse for describing teacher education situated in multiple sociocultural contexts. However, every method has its limitations. The triad formulization of activity systems analysis cannot capture the dynamics and complexity of activities in real-world contexts. In the inevitable process of

simplification, researchers should focus on the identification, description, and summarization of activities and their transformation related to the research questions.

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