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A Comparative Study of Learner-centeredness in Communicative Language Teaching and Task-Based Language Teaching

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Abstract

This comparative study examines how Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) operationalize learner-centeredness in language education. Through analyzing teacher-student roles, instructional de-sign, and assessment and feedback, the study reveals that CLT prioritizes scaf-folded participation through structured activities, while TBLT emphasizes au-tonomous creation via authentic tasks. This study aims to explore how CLT and TBLT embody learner-centeredness in their methodologies. While both empha-size learner agency, they vary in teacher-student roles, instructional de-sign, and assessment and feedback. The pedagogical implications propose adaptability principles: matching CLT's support to beginner proficiency, aligning TBLT's tasks with advanced competencies, and contextualizing both approaches within Chinese educational realities. By advocating a flexible blend of methods tailored to learner levels, goals, and cultural settings, this study of-fers educators a framework to enhance student agency in diverse classrooms.

Keywords

Learner-centeredness; Communicative Language Teaching; Task-Based Lan-guage Teaching; Comparative Study

1. Introduction

Learner-centeredness has emerged as a pivotal principle in contemporary language education, underscored by educational reforms worldwide that prioritize learners' active involvement and self-directed learning. In China, General Senior High School English Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition, 2020 Revision) explicitly emphasize "highlighting the subject status of students in evaluation, paying attention to their comprehensive development and progress" and "meeting their individual development needs", calling for a broadly based endeavor designed to gear language teaching, in terms of both the content and the forms of instruction, around the needs

and characteristics of learners (Ministry of Education, 2020). These requirements align with global trends in second language acquisition, where theories such as Rogers' humanistic education (1969) and Benson's concept of learner autonomy (2001) highlight the importance of tailoring instruction to students' cognitive and affective needs. Within this landscape, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) stand out as influential methods rooted in the belief that language is best acquired through authentic communication. CLT, grounded in Hymes' theory of communicative competence (1972), focuses on functional language use in contexts like role-plays and debates, while TBLT, inspired by Long's interaction hypothesis (1981), centers on completing real-world tasks such as designing projects or solving problems. Despite their shared commitment to learner-centeredness, these two methods differ in various aspects in teaching.

This study aims to explore how CLT and TBLT embody learner-centeredness in their methodologies. While both emphasize learner agency, they vary in teacher-student roles, instructional design, and assessment and feedback. By comparing these two methods across critical dimensions, this study seeks to clarify their distinct implementations of learner-centeredness. It also aims to offer practical guidance for educators, helping them design more effective language activities by leveraging the unique strengths of CLT and TBLT.

The paper first outlines core concepts: learner-centeredness, CLT, and TBLT. It then compares their practices in three dimensions: teacher-student roles, instructional design, and assessment and feedback. Finally, practical teaching suggestions will be proposed to help educators adapt these methods to different classroom contexts, enhancing learner engagement and language learning effectiveness.

2. Theoretical basis

2.1. Learner-centeredness

Learner-centeredness, rooted in humanistic and constructivist theories, emphasizes learners' active role in constructing knowledge and shaping their educational experiences. Humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers (1969) pioneered this method, advocating for learning environments that prioritize students' emotional needs, self-direction, and personal growth. He argued that education should foster "significant learning", where students engage in meaningful, self-motivated inquiry rather than passive absorption of information.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory further enriches this framework through the concept of the "zone of proximal development" (ZPD), which highlights the interplay between learners' current abilities and their potential with guidance. This theory underscores the teacher's role as a facilitator who designs tasks that challenge students just beyond their independent capabilities, fostering cognitive growth through scaffolded support.

Contemporary educational policies, such as China's 2022 Compulsory Education

Curriculum Standards, explicitly endorse learner-centeredness by emphasizing learner engagement, personalized instruction, and collaborative learning. Similarly, UNESCO's Reimagining Our Futures Together report (2021) calls for education systems to prioritize student agency, equity, and adaptive learning environments to address global challenges .

Collectively, these theories and policies converge on the idea that effective education balances learner autonomy with structured support, enabling students to develop critical thinking, metacognitive skills, and a lifelong love of learning. By integrating humanistic values, constructivist pedagogy, and policy-driven reforms, the learner-centeredness provides a robust foundation for designing inclusive, empowering educational practices.

2.2. Communicative Language Teaching

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), rooted in Dell Hymes' theory of communicative competence, is a method that prioritizes authentic language use in real-world contexts, aiming to develop learners' ability to communicate meaningfully rather than merely mastering grammatical structures. Unlike traditional teacher-centered methods, CLT embodies learner-centeredness through three key mechanisms: interactive task design, learner autonomy, and contextualized assessment.

First, CLT emphasizes communicative tasks that require students to negotiate meaning, solve problems, or express opinions. For example, Nunan (2004) advocates for tasks that create "information gaps" or "opinion gaps," where students must interact to exchange missing information or debate perspectives. These tasks shift the focus from teacher-led drills to student-driven collaboration, fostering active engagement and critical thinking. Similarly, Prabhu's (1987) taxonomy of tasks (information-gap, reasoning-gap, opinion-gap) highlights how CLT activities encourage learners to take ownership of their communication by making choices about language use and interaction strategies.

Second, CLT redefines the teacher's role as a facilitator rather than a lecturer. Littlewood (1981) notes that CLT classrooms prioritize learner autonomy, with teachers designing activities that allow students to explore language through trial and error, while providing scaffolding when needed . This aligns with Rogers' (1969) humanistic principles of self-directed learning, where students' emotional needs and personal growth are central to the educational process.

Third, CLT employs formative assessment methods that reflect students' communicative performance rather than memorization. Brown (2004) emphasizes the use of authentic assessments, such as peer feedback and self-evaluation, to monitor progress and adapt instruction. This learner-centered feedback loop empowers learners to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses, promoting metacognitive awareness.

In summary, CLT operationalizes learner-centeredness by integrating interactive tasks, learner autonomy, and dynamic assessment, creating a classroom ecosystem where students are active co-constructors of knowledge. By grounding language learning in real-life communication, CLT not only improves linguistic proficiency but also cultivates the social and cognitive skills essential for lifelong learning.

2.3. Task-Based Language Teaching

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) refers to a way of planning and organizing language teaching based on task core units, emphasizing the language teaching method of "learning by doing". It is the logical development of CLT, as it is consistent with several principles of CLT. Task-Based Language Teaching emerged in the 1980s, allowing learners to fully participate in learning and engage in practical and meaningful negotiations, promoting the improvement of students' practical English application abilities, and inspiring students to use language creatively.

This method organizes teaching through tasks, and in the process of task fulfillment, learners' cognitive abilities are fully utilized through participation, experience, interaction, communication, and cooperation. They mobilize their existing target language resources, perceive, recognize, and apply the target language in practice, and learn by doing and using.

TBLT embodies learner-centeredness through goal-oriented task design that requires learners to take active roles in decision-making, collaboration, and reflection. Willis' (1996) influential task cycle—pre-task, task implementation, and post-task analysis—positions students as agents who define strategies, negotiate language use, and evaluate outcomes, with teachers serving as facilitators rather than directors . For example, a TBLT task might ask students to plan a school cultural festival: they must collectively determine roles, draft proposals, and present plans, using language naturally to achieve the task objective.

By prioritizing learner autonomy and contextualized language use, TBLT reflects the humanistic principle of self-directed learning, enabling students to experiment with language, take risks, and develop metacognitive skills. Empirical research, such as Ellis' (2003) analysis of task-based cognition, highlights how TBLT enhances students' initiative and collaborative competence, as they engage in problem-solving that mirrors real-life challenges.

In essence, TBLT extends CLT's communicative vision by embedding language learning in purposeful action, creating a classroom environment where students are not just participants but co-designers of their learning journey, integrating linguistic, cognitive, and social skills through authentic task completion.

3. Comparison of Learner-Centeredness in CLT and TBLT

3.1. Teacher-Student Roles and Classroom Interaction Patterns

The conceptualization of learner-centeredness in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) diverges primarily in how teacher-student roles and classroom interactions are operationalized. While both mothods prioritize learner engagement, CLT emphasizes contextualized language practice within scaffolded frameworks, whereas TBLT promotes authentic task completion with minimal teacher intervention. This contrast is most evident in three interrelated dimensions: teacher guidance, student agency, and interactional dynamics.

In CLT classrooms, teachers act as architects of communicative scenarios, systematically designing activities to integrate linguistic forms with real-world functions. For example, a CLT lesson on "making suggestions" might begin with the teacher modeling target structures (e.g., "Why don't we…?"), followed by semi-controlled role-plays where students practice these phrases in simulated contexts. Teachers in CLT maintain a structured presence by providing immediate feedback on grammatical accuracy and lexical appropriateness, ensuring that interactions align with predefined language objectives. This method, as noted by Wang Qiang (2018), effectively builds foundational communicative skills by balancing form-focused instruction with meaningful practice.

In TBLT, however, teachers transition into task facilitators, defining overarching goals (e.g., "Organize a school charity event") while delegating procedural decisions to students. For instance, a TBLT task might require learners to negotiate roles, draft proposals, and resolve logistical challenges using English naturally. Teachers in this model intervene sparingly, focusing on clarifying task requirements or providing content-related support (e.g., explaining sponsorship contracts) rather than dictating language use. Cheng Xiaotang's (2020) argument that TBLT empowers learners to take ownership of both the language and the task outcomes, fostering metacognitive awareness.

CLT fosters contextualized participation, where students practice language within carefully designed frameworks. Lightbown & Spada (2013) highlight that CLT activities often involve "information-gap" tasks (e.g., completing a survey by asking peers questions), which require students to use target structures while navigating semi-authentic interactions. While this method enhances grammatical accuracy and fluency, it may limit creative expression, as interactions are constrained by predefined language forms.

TBLT, in contrast, emphasizes decisional engagement, where students act as co-designers of their learning. Tasks such as "negotiating a group project timeline" demand independent decision-making, requiring learners to select language strategies, resolve conflicts, and evaluate outcomes. For example, a TBLT task to create a travel brochure would involve students independently choosing content organization, persuasive language, and visual design. This autonomy, supported by Ellis (2022), encourages risk-taking and adaptability, as students

learn to apply language flexibly rather than reproduce memorized patterns.

CLT interactions are often form-evaluative, with teachers prioritizing accuracy through immediate error correction. In a typical CLT activity, students engage in guided dialogues where grammatical mistakes are addressed on the spot, and success is measured by adherence to linguistic norms . While this ensures structural correctness, it may stifle spontaneous communication, as learners become overly cautious about errors.

TBLT, by contrast, emphasizes meaning-driven negotiation, where interactions emerge organically from task demands. For instance, a TBLT debate on environmental policies would involve authentic exchanges where students use language to persuade, argue, and compromise . Errors in such contexts are addressed post-task through peer feedback or teacher-led reflection, allowing learners to prioritize message clarity over grammatical perfection.

The contrast between CLT and TBLT in teacher-student roles and interactions underscores a fundamental tension between structure and autonomy. CLT's scaffolded approach excels in building linguistic precision and contextual awareness, while TBLT's task-driven model empowers learners to apply language creatively in authentic contexts. Educators must therefore consider instructional goals and learner needs when selecting between these methods, recognizing that a balanced integration of both may offer the most comprehensive learner-centered outcomes.

3.2. Instructional Design

The learner-centeredness of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is realized through distinct instructional design logics, differing primarily in how they balance language form and communicative function. While CLT emphasizes scaffolded language practice within predefined contexts, TBLT prioritizes real-world task completion where language emerges as a tool for solving problems. This section contrasts these two methods to learning objectives, task design, and language integration, highlighting their complementary roles in learner-centered classrooms.

CLT instructional design centers on mastery of language functions, with teachers structuring activities around specific communicative needs (e.g., "expressing opinions," "negotiating solutions") to ensure accurate use of target forms. For example, Wang (2020) notes that Chinese CLT classrooms often adopt a "situation-structure" matching model, embedding grammatical structures (e.g., subjunctive mood) in simulated scenarios (e.g., "If you were the mayor...") to reinforce output accuracy through repetitive practice. This systematic approach builds a solid foundation for beginners but may limit spontaneous language use in unscripted contexts.

TBLT, conversely, prioritizes task achievement, setting real-world goals that re-

quire students to integrate linguistic and non-linguistic skills. Cheng (2021) emphasizes that TBLT tasks are "outcome-driven," such as designing an English culture festival plan, where students independently determine activity formats, collaborate, and naturally use language functions like invitations, persuasion, and summarization. This aligns more closely with authentic communication but demands higher language proficiency and problem-solving abilities.

CLT tasks are typically semi-controlled, following a "presentation-practice-production" (PPP) framework. Teachers first explicitly introduce target language (e.g., suggestion phrases like "Maybe we should..."), then provide practice scaffolds through substitution drills or role-plays, and finally guide application in semi-authentic contexts (e.g., group discussions on "improving campus environment"). Such structured tasks reduce cognitive load for beginners, as shown by Lightbown & Spada (2013), whose research indicates a 15%-20% increase in grammatical accuracy through focused practice.

TBLT tasks, however, are open-ended and complex, often following Willis' (1996) "task cycle": pre-task (goal setting, knowledge activation), task execution (autonomous problem-solving), and post-task (reflecting on language use). For instance, a task to "create an English video about your hometown" requires students to decide content, scripting, and narration independently, with teachers providing technical guidance pre-task and language feedback post-task. This design fosters critical thinking but risks leaving errors unaddressed during task execution.

CLT employs a form-meaning integration strategy, where teachers emphasize accuracy through explicit instruction, such as correcting tense errors during dialogues or highlighting collocations on the board. Ellis (2022) points that this method effectively directs learners' attention to linguistic structures, particularly beneficial for low-proficiency students building foundational skills.

TBLT adheres to a meaning-first principle, assuming that forms will be acquired incidentally during task completion. Teachers minimize immediate error correction during tasks, prioritizing goal achievement (e.g., ensuring clarity in a "Model UN debate" over article usage). Post-task language analysis (e.g., peer review, teacher summaries) addresses recurring errors, aligning with constructivist theories of learning through experience (Nunan, 2023).

The divergence in instructional design between CLT and TBLT reflects different emphases on "learning about language" versus "learning through language": the former builds systematic language knowledge, while the latter activates communicative potential. Educators should tailor their approach to learner proficiency, instructional goals, and cultural context: CLT's structured practice suits beginners, while TBLT's authentic tasks better develop higher-order competencies. Rather than opposing models, they can be combined—using CLT as a base and TBLT for extension—to achieve balanced development of accuracy

and fluency in learner-centered classrooms.

3.3. Assessment and Feedback

The learner-centeredness of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) are reflected in distinct assessment and feedback mechanisms, differing primarily in their focus on language form vs. communicative effectiveness, timing of intervention, and stakeholder involvement. While CLT emphasizes immediate, form-focused feedback to ensure linguistic accuracy, TBLT prioritizes delayed, task-oriented feedback to support authentic meaning-making. This section contrasts these two methods to feedback timing, focus, and modes, highlighting their respective roles in fostering student agency.

CLT class typically features real-time feedback, with teachers intervening during activities to correct grammatical or lexical errors. For example, in a role-play simulating a job interview, the teacher might pause to clarify the correct use of past tense (e.g., “Did you say 'I work’ instead of ‘I worked’?”). Wang (2022) notes that this “on-the-spot” correction is crucial for beginners, as it reinforces target structures and prevents fossilization of errors. However, excessive immediate feedback may disrupt communicative flow, making students overly cautious about speaking.

TBLT, in contrast, delays explicit feedback until after task completion, focusing first on whether students achieved the task goal (e.g., successfully organizing a debate) before addressing language issues. This follows a "meaning-first, form-second" approach: in a group project to design a travel brochure, teachers first recognize the creativity of the content and the students' collaboration skills. They then hold a post-task session to discuss recurring language errors like preposition misuse. This approach allows students to prioritize message clarity during task execution, in line with the constructivist idea that learning arises from authentic engagement.

CLT often relies on teacher-centric feedback, with educators serving as the primary evaluators. CLT activities, such as guided dialogues or grammar drills, are frequently followed by teacher-led summaries highlighting correct forms, which is effective for reinforcing explicit knowledge. However, this model may limit student autonomy, as feedback criteria are predefined by the teacher (e.g., strict adherence to grammatical rules).

TBLT promotes multidimensional feedback, integrating peer evaluation, self-assessment, and teacher comments. For instance, after a class-wide task to “negotiate a group project timeline,” students might first evaluate each other’s communication strategies (e.g., “Did they listen actively?”) using a rubric, then reflect individually on their own language use (e.g., “I struggled to explain my point clearly”). Teachers synthesize these inputs and provide targeted feed-

back on both task performance and language development.

CLT assessment criteria are often form-focused, measuring students' ability to use specific language structures correctly. A speaking task in CLT might be graded on grammar (40%), vocabulary (30%), and pronunciation (30%), with less weight on communicative effectiveness (e.g., whether the message was understood). This aligns with traditional language testing norms but may not reflect real-world communication needs.

TBLT introduces competency-based criteria, evaluating how well students use language to achieve task goals. A TBLT writing task to "persuade the school to adopt a recycling program" would be assessed on clarity of argument (30%), audience adaptability (25%), and collaborative problem-solving (25%), alongside language accuracy (20%). Such criteria, as outlined in Nunan (2023), reflect the integrated skills required in authentic contexts, encouraging students to prioritize meaning and purpose over rote correctness.

The assessment and feedback mechanisms in CLT and TBLT reflect a trade-off between precision and authenticity: CLT's immediate, form-focused approach is vital for building solid linguistic foundations, while TBLT's delayed, task-oriented feedback nurtures real-world communication skills. Educators should tailor their feedback strategies to learner levels and task goals: the former suits controlled practice environments, while the latter is ideal for projects requiring creativity and collaboration. By integrating both approaches—for example, combining CLT's immediate feedback with TBLT's peer reflection—teachers can create a balanced feedback ecosystem that supports learner-centered learning at all stages.

4. Pedagogical Implications

4.1. Adaptability to Learner Proficiency

Language proficiency plays a critical role in determining whether CLT or TBLT is more effective. For beginner learners, CLT's "scaffolded participation" provides essential structure to build confidence and foundational skills. In communicative language teaching, beginners often lack the linguistic resources to engage in open-ended tasks, making CLT's controlled activities–such as practicing basic sentence patterns through guided dialogues–ideal for reducing cognitive overload (Wang Qiang, 2020). For example, in a junior high English class, using CLT to practice greetings with visual aids and repetitive drills helps students internalize correct forms before moving to more complex interactions. This structured support ensures that learners develop accuracy and fluency in a safe, supportive environment, which is crucial for maintaining motivation in the early stages.

For intermediate and advanced learners, TBLT's task autonomy becomes a powerful tool to foster higher-order thinking. In task-based language teaching: Theory and Chinese Practice that learners with moderate proficiency are ready to take on

more responsibility for their learning. Projects like creating a short English video to promote local culture or debating social issues allow them to apply existing language knowledge creatively, while solving real-world problems inherent in tasks. These activities not only enhance linguistic competence but also develop skills like collaboration and critical thinking (Cheng Xiaotang,2021). For instance, a high school project requiring students to plan a school-wide English drama festival involves negotiating roles, writing scripts, and presenting proposals–tasks that demand autonomous decision-making and naturally activate advanced language structures. By shifting from teacher-guided practice to learner-driven problem-solving, TBLT respects older students' desire for autonomy, making learning more meaningful and engaging.

4.2. Adaptability to Educational Goals

The choice between CLT and TBLT is inherently tied to educational objectives, with each method offering distinct advantages in different instructional contexts. For exam-oriented goals, CLT's structured focus on language form and function proves invaluable. By aligning activities with specific test requirements–such as oral exam formats or writing task structures–CLT enables systematic practice of target language skills. This method helps students master grammatical accuracy and functional appropriateness within constrained timeframes, as seen in its effectiveness for preparing standardized tests where precision and conformity to norms are prioritized.

Conversely, TBLT excels in competency-based education, where the goal is to develop integrated language abilities for real-world application. TBLT tasks simulate authentic academic or professional scenarios, requiring learners to use language as a tool for problem-solving, critical thinking, and collaboration. Whether negotiating a project timeline, drafting a persuasive proposal, or delivering a research presentation, students in TBLT environments engage in holistic language use that mirrors real-life communication. This approach fosters not only linguistic fluency but also transferable skills like logical reasoning and cross-cultural competence, aligning with higher education's focus on cultivating comprehensive literacy rather than isolated language forms. The contrast highlights that CLT serves exam preparation by refining targeted skills, while TBLT supports long-term competence development through authentic task engagement.

4.3. Adaptability to Cultural Context

Chinese educational contexts, characterized by large class sizes and a tradition of teacher-led instruction, require adapting CLT and TBLT to local realities while maintaining learner-centeredness. One practical strategy is to integrate TBLT's post-task reflection into CLT's PPP model. In structured CLT activities like dialogue practice, the teacher can a TBLT-inspired reflection stage—where students

discuss what they learned, identify challenges, and set improvement goals—can enhance metacognitive awareness. For example, after a CLT-based role-play about ordering food, teachers can guide students to reflect in small groups: "Which phrases were easiest to use? What words did you struggle to remember?" This simple addition transforms passive practice into active learning, encouraging students to take ownership of their progress.

Another key adaptation is adopting a "gradual autonomy" method, transitioning from CLT's semi-controlled tasks to TBLT's fully autonomous tasks. Chinese students, often accustomed to teacher-directed learning, benefit from incremental increases in autonomy. Begin with CLT activities that provide clear language frameworks but allow minor creative choices (e.g., choosing dialogue topics within a set structure), then gradually introduce TBLT elements like open-ended tasks with teacher scaffolding (e.g., providing a task rubric for group projects)(Shu Dingfang ,2023.). For instance, a middle school class might start with CLT's guided conversations about weekend plans, then progress to a TBLT task of planning a class outing, where students independently research venues, create budgets, and present proposals in English. This phased approach respects cultural norms while fostering the independent thinking emphasized by modern education reforms.

The differences between CLT and TBLT are not limitations but opportunities for adaptive teaching. By matching CLT's structured support with beginner needs, TBLT's authentic tasks with advanced goals, and contextualizing both within Chinese educational realities, educators can create classrooms where every student—regardless of level or learning context—feels empowered to engage, explore, and excel.

5. Conclusion

The comparative analysis shows key differences in how CLT and TBLT embody learner-centeredness. CLT focuses on "guided participation," where teachers design structured activities like role-plays to help students practice language in controlled contexts. This method builds confidence for beginners by providing clear frameworks. TBLT, however, emphasizes "autonomous creation," assigning real-world tasks such as organizing projects. Students take the lead in decision-making and problem-solving, fostering higher-order thinking skills. CLT balances form and function, while TBLT prioritizes task outcomes, making them complementary for different learning stages.

Learner-centeredness teaching has no universal model. Its application must adapt to learner levels, educational goals, and cultural settings. For example, beginner students benefit from CLT's structured support, while advanced learners thrive in TBLT's autonomous tasks.

This study has gaps: it relies mainly on theoretical comparison without enough real-classroom data. Long-term studies on how CLT and TBLT affect language learning

in diverse contexts are needed. Future research could explore mixed methods combining CLT’s form-focused feedback with TBLT’s tasks, compare practices across cultures, or analyze adaptive models for different education levels. Such work would help refine learner-centeredness strategies for practical teaching scenarios.

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