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Factors in the implementation of task-based teaching in primary schools

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Abstract

This paper uses detailed qualitative case study data to explore the implementation of task-based teaching in three primary school classrooms in Hong Kong. It reviews six issues which were found to impact on how teachers approached the implementation of communicative tasks in their classroom. The themes to be addressed are teacher beliefs; teacher understandings; the syllabus time available; the textbook and the topic; preparation and the available resources; and the language proficiency of the students. It is argued that the complex interplay between these factors influences the extent of implementation of task-based teaching in the classroom. A tentative exploratory framework for the implementation of task-based teaching with young learners in Hong Kong is proposed. It is suggested that the paper may also shed light on the prospects for the implementation of communicative or task-based approaches in a variety of other contexts.

Keywords: Curriculum implementation; Task-based teaching; Primary schools; Qualitative case studies

Introduction .1

Teachers are frequently required to implement pedagogic innovations developed by external agents who may or may not be familiar with the teachers' viewpoints or the specific classroom context in which the innovation is to be implemented. If teachers' views are not sufficiently taken account of, the already challenging nature of implementing something new may be exacerbated. Within the Asia Pacific region, a number of attempts to introduce communicative or task-based approaches have

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often proven problematic, in South Korea (Li, 1998); in Hong Kong (Carless, 1999; Evans, 1996); in Japan (Browne andWada, 1998; Gorsuch, 2001); in China(Hui, 1997; Liao, 2000); in Vietnam (Ellis, 1996; Kramsch and Sullivan, 1996); and Indonesia (Tomlinson, 1990).

There is also a wide literature on communicative and task-based teaching often with adult ESL classes but as Candlin (2001) observes, there is a lack of empirical research on task-based teaching in school foreign language contexts. For school teachers in EFL state systems, the practicalities and challenges in task-based teaching are often very different from those reported in much of the literature to date. This paper thus seeks to meet the 'test of relevance' (Bygate et al., 2001) whereby research aims to have something to say to teachers as well as researchers. Reporting on how teachers are implementing an innovation carries implications both for the management of change and the ongoing development of task-based teaching in school settings.

How teachers implement changes in pedagogy is an important area which does not receive sufficient attention. The aim of the paper is to provide a picture of how three teachers tried to come to terms with the planning and implementation of a task-based pedagogic innovation. Issues identified by these case study teachers as impacting on the implementation of the innovation are discussed, and through liberal use of quotations, the teachers' own voices are heard. Although the data focuses on a small sample of Hong Kong teachers, I believe it speaks to many researchers, teacher educators and practitioners who are involved in the implementation of communicative or task-based curricula in a variety of contexts.

1.1. Notion of task

In Hong Kong, task-based teaching was introduced as part of a so-called TargetOriented Curriculum (TOC) reform (Carless, 1997, 1999; Mok, 2001; Morris et al., 1996). The TOC definition of task includes five elements as highlighted below (Clark et al., 1994):

a purpose or underlying real-life justification for doing the task, involving more than simply the display of knowledge or practice of skills

a context in which the task takes place, which may be real, simulated or imaginary

a process of thinking and doing required in carrying out the task, stimulated by the purpose and the context

a product or the result of thinking and doing, which may be tangible or intangible

a framework of knowledge, strategy and skill used in carrying out the task.

Tasks in TOC were distinguished from exercises defined as ''learning activities that help acquisition of specific information and skills'' (Education Department, 1994, p. 19). Exercises were intended to be used in the pre-task stages of task-based teaching.

In practice, the approach to tasks in Hong Kong primary schools equates to what Skehan (1996) describes as the 'weak' approach to task-based learning, with tasks roughly comparable to the production stage of a Presentation–Practice–Production method. This weak approach is believed to be more feasible in Hong Kong than a strong

approach where tasks are the prime organisational focus and the language to be transacted emerges from these tasks. In view of the lack of linguistic resources of 6–7 year old young foreign language learners, tasks in TOC have tended to be highly structured in this weak form of a task-based approach. Task-based approaches, as interpreted in Hong Kong, are thus very close to the orientation of communicative language teaching.

Research methodology .2

I carried out case studies (Carless, 2001a) of three English teachers, in different schools, implementing the task-based innovation TOC over a seven month period in their own primary 1 or primary 2 classrooms with pupils aged 6–7 years old. The selection of the teachers, all Cantonese native-speakers, was based on the following: they were interested in engaging with the uptake and implementation of the inno vation; as 'young' teachers in their twenties or early thirt ies, they were considered to be open -minded in reacting to change; they had sufficient confidence to be observed on a longitudinal basis; they were willing to take part in the study and were comfortable in interacting in English. Case study was chosen as an investigative technique so as to permit me to study the teachers in depth in the classroom setting and to facilitate the development of an understanding of the innovation from the teachers' viewpoints. For e xa mple, it was possible to probe what the teachers were doing in the classroom and why and relate this to their attitudes towards teaching, learning and TOC. Notwithstanding limitations of generalisability from small samples, detailed case study data can provide what Bassey (1999) refers to as 'fuzzy propositions' or 'fuzzy generalisations' i.e. tentative general statements which lack scientific generalisability but are likely to be a useful reference point for teachers and/or researchers to compare with their own contexts.

This paper seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ 1 What are the teachers' attitudes and understandings towards task-based teaching?

RQ 2 What factors impact on the planning for the implementation of task-based teaching?

Data collection methods used for the study comprised classroom observation, focused interviews and an attitude scale. Classroom observations were conducted for five–six consecutive English lessons for each teacher in three separate cycles of observation during the school year, totalling 17 lessons per teacher. The rationale for observing successive lessons and at different stages of the academic year was to minimise the dangers of observer paradox or one-off display lessons not typical of regular teaching. Both quantitative data in terms of a tailor-made classroom observation schedule and qualitative data, in terms of lesson transcriptions and field notes were collected. Data reduction was achieved through one page classroom observation summaries for each of the 51 lessons.

A series of six semi-structured interviews, lasting between 40 min and 1 h, were conducted with each of the three teachers. A baseline interview, prior to the commencement of classroom observation, collected relevant background information

about the teacher and the school. Three post-observation interviews, carried out at the end of each cycle of observations, focused primarily on the lessons which had just been observed. Summative interviews were conducted in order to probe further the main issues arising from the classroom observations and the ongoing data analysis. Post-analysis interviews were carried out about 6 months later so as to facilitate member checking (Erlandson et al., 1993), in other words verifying the interpretations and conclusions with the respondents themselves as part of the process of data analysis. I transcribed all interviews verbatim, using the transcription process to immerse myself more deeply in the data. Task-based teaching was a major focus of the interviews, both with respect to direct questions posed by me and issues raised by the informants. For example, all respondents were asked about their understanding of the term task and to describe the tasks carried out in each cycle of lessons.

A five-point Likert attitude scale was developed to measure the orientation of respondents to ELT and TOC. An overall orientation towards TOC was computed for the three teachers and a wider sample of primary school English teachers. The attitude scale is not a major focus of this paper but is briefly referred to when discussing the teachers' orientations towards task-based teaching.

Data analysis of the qualitative data from the study was carried out by assigning codes to the interview transcripts and the classroom observation summaries. From these codes a number of themes were developed, for example, the theme of the syllabus time available to carry out communicative tasks. Once a theme was identified, all data touching on it from the different research tools was pooled and analysed in further depth. Reasoned judgements were then developed as a result of an iterative process of moving repeatedly from data to emergent findings and then returning again to the data and comparing informants' understandings and interpretations with their classroom actions.

Extracts from interviews are used in the remainder of the paper to provide supporting evidence for the findings and permit the teachers' voices to be heard directly. Given the necessary subjectivity in all qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), I try to make it clear what is primary data and what is my interpretation to enable the reader to make their own judgements of the arguments being presented (Holliday, 2002). Alternative perspectives and interpretations may be equally valid.

Background to schools and teachers .3

This section provides a brief contextual background to the schools and teachers involved in the study.

At the time of the study Priscilla had 8 years experience as an English teacher and had been working in her current school for 6 years. In terms of training, she is a graduate of a local college of education with English as her major subject and had also recently completed a 16 week full-time in-service refresher course. As such, she has been trained in the theory and practice of communicative and task-based approaches. Her school caters for pupils above average in terms of ability. She was teaching a primary 1 class of 33 pupils aged 6–7 years old.

At the time of the study, Susan was in her third year of teaching. She holds a BA degree majoring in music from a local university but was an untrained teacher in the first year of a 2 year part-time teacher training course. As she was only beginning formal

training, she was relatively unfamiliar with the theory and practice of language teaching methodologies. Her school has an intake of average ability. The class she was teaching was a primary 2 class with 31 pupils mainly aged 7 years old.

Gloria had 4 years teaching experience at the commencement of this study, 3 of them being in her current school. She holds a teaching certificate, majoring in English from a college of education in Hong Kong. She also possesses a B.Ed degree from a British university and at the time of the research was studying for a part-time M.Ed. During her certificate programme, she was trained in the theory and practice of communicative approaches. She was the TOC co-ordinator in her school, so had some middle management duties. Her school caters for pupils of slightly below average ability. During the period of the research, she carried out TOC with a primary 1 class of 26 pupils aged mainly 6 years old.

Findings .4

I now present the findings in terms of six themes which emerged from the data: teachers' understandings of tasks, their attitudes, the classroom time available for task-based teaching, teacher preparation of resources, the influence of textbook and topics, and the language proficiency of pupils. Although I treat each issue separately for convenience of exposition, there is a certain amount of interplay between factors. For example, the more positive the teacher attitude towards task-based teaching, the more likely she is to take time to prepare supplementary task-based materials or to create classroom time for carrying out activities. For each theme, I briefly make some introductory comments and review some relevant literature, before outlining the teacher perspectives on the issue.

Teachers' understandings of task .4.1

Understandings are defined as the ability to articulate the principles of task-based teaching and an awareness of the implications for classroom practice. Karavas-Doukas (1995) shows that teachers in her study of the implementation of a communicative approach in Greek secondary schools exhibited incomplete understanding of the innovation which they were adopting. In the Korean context, Li (1998) also reported that misconceptions about the nature of communicative approaches to language teaching were a barrier to their implementation. Clark et al. (1999) found similar evidence that Hong Kong teachers had unclear conceptions about task-based teaching and learning, and this hindered its implementation.

Understandings were revealed principally in the interview data and also through the classroom observations. In the baseline interview for each teacher, they were asked, 'What is your understanding of the term task in TOC?' In each of the postobservation interviews they were asked to describe the tasks carried out in the observed lessons, and further follow-up questions related to tasks were posed at various points throughout the interviews.

Priscilla describes one of the aims of tasks as ''To make learning more like reallife, not very class constrained, to let pupils learn happily, creatively to involve them in learning by doing''. She goes on to describe 'task' as follows: ''Task is an activity; in the task

pupils should have the chance to use the language meaningfully but not just to read after the teachers or repeat something, after the task the pupils should consolidate what they have learnt''. My interpretation is that she has referred to a number of relevant aspects of tasks: the notion of context (real-life situations) found in the TOC task definition; the concept of 'learning by doing'; and the idea that pupils should be putting language into use through tasks. Although she has not used TOC terminology directly, I believe she has demonstrated her own understanding and interpretation of task-based teaching.

Susan's expressed definition of task is that ''task mainly has objectives and it can link the pupil ability of understanding, conceptualising, that kind of communication''. My analysis is that this is a rather vague definition with the reference to objectives, not distinguishing tasks from exercises or worksheets which would also contain objectives. I suggest that as an untrained and inexperienced teacher, Susan is still coming to terms with the meaning of the notion of task.

In various interview extracts, Gloria's views on task-based teaching in the TOC innovation denoted the following features: motivating the pupils through lively and creative activities, encouraging them to put the language into use and relating learning to their daily life. She sums up pupils activating their own knowledge as follows, ''I think the most important thing is that I have to get them to do something by themselves and to work out something on their own independently of the teacher''. In a similar way to Priscilla, Gloria was able to highlight key features of TOC through a personal interpretation of task-based teaching.

4.2. Teachers' attitudes towards task-based teaching

Attitudes are defined as ''the interplay of feelings, beliefs and thoughts about actions'' (Rusch and Perry, 1999, p. 291). When an innovation is incompatible with teachers' attitudes, some form of resistance or negotiation of the innovation is likely to occur (Young and Lee, 1987). In the Greek study referred to above (KaravasDoukas, 1995), teachers' attitudes and beliefs about the learning process were, to a large extent, incompatible with the principles of the innovation. Not surprisingly, this reduced the extent of implementation of communicative teaching in the classroom. In a Hong Kong survey, Clark et al. (1999) found that overall teachers expressed tentatively positive views towards task-based TOC teaching and that they were beginning to develop more positive sentiments after trying it out.

In the current study, the three teachers' attitudes towards task-based teaching were primarily evidenced by the attitude scale and interview data. The attitude scale data showed that of the three teachers, Gloria was the most positively oriented towards a task-based approach, Susan the least positively oriented and Priscilla somewhere in between. In the interviews, Priscilla and Gloria were generally positively inclined towards task-based teaching, whilst Susan claimed to be positive when asked directly, but there were sometimes contradictions between these positive assertions and other interview extracts, the attitude scale and the classroom data.

Priscilla states some of her reasons for being positive about task-based teaching, ''because I can see that the pupils enjoy it in the lesson...I like to do tasks in the lessons and let the pupils talk in English''. She also points out that TOC is congruent with her own teaching beliefs: ''The spirit of it matches my own style. I myself thought in that way, too, learning English should be enjoyable, keep pupils involved greatly, this is the

main thing I agree very much with task-based teaching''. This is an important factor, facilitating the implementation of task-based teaching in her classroom.

Susan describes one of her main roles as a teacher as ''to give lectures'' to the pupils, which I interpreted as meaning to provide input. Within this 'lecturing' mode, she describes a major focus as to teach language items, such as vocabulary or grammar. She also believes firmly in the need for a strong disciplinary foundation in her teaching. In her own words, she states: ''The discipline should be settled before the lesson starts, I think that is a rule for teaching...if the discipline is lost then I think the lesson cannot be continued''. This belief in the importance of discipline seemed to discourage the implementation of task-based activities in which the teacher is required to release some control. Overall, I would characterise Susan as being not naturally positively inclined towards task-based teaching.

Gloria feels that her general beliefs about teaching and learning stem largely from her pre-service teacher training, where she was exposed to the principles and practice of communicative approaches to language teaching. She also notes the parallels between these communicative methods and task-based teaching. She believes that it is important for teachers to make English lessons interesting so motivation is a feature of her teaching and she sees the teacher as needing to be 'active' so as to create a lively atmosphere. She also states that she thinks pupils learn most through 'application', for example, when they need to talk and listen in English, such as pair- and group-work. In this respect, she is somewhat similar to Priscilla but different from Susan.

4.3. Time available for task-based teaching

There is evidence in the literature that concerns about the time taken to complete process-oriented activities impact on the extent of implementation of communicative tasks. This seems particularly relevant in contexts where teachers perceive themselves to be under pressure to prepare students for internal or external examinations. For example, Li (1998) analysing perceptions of barriers to the implementation of communicative approaches in South Korea, points out that because of the need to prepare students for grammar-based tests, teachers devote considerable time to teaching test-taking skills or drilling students on multiple choice grammar items. In the Korean context, it was perceived that teachers had little time available to carry out communicative tasks. Similarly, in the Hong Kong context, there also appears to be a perception amongst Hong Kong primary English teachers that there is pressure to complete the syllabus or textbook and this impacts on the time available to carry out activities and tasks (Carless and Gordon, 1997; Education Commission, 1994).

All three teachers referred to the impact of time on task-based teaching. Priscilla makes a number of references to the influence of time with respect to the pressures of completing the syllabus (or the textbook) and that some tasks are quite timeconsuming to prepare and carry out. She also expresses concerns that, under TOC, there may be a reduction in the time spent on written or grammatically focused activities, stating ''what worries us is their written work and the very tight schedule, we want to let them write more through writing activities but we don't have time''. She also refers to the limitation of time to teach the required knowledge and also to carry out enjoyable activities or tasks and cites the opinion of the principal as follows:

> My principal thinks that it is not worthwhile to spend so much time on letting pupils enjoy themselves. It is not worthwhile to speak, to listen so much but more time should be spent on reading, writing and most important of all, train their familiarity about grammar.

Susan also identifies time as a major problem as in the following quotation:

> I think the time is a big problem to me because the content of the textbook involves a lot of 'vocab' and structures and many activities are involved. But I don't think that I have enough time to do all of them so I have to select some.

My interpretation of the classroom observation data for Susan was that there appeared to be an emphasis on textbook completion and that tasks were sometimes squeezed out in order to permit more time for teacher presentation or drilling of textbook vocabulary. Gloria also makes some observations on issues of time, for example, ''if it is not a TOC lesson, I think I can teach much faster if I have to rush to keep up with the syllabus'' and with reference to her colleagues, particularly the more traditional ones, ''if it is a normal [i.e. non-TOC] class then they [colleagues] just rush for the schedule''. Here she is identifying, what appears to be a common phenomenon in Hong Kong of teachers completing the syllabus or the textbook without paying particular attention to the learning needs or progress of the students (Education Commission, 1994). A further issue for Gloria is that as a middle-manager, she sometimes had to meet parents or the principal and this occasionally made her late for class; she also attended some short training courses which necessitated missing some lessons. This put her behind the teaching schedule so in the later stages of the school year, she had to catch up with the syllabus and so there was less opportunity for task-based activities.

My overall interpretation is that the three teachers perceive that pressure of time presents some barrier to the implementation of task-based teaching in Hong Kong primary schools. Supporting evidence for this assertion is also provided anecdotally by teacher participants in the in-service courses offered by the teacher education institute to which I belong and via a research study of teachers experimenting with task-based teaching in their schools during an in-service programme (Carless and Gordon, 1997).

Role of textbook and topics .4.4

Another factor affecting what goes on in the classroom is that Hong Kong teachers put great emphasis on covering the textbook, an issue also related to the previous sub-section on time available for task-based teaching. Ng (1994, p. 82) observes that ''many teachers, perhaps as a result of perceived or actual pressure from the school or from parents, try to 'finish the textbook' with little regard to the ability of the students''. It is also suggested (Cortazzi, 1998; Tong, 1996) that the apparent deference to the textbook may be related to the emphasis on text in traditional Chinese culture.

For Priscilla, classroom observation did not seem to support the view that different topics impacted significantly on the extent of task-based teaching in her classes. She perceived the topics as all permitting exploitation via task-based teaching and this seemed to be confirmed across the three cycles of observation, where there was a consistently high frequency of task-based teaching.

In the interview data, Susan did not draw an explicit link between topics and task-based teaching but notes that different topics in the textbook can affect pupil motivation or interest:

> I remember that when I am talking about the plants, the topics are not so interesting, it depends on the materials and the textbook...I don't think they have an interest in plants, talking about the roots and the leaves. It's difficult for the teachers to interpret the material. On the other hand, the topic about the juice is more interesting, I think they can easily have that experience in their daily life.

It is not clear the extent to which difficulty in ''interpreting the material'' has an influence on the implementation of task-based teaching but according to my observation of Susan's classroom, the textbook topic of plants did not lend itself particularly naturally to motivating language tasks for young learners.

Gloria explains that the materials contributed to a lower degree of implementation of tasks in her third cycle of observation:

> For these lessons, I find that some exercises can't be TOC, because it's quite mechanical and it's really a kind of drilling or exercise and you can't change it to be TOC, you can't change the textbook, therefore just part of it can be TOC.

These lessons focused on adjectives for describing people or animals, such as 'kind', 'rude', 'fierce', 'afraid', 'tired', and the way this was presented in the textbook did not lead so obviously to contextualised tasks.

Overall, although a clear picture did not emerge, there was evidence to indicate that the topics or themes covered in the textbook had an impact on the extent of task-based teaching for Susan and Gloria, but not for Priscilla.

Teacher preparation and resources .4.5

Hong Kong language teachers are acknowledged to have heavy workloads particularly in terms of marking (Storey et al., 1997). This heavy workload may reduce the time available for lesson preparation and when time is scarce, traditional teaching or following the textbook may be preferred to preparing for task-based teaching.

Task-based teaching sometimes requires additional preparation of ideas, materials or teaching aids. For example, for a task which involved smelling and identifying fruits, Priscilla prepared six plates of fruit for the groups in her class, a somewhat time-consuming endeavour. As such, I believe task-based teaching requires more thought, imagination and planning than simply following the set text, although the TOC textbooks do at least contain suggestions for tasks and provide some relevant materials. The impetus for preparing materials for task-based teaching may thus come from a suggestion in the teachers' notes for the textbook or independently from the teachers themselves.

Some teacher viewpoints on preparations for taskbased teaching are discussed below.

Priscilla indicates that for teachers implementing TOC for the first time, there is some additional workload, so suggests it is desirable to plan in advance and develop collaboration with colleagues:

> You have to well-prepare yourself, it 's better to prepare before September to know the details about your textbook, the tasks for the first term, what things you need to prepare or make beforehand, and try to get your colleagues to sit down with you to share the workload together.

For the first year of TOC implementation, when TOC was only carried out with one year group, she and her colleagues found the preparation time ''acceptable'' but they were concerned that as TOC was implemented in more classes, then they may need more support from other teachers. She also made an interesting observation that TOC could also reduce her workload preparation. ''[the new te xtbook] itself is quite task-based, I need less time to think about what activity to do, it saves my time in designing activities, I just follow most of the tasks suggested in the book''.

Susan did not identify preparation time for task-based teaching as being a major issue. My interpretation was that this was because she tended to stick closely to the TOC textbook and also use the supplementary materials provided by the publisher, so relatively little additional preparation time was required.

Gloria states that task-based teaching in TOC engenders additional preparation time but does not perceive this wholly negatively however, as she observes that more time spent on preparation is a good habit for teachers:

> I think more time should be spent on preparation, this is also advice for myself. Sometimes we can't just wait for the publisher to give us materials, we have to tailor what we have to teach and to prepare something that suits our students.

In sum, there were mixed views on the impact of the time needed for preparation oftask-based materials and overall this factor did not seem to be a major impediment to the implementation of task-based teaching for the three teachers. The provision by the textbook publishers of materials suitable for task-based teaching seemed overall to mitigate the problem of preparation time.

Language proficiency of pupils .4.6

Li (1998) points out that Korean teachers in her survey perceived that the low language proficiency of their students was a barrier to the implementation of the communicative approach. Similarly, Greek teachers perceived that young, inexperienced, beginning students are not capable of responding to the demands of a communicative approach (Karavas-Doukas, 1995). Although there is surely some validity in these teacher perceptions, I am inclined to take the view that such views may also be prompted by misconceptions about communicative approaches, selection of inappropriate tasks and/or that such perceptions can be used partly as a pretext to continue with one's own preferred method.

Both Priscilla and Gloria were positively oriented to task-based teaching but Priscilla evidenced much greater implementation of tasks. I suggest that one of the reasons for this, is because her class are of higher ability. Priscilla states that she carries out at least two or three tasks in every chapter i.e. a high frequency of task-based teaching. Susan, in contrast, states that she needs to spend a lot of time on presenting and drilling language items as she perceives that her students need consolidation of the taught vocabulary.

Gloria points out that because of her students' relatively low ability, she needs to do a lot of language practice and that her preferred method of maintaining English medium communication (as opposed to switching to the mother tongue) can be quite time-consuming.

My interpretation is that more able pupils have a greater capacity for doing tasks for the following reasons. Firstly, higher ability pupils may be able to carry out a wider range of tasks on different topics. Secondly, they may need less time on pre-task presentation and drilling of language items and may be able to complete assigned tasks more quickly, thereby creating more t ime for additional tasks. In other words, they may have the capacity to complete the syllabus more quickly thereby facilitating the time available for task-based teaching.

Table 1
Factors impacting on extent of implementation

	Priscilla	Susan	Gloria
Attitude	+	=	+
Understandings	+	=	+
Time	=	=	
Textbook	=	=/	=/
Preparation	=	=	=
Pupils' language proficiency	+	=	

Extent of implementation .4.7

I have considered six factors which impacted on how task-based teaching was approached by the three teachers. I now wish to relate these factors to the extent of implementation of task-based teaching in their lessons. Space precludes me going into detail how this was measured, but basically using the TOC task definition, activities were designated as 'high', 'medium' or 'low' using a framework adapted from Littlewood (1993) and Morris et al. (1996). This categorisation identified 12 medium or high tasks for Priscilla, eight for Susan and five for Gloria. Table 1 relates this e xtent of implementation to the six factors considered above. A plus sign indicates that the factor had a positive impact on the e xtent of implementation of task-based teaching, an equals sign indicates a relatively neutral impact and a minus sign implies a negative impact. The judgements contain a degree of subjective interpretation, but my purpose is to relate the factors to the extent of implementation of task-based teaching.

The factors may or may not carry approximately equal weighting. In my opinion, attitudes and understandings are likely to be highly significant issues, but for Glo ria, who had a relatively low degree of implementation, it seems that these factors were outweighed by the other issues. To provide an e xa mple of how the table relates to the teachers under discussion, Priscilla believes in the value of tasks, has a sound understanding of task-based teaching and teaches high ability pupils. There was a higher incidence of contextualised and purposeful tasks in her lessons than for the other two teachers whose profiles across the six factors are somewhat less conducive to task-based teaching.

Conclusions and implications .5

In this article, I have shown the factors which impacted on teachers' approaches to task-based teaching in the Hong Kong context and indicated how this related to the uptake of the innovation. I now propose a tentative exp loratory model of factors impacting on the classroom implementation of task-based teaching for Hong Kong primary schools. The model is derived from the data but may be viewed as somewhat speculative in view of the small sample of teachers and the lack of space in a journal length article to represent the classroom database more fully. Notwithstanding these limitations, it is hoped the framework may have something to say to teachers and researchers interested in how teachers try to come to terms with communicative or task-based innovations.

Stage 1 of Fig. 1 shows the six issues which affected the planning of a task. It is not claimed that these are the only issues which may arise, but they represent the ones which emerged from the current study. I propose that the interplay of some, or possibly all, of these six factors impacts on the design of an activity (stage 2 of the figure).

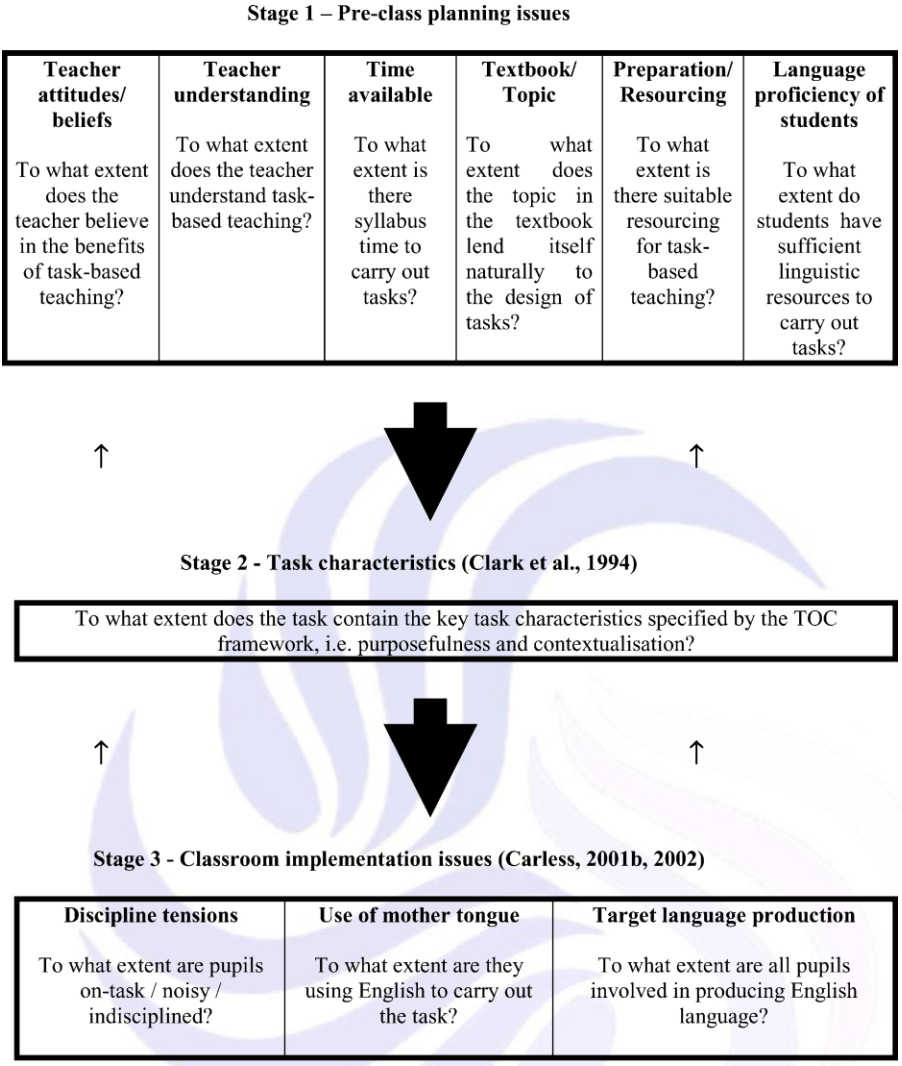

Fig. 1. Exploratory model of factors impacting on the implementation of task-based teaching in Hong Kong primary schools.

Stage 2 represents the characteristics of tasks, and as indicated above were identified in this study as 'high', 'medium' or 'low' tasks. Purposefulness and contextualisation are highlighted as key aspects of 'task' as discussed in an earlier sub-section.

Stage 3 of Fig. 1 highlights the three main issues which were identified by the teachers as challenges when the tasks were carried out in the classroom, namely discipline tensions, (how did the teacher handle and respond to noise and indiscipline during activities?) the use of the mother tongue (when and how did students use mother tongue or target language and what was the teacher response?) and the extent of target language produced (did activities promote restricted or e xtensive language? Was language use concentrated on individuals or was it shared around? To what e xtent did activities promote language use as opposed to drawing, colouring or making things?). These issues

have not been discussed in the current paper but are covered elsewhere (Carless, 2001b, 2002).

The thick bold downward arrows in the figure indicate that the model proposes some degree of linearity, although the smaller upward arrows imply that the model also has two-way aspects. For example, concerns about discipline in stage 3 may impact on the planning and design of a task in stages 1 and 2. The process is cyclical, with implementation issues in stage 3 hypothesised as feeding back into subsequent planning (stage 1).

I would also like to comment on two issues which do not appear in the figure. One theme which one might expect to be important, but in fact was not highlighted by respondents was the impact of examinations on what went on in the classroom. One of the reasons why this was not emphasised by the informants is that the high stakes examinations which take place at the end of primary schooling focus more on Chinese language skills and mathematical reasoning and problem-solving. Preparation for this process is thus not an issue for the lower primary English lessons which I was observing. Lack of teacher English language proficiency is another factor which might inhibit the implementation of communicative approaches (Li, 1998). I suggest that this was not an issue for the teachers in this study, because if they had any doubts about their own language abilities, they would not have agreed to take part in research of this nature. I suggest however, that both in Hong Kong and in other EFL contexts, a lack of English language confidence or proficiency can sometimes inhibit teachers from attempting more open-ended task-based activities.

In conclusion, the potential value and usefulness of this exploratory framework requires further investigation. For me, it reinforces a number of general elements of educational change:

.1 the complexity of the change process, in view of the numerous factorsimpacting on implementation, such as those outlined in Fig. 1;

an innovation, such as task-based teaching, needs to be adapted to localcontextual .2 conditions and the characteristics of the target learners; and

.3 the need to build change processes on the existing values, understandings andprior experiences of the teachers who will implement an innovation.

As a final word, task-based teaching in school EFL classrooms remains an issue in need of further investigation.

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