ICT-BASED TASKS FOR LANGUAGE LEARNERS: THE SPANISH PROPOSAL

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Abstract

This paper presents the tenets of a European funded project (530863-LLP-1-2012-1-NL-KA2-KA2MP) in which the University of Granada is a consortium partner. Our goal is twofold: we put together ICTs and the so-called CEFR in order to enhance Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT). Nowadays, task-based language approach has an important role in second language teaching. It primarily emphasizes the importance of using authentic language in class, asking students to perform meaningful tasks in the target language. This project adds the technological dimension to TBLT so that at the end we come up with a set of ICT based tasks which may work well within any language learning context. To achieve this, the twenty partners (two per country) involved in the project will work cooperatively trialling each other's tasks. In this paper we present the Spanish tandem's tasks and explain how they can be performed in the language classroom.

Keywords: Task Based Language Teaching, Foreign Languages, ICTs.

1   INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the main guidelines of a European subsidized project entitled "Pan European Task Activities for Language Learning" (PETALL). The project gathered momentum in the spring 2014 and will continue up to summer 2016. The countries involved in this project are: Portugal, United Kingdom, Netherlands, Germany, Hungary, Serbia, Turkey, Greece, Italy, and Spain. In order to develop and trial the tasks, we will be working more closely with our neighbouring countries (for instance, Spain will exchange tasks with Italy and Portugal). We believe that we have succeeded in creating an exceptionally well-balanced consortium. The map below represents the existing tandems:

The consortium members set forth the following objectives:

- To encourage collaborative work between teachers in different countries and teacher trainers by setting up regional networks for the development of ICT-based tasks.

- To facilitate the access to technology-mediated tasks that travel well, securing the quality of the communicative exchange across cultural and geographic borders.

- To promote mutual understanding and awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity through ICT-based Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT).

- To enhance the quality of teacher education in technology-mediated TBLT.

- To develop the teachers' digital competence.

In other words, we are committed to design ICT-based tasks for learning foreign languages that can be easily implemented in different educative contexts through Europe.

2   TASK BASED LEARNING AND THE COMMON EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK OF REFERENCE FOR LANGUAGES (CEFR)

During the last decades, TBLT has been the focus of attraction for SLA researchers, teacher trainers, language teachers, etc. The concept emerged in the 1980s in reaction to teacher-centered and form-focused second language teaching methods. Today, TBLT is implemented in many countries as a powerful language pedagogy. TBLT puts communication at the most important level, and hence it has many things in common with the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT): holistic learning, meaning-focused and learner-centered.

The CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001) places strong emphasis on the communicative facet of language learning. In spite of having been in the limelight for more than four decades, communication still lies at the core of any foreign language syllabus. The CEFR distinguishes different domains of communication the language user may be interested in: personal domain, public domain, occupational domain, and the educational domain. In order to pursue the needs in a given situation, the language user should be exposed to communicative tasks. For this reason, the CEFR (*Ibid.:* 157-167) devotes a whole chapter (chapter 7) to tasks and their role on language teaching. According to this document, tasks accomplishment is supplemented by other specific competences that ease the learning process. This makes the definition of task extremely acute. Thus, it is affirmed that:

> Tasks can be extremely varied in nature, and may involve language activities to a greater or lesser extent, for example: creative (painting, story writing), skills based (repairing or assembling something), problem solving (jigsaw, crossword), routine transactions, interpreting a role in a play, taking part in a discussion, giving a presentation, planning a course of action, reading and replying to (an e-mail) message, etc. A task may be quite simple or extremely complex (e.g. studying a number of related diagrams and instructions and assembling an unfamiliar and intricate apparatus). A particular task may involve a greater or lesser number of steps or embedded sub-tasks and consequently the boundaries of any one task may be difficult to define. (Council of Europe, 2001: 157).

One of the novelties of the CEFR is the revisiting of mediation as an integral part of communication. Mediation entails translation and this is envisaged as one of the communicative uses of the basic language skills (i.e. listening, speaking, interacting, reading, and writing). Consequently, "communication is an integral part of tasks where participants engage in interaction, production, reception or mediation, or a combination of two or more of these" (*Ibid.*: 157).

It is also worth highlighting the concept "pedagogic tasks" which affects directly the learning and teaching of foreign languages. These usually take place in academic settings where we cannot bring the real world into the language classroom. The overall goal is to develop the communicative competence for future performance beyond school boundaries. As depicted by the CEFR,

> [c]ommunicative pedagogic tasks (…) aim to actively involve learners in meaningful communication, are relevant (here and now in the formal learning context), are challenging but feasible (with task manipulation where appropriate), and have identifiable (and possibly less immediately evident) outcomes. Such tasks may involve 'metacommunicative' (sub)tasks, i.e. communication around task implementation and the language used in carrying out the task. This includes learner contributions to task selection, management, and evaluation, which in a language learning context may often become integral parts of the tasks themselves. (*Ibid.*: 157-158).

The distinction between pedagogic and real-world tasks may not be clear. The former requires the learner to perform linguistic situations similar to the ones he or she will carry out in the real world. However, the latter requires the learner to do things that he or she will not do outside the classroom. Hence, Long (1985) begins with pedagogic tasks, and little by little he introduces real-world tasks in the classroom. Nunan (1989: 45) suggests the following conclusion:

> We need to consider the extent to which classroom tasks can be expected to mirror the real world. As I intimated earlier, it is unusual for real-world tasks not to be adapted in some way when they are brought into the classroom, and many real-world tasks are transformed into games, simulations, role plays and the like in order to make them appropriate for the classroom".

3   ICT-BASED TASKS: THE SPANISH PROPOSAL

In this section, we will describe the tasks which the Spanish consortium (namely, Mari Carmen Caravaca, Antonio Cantero, and Raúl Ruiz-Cecilia) has designed in order to be piloted in Italy and Portugal. It must be born in mind that these tasks reflect 'real-life' uses although they are pedagogical in nature as they are educationally-oriented.

Task 1: **"NGOs: A better world… is possible"**

This is based on a webquest which is reachable on the link www.zunal.com/webquest.php?w=254893. The objectives are:

- To develop and encourage students to think critically about social movements around them.
- To become familiar with the variety of ways in which NGOs work to bring about sustainable change in developing countries and their own community.
- To give the student the opportunity to show their talents and creativity.
- To develop language competences using ICT resources.

The structure of our webquest follows the standard division, i.e., introduction, task, process, evaluation, and conclusion. The 'introduction' presents the general goal of the activity as to make students understand from the very beginning why they are addressing the topic of NGOs in the language class. As it reads on the webquest itself:

> The goal of this webquest is to learn more about NGOs and volunteers work in your town or city. Students will explore the different NGOs in their community and will become experts on NGOs and …maybe they will go further and will get involved in one of them…

The 'task' explains thoroughly what students are expected to produce, namely, "a Slide Presentation about a Non-Governmental Organization located in your town or city". The achievement of the task entails the fulfilment of four steps: getting into groups of four; assigning roles to each member of the group and gathering as much information as possible on different areas (organization, problems, projects, volunteer work); sharing, selecting and organizing information, and preparing a digital-slide presentation; presenting the final version to their classmates. Finally, students are encouraged to invite a volunteer from the NGO they have researched about to their oral presentation. This may be very motivating and rewarding for them.

In the 'evaluation' section, students are provided with a rubric indicating how their slide presentation and their speaking skills will be assessed.

The 'conclusion' works as a motivation booster, keeping students engaged and involved in NGOs, and ultimately, in the target language.

Task 2: **"Once upon a time"**

This task is geared up to showcase creativity through narration. Thus, students will develop their writing skills through the website *www.storybird.com* whose motto is "the world needs your stories". As proclaimed by the creators of this webpage "*storybird reverses visual storytelling by starting with the image and 'unlocking' the story inside*". Hence, learners will tell/write a story using a series of pictures from storybird.com as hints.

In order to put into practice this task, teachers may allocate up to a total of 4 hours within their syllabus. The very first lesson will be devoted to revise previous knowledge related to the text structure, cohesive devices and logical order in paragraphs. In addition, students will be explained the

task itself, i.e., writing a six-page story using images form storybird.com as prompters. They class will be divided into groups of six.

The second and third sessions tackle the writing process. The teacher shows the first picture and supervises students' stories and editing process. In the third session, the last pictures (one for every half of the class) are chosen by the teacher. Once the stories are finished, students will upload them in the storybird website (the teacher, as a registered user, will grant uploading permission to students).

In the forth and last lesson, students show their stories by using the digital board / PC and projector. In order to avoid boredom, this can be done once a week, devoting some 20 minutes of each class. More time would be too much, in our opinion. At the end, students and teacher vote for the best one, by filling in an assessment grid.

Task 3: "Watch, discuss and create your commercial"

This task is directed towards teaching critical thinking through the analysis and production of TV commercials. To accomplish this, we have distributed content into three lessons. In the first session, students are asked to think about their favourite TV commercial and are given some time to say why they have chosen it. This will activate students' schemata, awake their motivation, and catch their attention. The main part of this lesson will focus on the analysis of different commercials from youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OAlyHUWjNjE;   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pfxB5ut-KTs, and
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cZGghmwUcbQ&list=PL5iL6ZuuVIEQyMStAkOg7h5up2uMk8ch-

For the first link, they are expected to answer the following questions:

- What is the commercial about?
- How did you feel after watching it?
- What is the message they are trying to send?
- Why did they choose this terrible situation to represent their service?
- Do you like the images/type of music chosen to enhance the message of the ad?
- Did you like this commercial? Explain.
- Is this an ethical way to sell products? Explain

After watching the second video, we will prompt students to discuss the differences between the two ads. Questions above may help them to put together a coherent argument. The last video is part of the 'cool down' stage and pursues the learners' own line of reflection.

The second lesson starts with two other examples of commercials:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SswMzUWOiJg and
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2OlfGoNfm4w. As Tuzi, Mori and Young (online) aver:

> Teachers can remind students that commercial makers are trying to convince or manipulate the audience to buy a product or service. Students can use that information to critically analyze the commercial. Teachers can ask students about the intended audience and about the choices the producers made in designing the commercial.

The main focus of this session lies on the analysis of the components of a commercial (in pairs). Students will be provided with a grid in order to facilitate the task. They will be asked to think of the product, the intended audience, the story, the message, the type of music, and the effectiveness of the commercial. A debate may follow just after the completion of the activity. Once they are familiar with the internal structure of commercials, the teacher will present the ict-based task in itself: shoot and edit a TV commercial no longer than two minutes. The most convenient interaction pattern would be in groups of three or four. A considerable amount of time (one week or weekend) will be given to students so that they can write the script and shoot and edit their TV commercial.

All the commercials will be shown in the time allocated for the third lesson and students will complete an assessment rubric for each group. All the ads will be uploaded to facebook or youtube. This will make students feel proud of their own work.

Task 4: "Finding Zemo"

The underlying objective of this task is to engage students in the creation of a comic strip to help them practice English by using suitable vocabulary (in this case parts of the house and prepositions of place) and grammar (present continuous). It is of paramount importance that both students and

teachers are well acquainted with the online application *BitStrips* (www.bitstrips.com). For this purpose, it may be advisable that they watch a tutorial video in their L1 (for instance, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4LtHfCHw54w in Spanish). This task needs three lessons to be successfully implemented.

In the first lesson, students revise the vocabulary about "parts of the house" which has been previously learnt (it may be adapted to the specific needs of the target group). Grammar will also be part of this review (in our proposal, the present continuous). The next step familiarizes students with the strip-creator application by watching a tutorial video from youtube. The explanation of the task will follow. They are expected to design a six-frame comic strip containing: one frame with the questions *Where is Zemo? What is he doing?*; five frames with five different parts of a house and using five different prepositions of place; at least two of them must also contain a sentence telling what Zemo is doing.

In the second lesson, students create and edit their strips using the *BitStrips* software (avatars are welcome). The teacher's role will be to supervise and help learners. Comics are shared with teacher using any of the ways available in the application, so that it can be assessed and marked later (if not completed in class, it is set as homework).

Lesson number three allocates time for oral presentations and assessment. Learners show their strips by using the digital board/PC and projector. Both the teacher and the students vote for the best one by filling in an assessment rubric (it gathers information on the avatar/characters, background design, grammar, vocabulary, and mistakes).

4   CONCLUSIONS

As we have seen throughout this paper, ICTs and tasks work well together if they are aimed at communication. From our point of view, the fact that TBLT focuses on the use of authentic materials motivates students to carry out meaningful learning activities. Consequently, students' interest in the foreign language increases as they realize that what they are doing is useful for their daily life beyond school.

By the end of this European project, we hope to come up with a set of tasks that promotes the learning of foreign languages in general. It is worth highlighting that the forty tasks will be translated into ten languages (i.e. the mother tongues of the consortium members). Undoubtedly, this will make them available for a vaster number of language specialists.

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