

PETALL in action: latest developments and future directions of the EU-funded project Pan-European Task Activities for Language Learning

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Abstract. The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) proposes Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) as an important strategy to develop the learners' linguistic competences along with their communicative skills. Since it is learner-centred and relies mostly on engaging learners in meaningful communicative interchanges in a foreign language, it allows for greater interaction and collaboration between them in the development of products, in problem-solving processes and in the construction of knowledge. Nevertheless, teachers have revealed some resistance to this approach. Pan-European Task Activities for Language Learning (PETALL) is a project involving ten countries and seeks to address these problems by constructing a transnational strategy for Information and Communications Technology (ICT)-based task design management. It aims to produce tasks that can be implemented in different educational contexts, and offer training courses to help teachers build their confidence in TBLT. This presentation seeks to offer an overview of the project, including its objectives, underlying principles and deliverables (samples of good practices, the website, the courses, and the international conference).

Keywords: task-based language teaching, TBLT, ICT, CEFR, teacher training.

1. Introduction

PETALL is a project co-funded by the former EU Life-Long Learning Programme. The project seeks to address three specific objectives of the Programme (European Union, 2006), namely the promotion of language learning and linguistic diversity, the support to the development of ICT-based resources and the improvement of their quality by encouraging “the best use of results, innovative products and processes” along with the exchange of good practice “in order to improve the quality of education and training” (p. 49).

The project consortium, constituted of twenty institutions from ten countries across Europe, is coordinated by the University of Algarve, Portugal.

Its main purpose is to encourage teachers to make use of ICT-resources in task-based language teaching, an approach to which the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001) dedicates a whole chapter ‘Tasks and their role in language teaching’).

The project, which should have started in 2013, only had its kick-off meeting in June 2014 due to a series of institutional cutbacks, and is to end in June 2016. After the first year of implementation, the paper discusses the need for teacher training in technology-mediated TBLT, and looks at what has been achieved so far and how things are expected to evolve in the near future.

2. Meeting practical challenges

In several teacher training courses run by the higher education institutions that participate in the project, it has become evident that for the majority of trainees the principles and practices of

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TBLT still remain a challenge, despite the fact that most agree on the benefits of this approach at different proficiency levels and across different age groups, including adult education. A survey undertaken within the scope of the ETALAGE (European Task-based Activities in Language Learning: a Good Practices Exchange), another EU cosponsored project, showed that teachers considered the lack of training opportunities, the absence of material and practical conditions, or even the difficulty in finding resources for developing materials and planning lessons, to be the major obstacles to an effective implementation of TBLT in schools (Lopes, 2012). Their reluctance is aggravated not only by their dependence on traditional methods, but also by the fact that examples of good practices that they can easily tailor to their needs—even more so if it involves ICT – are not easy to come by.

PETALL is precisely trying to tackle these problems by: (a) providing teachers with samples of good practices that can be used regardless of the language taught and of the age group being targeted; (b) offering teacher training courses in all the countries of the consortium; (c) disseminating the theory and practice of TBLT in schools; and (d) providing a virtual space to help teachers discuss and share ideas.

In addition to this, one of the project's concerns is to make sure that the proposed samples can travel well from one country to the next and from one educational context to another without losing their pedagogical efficacy. That is why the project relies heavily on the transnational collaborative work between teachers, all of them coming from different cultural backgrounds, working within different education systems and teaching different languages. In order to facilitate such cross-cultural dialogue, the project has resorted to the CEFR as the conceptual tool that best provides a common ground for mutual understanding and for bridging the gaps that exist between education systems.

3. Relevant literature

The integration of ICT into TBLT is now receiving the attention of an increasing number of researchers. Little more than a decade ago, authors like Willis and Willis (2001), Ellis (2003), and Nunan (2004) laid down the theoretical and methodological foundations of TBLT. However, exploring the potential of technology was not their primary concern back then. The rapid evolution of ICT and its growing importance in everyday life have changed the ways in which human beings not only work and communicate, but also socialize and engage in new experiences. If, according to Ellis (2003), “a task is intended to result in language use that bears a resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world” (p. 16), then the tasks that proposed to the learners cannot overlook the growing prevalence of ICT in their lives. Tasks, practical as they are, must emulate these ever-evolving technology-mediated contexts. One of the first volumes of studies on the integration of ICT and TBLT, Thomas and Reinders, appeared in 2010. It covered a wide variety of topics (use of computer-mediated communication in intercultural exchanges, network-based computer-assisted language learning, teacher training, and virtual-world learning environments). More recently, González-Lloret and Ortega (2014) edited another volume dedicated to the use of ICT in TBLT activities. As they argue, “the canonical principles of task-based language teaching (TBLT) can be fitted integrally into the new language education and digital technology realities” (p. 1).

4. Latest developments in the project and conclusion

Each national tandem, formed by a practice school and a teacher training institution, has until now produced four tasks (40 *in toto*), which have already been trialled in the practice schools pertaining to the tandems of neighbouring countries. With the results of the trial (obtained from direct observation in school settings, analysis of outputs, evaluation by end users), the tandems have been carefully revising the tasks before submitting them to a team of independent reviewers. The latter will evaluate them according to a series of pre-defined criteria (including its compliance with the CEFR, functionality, quality of planning, availability of resources, clarity of the assessment procedures) (see also Lopes, 2015). Recommendations for improvement will then be incorporated into the tasks before they are translated into the consortium languages and made available in the project website at petallproject.eu.

Besides a thorough description of each of the ten national courses offered by the teacher training institutions, the website will also feature all the products of dissemination and exploitation activities carried out to date by the consortium members. They include presentations at national and international conferences, papers published in journals, theses produced in the context of the project, and reports on meetings with the teaching staff of schools and university departments.

Since one of the goals of the project is to foster transnational collaboration, the website also hosts a forum for teachers and trainees to exchange ideas, discuss practical issues and submit their own proposals of tasks to be added to the online project repository. On the other hand, national courses are also going to be scheduled in such a way as to allow trainees to engage in collaborative work with colleagues abroad. Common projects resulting from this work will be added to the repository.

Another equally important initiative is the international conference scheduled for 25-27 April 2016 at Granada University (Spain). It aims to (a) disseminate the project products amongst practitioners, through hands-on workshops and practical sessions, (b) discuss the latest investigation in the field, and (c) promote a debate between stakeholders involved in the design of language education policies not only in each country of the consortium, but also at European level. The starting point of the debate will be a study based on an online survey to be carried out at European level aiming to ascertain:

- the teachers' perceptions of TBLT;
- how willing they are to implement technology-mediated TBLT;
- how much they know about the CEFR;
- how much they still rely on more traditional approaches;
- their training needs in this area.

Only by the end of the project will it be possible to measure its reach and impact. However, from the preliminary results of its implementation, exploitation and dissemination, as well as

from the feedback from stakeholders and end users, the consortium expects to achieve the objectives successfully and to open new avenues for further research and actions.

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