



Using Task-Based e-tivities to Maximize Online English Language Learning during the COVID-19 School Closure: An Action Research Study

Francesca Ripamonti¹

University of Milan, Liceo Scientifico "G. Gandini", Italy¹

Abstract

The COVID-19 emergency has forced educators and students worldwide to abandon classrooms and move into distance education settings. This has involved losing contact with practices and schemes consolidated over the years and, urgently, finding new and effective alternatives to face-to-face education on an unprecedented scale. Language learning has had no immunity. This contribution intends to show how, among the numerous critical issues that have emerged, the health crisis has also become an experimental moment for language teaching. Having to go "beyond the distance", our research tried to develop a didactics of virtual closeness relying on the theoretical paradigms of Task-Based Language Learning (TBLL) approach and the foundations of the Companion Volume of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR CV): online interaction and mediation. This paper reports on an action-research study conducted during the second lockdown (autumn 2020) when digital technologies and virtual schooling had inevitably become an established practice. It was a vertical study as the participants belonged to two different educational levels, respectively: a group of 45 eleventh-grade high school students in Lodi, and a group of 25 Human Sciences undergraduates attending an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) workshop at the State University of Milan. It was an action-oriented study since, albeit with distinct objectives, the two groups engaged in task-based e-tivities originating from contingent needs-analysis and aiming at fostering real-world relevant communication (North, 2020) while interacting online with peers and educators, who played the role of facilitators, selecting, sequencing and monitoring tasks to help participants negotiate meanings (Richards & Rogers, 2014). Learners' central role in the assigned e-tivities was to complete authentic tasks which were purposefully tailored following criteria of "essentiality, naturalness and utility" (Ellis, 2003) to actively engage students with the language in meaningful contexts, even in remote settings. Qualitative and quantitative tools for collecting data included participants' observations, interviews and analysis of students' products. Formative assessment was assured by constant monitoring and ongoing feedback, while the summative assessment was carried out at task completions with rubrics whose criteria were shared with students. Preliminary results indicated that task-based e-tivities had high potential in promoting learners' opportunities for "natural" language learning in distance teaching. They also offered learners with fertile inputs of target language thus contributing to the improvement of communicative fluency without disregarding accuracy.

Keywords: task-based e-tivities, language teaching; interaction; online schooling; action-research

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The COVID-19 emergency has forced educators and students worldwide to abandon classrooms and move into distance education settings. This has involved losing contact with practices and schemes consolidated over the years and, urgently, finding new and effective alternatives to face-to-face education on an unprecedented scale. Language learning has had no immunity. This contribution intends to show how, among the numerous critical issues that have emerged, the health crisis has also become an experimental moment for language teaching. Having to go "beyond the distance", our research tried to develop a didactics of virtual closeness relying on the theoretical paradigms of Task-Based Language Learning (TBLL) approach and the foundations of the Companion Volume of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR CV): online interaction and mediation. This paper reports on an action-research study conducted during the second lockdown (autumn 2020) when digital technologies and virtual schooling had inevitably become an established practice.



1.2 Central theme, learning objectives and research questions

This project can be defined as vertical as the participants belonged to two different educational levels, respectively: a group of 45 eleventh-grade high school students in Lodi, and a group of 25 Human Sciences undergraduates attending an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) workshop at the State University of Milan. Also, it was an action-oriented study since, albeit with distinct objectives, the two groups engaged in task-based *e-tivities* originating from contingent needs-analysis: the online learning environment. Learners' central role in the assigned *e-tivities* was to complete authentic tasks which were purposefully tailored following criteria of "essentiality, naturalness and utility" (Ellis, 2003) to actively engage students with the language in meaningful contexts, even in remote settings. The *e-tivities* were customized to foster real-world relevant communication (North, 2020) and learner-centeredness (Long, 1985; Skehan, 1988) while students interacted online with peers and educators (Larsen-Freeman, 2000) who played the role of facilitators, selecting, sequencing, and monitoring tasks to help participants negotiate meanings (Richards & Rogers, 2014). Parallel and central to this vertical action-research project were the following research questions:

How to boost learners' competence and confidence with ICT in the online classroom? How to enhance the uptake of ICT in online language learning? How to maximize English interaction, effectively, in a remote environment?

2. Literature review

With the outbreak of the pandemic, there have been several online initiatives using web tools and applications with the simple aim of involving learners via the web, but few of these attempts were truly interactive for language learning and, even fewer proved to be pedagogically effective in creating a perfect match between linguistic mediation and task-based approach. Thus, it was decided that the best procedure for this investigation was to assign *e-tivities*, which, combining the new paradigm shifts in language education, i.e. online interaction, mediation and task completion, seemed the right pedagogical answer to language education boosting the adoption of technology.

2.1 *The Companion Volume of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR CV): mediation*

As suggested by Piccardo (2018, 33, 98) two new descriptors should be developed as integral parts of language learning: mediation and online interaction, because when we use a language, it is not just to communicate a message, but rather to develop an idea through what is often called 'linguaging' (the cognitive process of negotiating and producing meaningful, comprehensible output as part of language learning) or to ease understanding and communication. The basic requirement of linguistic mediation is to help people communicate to solve a problem. In simple terms, mediation refers to facilitating communication between two or more speakers or groups who, for whatever reason, cannot communicate directly. Within the language learning context, mediation combines receptive, productive and interactive skills: linking to previous knowledge, adapting language, breaking down complicated information; amplifying a dense text, or streamlining a text. In a world that is increasingly global, multicultural, and digitalized, mediation is a fundamental part of everyday life: it helps users create relationships, resolve conflict and enhance communication, all of which are essential life skills.

2.2 *The Companion Volume of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR CV): online interaction*

Being a multimodal phenomenon, online communication is always mediated through a machine, this implies that it is unlikely to be exactly the same as face-to-face interaction. Virtual speakers need to develop new language skills and resources to avoid common misunderstandings traditionally absent in face-to-face communication: online interaction. Some requirements for successful online interaction are: the need for more redundancy in messages; the need to check that the message has been correctly understood; the ability to reformulate in order to help comprehension or deal with misunderstanding; the ability to handle emotional reactions and the ability to include symbols, images, and other codes for making the message convey tone, stress, and prosody, but also the affective/emotional side and irony.

2.3 Task-Based Language Learning (TBLL)

Task-based English language learning is a technique that centers around the very purpose of language: communication (Willis, D. and Willis, J., 2007). In a task-based lesson, students develop their skills by engaging in authentic and meaningful situations in English. The teacher does not pre-



decide the language that will be studied, but plans a central task for students to complete. The language studied is then decided by what happens during the task. As well as being naturally interesting and motivating, this approach has several other advantages: students combine and activate all their language resources to complete a task, rather than isolating and practicing one skill at a time; authentic situations mean students have varied exposure to the language (including a rich variety of phrases, patterns, and language forms) and students spend much of their classroom time actively engaging rather than passively listening to the teacher. When the motivation to communicate is truly inspired through task-based learning, language becomes a tool to communicate and thus, is acquired more authentically and effectively..

3. Methodology and *e-tivities* design

For this project, the action research method was used, whose cycle, besides starting from the exploration of a contingent problem, namely the identification of an effective strategy for the distance teaching of languages, also required the design of a plan focused on task-based *e-tivities*, its implementation with the final reflection on the consequences on the entire process. As stated above, assigning *e-tivities* constituted our educational challenge to maintain students' affect, foster their engagement, and ameliorate their achievement in online language education.

3.1 What is an *e-tivity*?

E-tivity is a term coined by Professor Gilly Salmon (2002) to describe a framework for facilitating active learning in an online environment. An *e-tivity* involves learners interacting with one another and with the course tutor (the e-moderator) in an online communication environment in order to complete a particular task. *E-tivities* generally involve the tutor providing a "spark": a small piece of information, stimulus, or challenge. Learners then take part in online discussions or activities which require individual or group response. Feedback is then offered, often by the e-moderator but in some cases, it may be provided by the learners themselves..

3.2 Task-based *e-tivity* n.1: "Make grammar alive"

The starting problem analysis was the consideration that English grammar teaching is mandatory in Italian high schools and part of the syllabus, especially for students who have to take language exams at the end of the year (B2/C1 -CEFR). Locked down with remote teaching and tired of impersonal and frustrating grammar lectures, it was decided to apply a task-based *e-tivity* to make grammar lessons relevant and engaging for a group of forty-five 11grade -students. Our priority was to make grammar rules interactive and original by having students play an active role in the constructions of those specific functions expressing preferences/regrets/ complaints and assumptions (rather/if only/wish/if). The spark was "How can we make grammar structures and functions alive?". Peer teaching was the guiding principle for fifteen balanced groups of three students each who tried to involve classmates with digital and real-life grammar activities also involving situations and characters taken from other disciplines, part of their curriculum (CLIL methodology)

3.3 Task-based *e-tivity* n.2: "What do you want to demonstrate?"

At the end of the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) workshop, twenty-five undergraduates attending the Human Sciences faculty at the State University of Milan English where provocatively invited to answer this *e-tivity* spark "What do you want to demonstrate?". Students completed a short research-oriented project on a topic of their choice. Students briefly outlined the primary goal(s), feature(s), key-terms and outcome(s) of their research. They provided some background information to their issue, thus helping other students find out more about the reasons around research itself. This *e-tivity* proved how effectively students could communicate in a variety of situations as online interactions, presentations, and debating. This task-based *e-tivity* also generated new insights through in-depth investigation and showed what competencies each student had developed at the end of the workshop.

4. Learning outcomes

Qualitative and quantitative tools for collecting data included participants' observations, interviews and analysis of students' products. Formative assessment was assured by constant monitoring and ongoing feedback, while the summative assessment was carried out at task completions with rubrics whose criteria were shared with students. Both paths show how the task-based *e-tivity* method is a valuable and innovative alternative to front teaching in terms of benefits to make language contents meaningful and relevant to students' learning and lives; to get students to play an active role in their learning (despite the distance context); to learn how to apply language learning to real-life; to work in



group and collaborate remotely. The *e-tivity*-experiences also maximized students' management of 4Cs' innovation skills: critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity. Similarly, the virtual presentations of the final products to classmates not only engaged learners with digital tools but triggered such important key-competences as multilingual competence, persona and social citizenship competence, and learning to learn competence.

5. Conclusions

Despite the overwhelming consequences of the pandemic, this global crisis was also an extraordinary time for learning. We have shown how adaptable and resilient education systems, teachers, and students can be. With a focus on two specially designed task-based *e-tivities*, purposely created as remote learning solutions to re-imagine human connections and interactions with locked-down students, this action research study also highlighted their effectiveness in language acquisition and skills, far increased and maximized compared to when learning took place only in person. Preliminary results indicated that task-based *e-tivities* had high potential in promoting learners' opportunities for "natural" language learning in distance teaching and offered learners with fertile inputs of target language thus contributing to the improvement of communicative fluency without disregarding accuracy.

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