

Spurring ICT-based Tasks in the Language Classroom: a European Project (PETALL) of International Collaboration

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Abstract

PETALL, an acronym for Pan-European Task-based Activities for Language Learning, is an international project co-sponsored by the European Commission, which seeks to encourage the use of ICT-based tasks in the language classroom. Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is an approach that has witnessed a growing interest on the part of the teaching community over the past few years, especially thanks to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and to the national curricula across Europe, all of which acknowledge its importance in the development of the children's language and communicative skills. Research has provided strong evidence of its benefits, but in general teachers are still reluctant to make use of it in the language classroom due to a series of practical constraints and requirements. This is even truer when the tasks involve ICT. In order to tackle this problem, the consortium members (teacher training institutions and high schools from ten different countries) have built on the products of previous projects to draw a multinational plan for ICT-based task design management. The objectives are: promote mutual understanding and awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity through ICT-based TBLT; enhance the quality of teacher education in technology-mediated TBLT; help the teachers further develop their digital competence. This paper aims to disseminate the results of the project, as well as to encourage teachers, researchers and teacher trainers to make use of its products and services.

1. Introduction

PETALL—European Task-based Activities for Language Learning—is a project funded by the European Commission through its Lifelong Learning Programme. It aims to encourage the learning of foreign languages through the implementation in the classroom of tasks in which ICT plays an instrumental role by offering teachers samples of good practice that are in line with the recommendations of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). It is co-ordinated by the University of Algarve and involves ten countries (Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Serbia, Spain, the United Kingdom and Turkey), each of them represented by a tandem consisting of a teacher training institution and a primary or secondary school. This paper aims to present the project, including the reasons that led to its creation, the scientific references underpinning it, its operationalization and the exploitation of its results.

2. The starting point of the project

Since tasks are generally student-centered and involve problem-solving procedures or product development, the learning process succeeds in drawing the student's attention to content and communication in ways usually overlooked by more traditional approaches. Tasks not only facilitate social interaction, but they also make students meet practical challenges and make them responsible for results of the communication process.

Although the national curricula of many countries are clear about the importance of this approach, the reality of the classroom hardly echoes the official documents, since it is not always possible to meet the conditions for the implementation of tasks, especially if they involve ICT. Tasks can be accessible and intelligible in terms of its design, but the ways in which they can be incorporated into the classroom routine and integrated into the lesson planning pose methodological and practical difficulties. Problems such as the amount of work involved in the preparation of the task, the difficulty of encouraging students to communicate in a foreign language, or the challenge of monitoring multiple groups simultaneously can be discouraging for many teachers. Also difficult to resolve are the attempts to find the most appropriate strategies to improve the quality of the student learning experience, the creation of assessment tools consistent with the capabilities of the student and the design of tasks that best meet the needs of the students. These issues prevent teachers from giving TBLT a try, as they usually feel more confident with practices that do not expose them to the contingencies of the real-time communication between students. A pre-course survey conducted in 2012 within the framework of a previous project, the ETALAGE (European Task-based Activities in

Language Learning: a Good Practices Exchange), showed that the reluctance of many professionals to use task-based activities was related to the lack of specialized support and to the weak collaboration between peers. Another problem was the difficulty to adapt tasks to the specific needs of the classes [1]. The adaptation of some samples published in the project repository was time-consuming and demanded significant changes. Nevertheless, the post-course survey revealed that, thanks to the training course, the trainees had acquired a better understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of ICT-based TBLT and felt more confident about designing and implementing such activities in their classrooms.

3. Searching for solutions

One of the conclusions that the ETALAGE consortium drew was that it was necessary to work on the implementation of the samples of ICT-based tasks in educational contexts other than those in which they had been first designed. The purpose was to ensure that they could be shared with teachers from other countries. This required the creation of regional networks for their joint development. Only the collaborative work among teachers working in different education systems could help overcome some of the limitations identified in the previous project, in particular those related to the adaptation process, the lack of specialized support and the absence of dialogue among peers.

Thus, the PETALL consortium, looking back at the results of previous projects where some of its members had already been involved, proposed to build a transnational strategy for the management and design of ICT-based tasks. The consortium also decided to invest in the development of the key competences defined in the 2010 Progress Report of the Council of Europe and the European Commission, in particular those related to communication in foreign languages, digital skills, social and civic skills, and cultural awareness and expression. The consortium also seeks to promote multilingualism, linguistic diversity and mutual understanding between cultures—important factors of social cohesion at the heart of the language teaching policies of the Council of Europe.

4. Research in the field

Only recently have researchers and academics paid more attention to the integration of ICT in Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT). Over a decade ago, authors such as Ellis [2], Nunan [3] and Willis & Willis [4] gave an invaluable contribution to the development of the theoretical and methodological framework of TBLT, but in general they proposals only took into account face-to-face personal interaction in traditional classroom settings, leaving aside technology-mediated contexts. The specific features of such technological settings require a differentiated approach, all the more so because the uses of language have also evolved with the development of ICT (take, for example, skyping, texting, tweeting or chatting).

One of the most important contributions to the study of the relationship between ICT and TBLT was Thomas and Reinders's volume of studies dedicated to ICT-based TBLT [5] published in 2010, covering subjects as diverse as intercultural exchange in TBLT and computer-mediated communication (CMC), TBLT and network-based CALL, teacher training in TBLT and ICT, and virtual worlds.

Another volume on the same topic edited by González-Lloret and Ortega came out in 2014 [6], and there it is defended that “the canonical principles of task-based language teaching (TBLT) can be fitted integrally into the new language education and digital technology realities.”

The PETALL project speaks directly to this set of concerns. It aims to contribute to a better understanding of: the transnational dynamics of collaborative work between teachers in the management and design of tasks where ICT is used; the role of evaluation tools in improving the quality of both teacher training in ICT-based TBLT; and the aspects that ensure that these tasks can travel well.

5. Objectives of the project

In order to solve the problems identified in the previous ETALAGE project, the consortium set the following goals:

- a) Encourage transnational collaborative work between teachers through the creation of regional networks for the development of ICT-based tasks;
- b) Facilitate access to ICT-based tasks usable in various cultural and educational contexts;
- c) Promote mutual understanding and awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity;
- d) Improve the quality of teacher training in ICT-based TBLT;
- e) Contribute to the ongoing development of the teachers' digital competence.

6. Operationalization of the project

The project brings together teacher training institutions and practice schools. Each tandem proposed samples of good practices designed in accordance with the CEFR and trialed them in the tandems of the neighbouring countries, thus forming an inter-institutional chain of collaborative work.

After the trialing of the tasks and their evaluation by end-users (students and teachers), the results were submitted to independent reviewers, who issued recommendations for change or improvement. In addition, the teacher training institutions offered training courses dedicated to the ICT-based TBLT. The evaluation results of these courses were also submitted to independent reviewers, as part of the internal mechanisms of quality assurance of the project [7].

The products (40 tasks and 10 teacher training courses) will soon be translated in the languages of the consortium and published on the project website, which will also feature all the papers, reports, and other material produced within the scope of the project.



Fig.1. Distribution of the chain of inter-institutional collaborative work of the project

7. Expected impact of the project

The target groups of the project are essentially foreign languages teachers working in primary and secondary education, adult education, and initial and in-service teacher training programmes.

The project is expected to influence the quality of teaching and learning both in schools and teacher training institutions, and to have an impact on the curriculum itself, as some of the tasks can involve other subject areas.

It also intends to operate a change of focus in the teachers' perceptions of their practices, as it seeks to encourage them to critically question their methodologies, to innovate their practices and to avoid excessive reliance on traditional approaches. On the other hand, it seeks to make teachers aware of the need to invest more in the development of the learners' communicative skills, so as to ensure that they are effectively able to make use of the language in real situations. The tasks have been designed

to help learners develop not just their language skills, but also their ability to learn, to adapt and to intervene in different context.

8. Dissemination and exploitation

Dissemination activities are fundamental for a successful exploitation of the project. A real impact can only be made if the products are widely disseminated by the consortium and accepted by end users. That is the reason why the information gathered from the trialing and evaluation of the tasks has been shared with the target groups in a number of contexts. An effort has been made to divulge its results through presentations at national and international conferences and papers in peer-reviewed journals. Contacts established for the implementation and dissemination of the tasks have also resulted in proposals for further collaborative work.

For a more effective dissemination of the project and of its products, the partners have been laying down their own dissemination and exploitation strategies, resorting to different dissemination tools, types of events and actions, and channels of communication.

There is already a provisional website (<http://petallproject.wix.com/petall>) containing systematic information about the project. However, this is about to be replaced by another more complete multilingual website (<http://petallproject.eu>), currently under construction by a web design company hired for this purpose, and which contains a set of interactive features that allow the user to access a discussion forum, ask questions directly related to the consortium experts and do upload their own proposals.

9. The European added value

The best way to foster a communicative approach to language learning is to make students interact with native speakers of the target language. This project has sought to do this through the proposal of samples of good practice where learners are asked to work together with colleagues from across the border.

On the other hand, the project has allowed education professionals to learn more about other European educational systems. Participants in the project have been given the opportunity to visit the schools of the neighbouring tandems and witness the type of work that is currently being carried out there. This direct contact with other educational contexts has allowed them not only to come across new teaching solutions, but also to look at their own education system and practices with a more critical eye.

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