



Task-Based Learning: A Research Study on the Use of Web 2.0 Technology in Second Language Acquisition

Ana Boman¹

Abstract

The research is a pilot study that evaluates the application of task-based activities with Web 2.0 tools in second language acquisition. The research project focuses on the delivery of instructional content with task-based activities in a basic Spanish language course and the integration of technological tools to promote language competence. The task-based activities are designed to facilitate the development of language production in real life situations. These task-based activities are developed to foster an interactive student-centered environment to encourage student participation, commitment and responsibility as well as to promote students' autonomy in their own learning. The participants in the study employed technological resources available inside and outside the classroom to practice writing, reading, listening and speaking skills in the target language. Two kinds of data were collected and analyzed for the study: These are the responses from the participants from written questionnaires and oral interviews, as well as the instructor's observation from the students' participation in their task-based assignments. Data collection was evaluated to assess the students' academic progress in second language learning. Preliminary data shows that students improved their writing skills and reading skills as well as their listening and speaking skills in Spanish.

Keywords: *Second Language Acquisition, Web 2.0 Technology Tools, Task-Based Activities, Student-Centered Environment;*

1. Background

The field of language acquisition is dynamic, and it is developing constantly to improve the quality of teaching. The evolution in language teaching has implemented different paradigms over the years. One of the most important theories in the acquisition of a second language is the communicative theory that has its beginnings in the decade of the 70's. According to Brumfit and Johnson [3], this theoretical framework emerges as a separation from the structuralism scheme which focuses on language learning based on repetition and memorization of grammatical structures in the target language. One of the communicative theory's main objectives is the development of strategies to increase the production of authentic language with the student [5]. This theory emphasizes the elaboration of activities to increase language production and communicative competence in the target language. In addition, the student is considered the principal subject who will be involved in real-life communications. Communicative theory emerges from the constructivism model which suggests that students build their own knowledge to what they have learned in the classroom, thus allowing them to develop autonomy in their own learning. As indicated by Usca and Orrego [6], students' autonomy is defined as "the capacity for critical reflection in decision-making and independent action". It is important that the instructor collaborates in a meaningful way for the student to develop autonomy in the classroom. The students become protagonists in their own learning with the instructor's assistance.

Within the communicative theoretical framework, the paradigm of the Teaching of Languages with Focus in Tasks (TBLT: Task Based Language Teaching) is established in the 80s. Candlin and Murphy [4] proposed the model of language teaching through the task-based approach with emphasis on functional and meaningful (purposeful) use of language. According to Candlin and Murphy [4], the tasks are activities that promote the use of real language while involving the student in cognitive processes in the production and comprehension of language. As stated by Alba and Zanón [1], the tasks are activities that lead to the preparation of a final project to meet the learning objectives of the language course. These activities are preparatory tasks or enablers that comprise exercises and assignments to promote authentic language. Furthermore, Zanón [7] describes the tasks as units of work in the classroom for language learning that meet the following characteristic: The tasks are activities that are representative of real-life

¹ Trine University, United States



communications. Additionally, the design of preparatory tasks with independent and collaborative assignments, as well as the integration of these activities in the academic curriculum will meet the needs of the student in language learning. For this reason, the design and the adoption of tasks as didactic units in the academic curriculum are essential for the completion of the final task or project to increase the student's linguistic competence.

Zanón [7] proposes a scheme in the design of tasks:

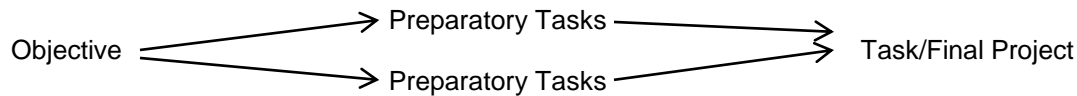


Figure 1. Scheme in the design of the activities by means of Task-Based Approach

The model of language teaching with the task-based approach has taken an important place in recent years, as it is considered one of the most effective perspectives in the teaching and acquisition of second languages (in particular, Spanish language learning). Likewise, it is important to offer students different resources in and out of the classroom to promote language learning. One of these resources is the implementation of technology tools to meet the needs of millennials and future generations with global communication in the twenty-first century. The use of technology such as Web 2.0 tools (internet-based free software including blogs, wikis, and web pages) provides instructors the opportunity to offer these tools to teach curriculum content in second language acquisition. Blake [2] suggests that if technology is used wisely, it could play a major role in students' performance with the target language. Research suggests that one of the benefits of technology tools is to support student-centered learning for students' engagement in their language learning.

2. Methodology

This research presents a pilot study with a task-based approach on the use of technology in the teaching of foreign language. The study analyzes the impact of one of the Web 2.0 asynchronous tools with tasks and activities to increase student's linguistic competence in learning the Spanish language. The researcher poses two research questions in the study. The first one is about the effectiveness of Web 2.0 technology tools in a task-based approach to promote communication with real language in the classroom. The second research question is about the motivation of students in learning the Spanish language to complete activities successfully with the use of technology tools. The study evaluates the use of technology in the teaching of the Spanish language particularly with one of the Web 2.0 asynchronous tools in the design of a personal web page (Weebly Web Page).

2.1 Project Design and Participants

The project is based on with quantitative and qualitative mixed methods with a group of 25 students (ages from 17 years to 22 years). These undergraduate students enrolled in a beginner Spanish course at a university in Northern Indiana in the United States with face-to-face sessions during an academic semester of eighteen weeks. The research is conducted without a control group. The pilot study integrated task-based activities as part of the students' requirements in their academic curriculum with writing, reading, listening, and speaking skills. These activities are preparatory tasks which foster an interactive student-centered environment. The activities are designed to encourage student participation in, commitment to and responsibility for their own learning, as well as the development of language production in real world situations. In this study, students completed independent tasks as well as collaborative preparatory tasks designed for a final goal or project within the academic requirements of the course. Collaborative tasks included one-on-one editing and grading activities to foster communication between students. Each student collaborated with a classmate to review their preparatory tasks to provide academic support. These tasks were implemented as learning strategies for the completion of a final project or objective "Proyecto Especial" (Special Project in Spanish) with the creation of a web page to promote the practice of writing, reading, listening and speaking skills with authentic language using grammar structures from the didactic units within the language course curriculum.



2.2 Final Project Guidelines

For their final project (Proyecto Especial), the students were asked to write a paragraph (rough draft) in Spanish with personal information about themselves (200 words) using grammar structures learned in each lesson in a task-based approach. Students shared their drafts with a classmate in a peer-editing activity to provide feedback. Once they completed this activity, students met with the instructor for additional feedback on their drafts. When the instructor provided feedback, students wrote a final copy and created a personal web page (Weebly Web page) with information from their written paragraph. The construction of this webpage is part of a scheme of tasks focused on promoting the practice of oral, writing, reading and listening skills in a context with authentic language. The high-tech tools enabled students to develop their web page through the reflection of their personal information. In addition, students used the information from their written paragraph as well as images and videos to illustrate the Weebly page. Students shared their Weebly pages and communicated this information in front of the class to with their peers in the target language.

3. Research Outcomes

Research data were collected with information from a survey (15 questions), the evaluation of tasks and activities in the final project, and a journal with observations from the instructor. These data were analyzed to assess the students' academic progress and motivation in language learning.

3.1 Academic Progress Evaluation

The instructor graded each student's Proyecto Especial according to the project grading rubric. Preliminary data show that most students displayed improvement in their writing and reading skills, but it was observed that their listening and speaking skills did not improve at the same level in Spanish.

3.2 Observation from Journals

An interesting point is that observation from the instructor's journals showed some students did not feel comfortable during the peer-editing activities at the beginning of the semester. It seems that some students did not think they had the necessary skills in Spanish to complete the editing tasks with their classmates successfully. However, the instructor recognizes that most students felt more comfortable while reviewing their classmate's preparatory tasks at the end of the semester. At that time, the instructor also noticed that students were more willing to engage in collaborative tasks to provide meaningful academic support to their classmates.

3.3 Student Motivation

The data from the post-survey questionnaire also showed enhanced student motivation in language learning in Spanish. The students' responses in the survey showed the following preliminary data in a 5 Point Likert psychometric scale.



Table 1. Post-Survey Questionnaire (Sample Questions).

Statements of Survey (n-25)	Mean	SD
8. My Reading Skills in Spanish improved as a result of the Proyecto Especial	4.0	0.41
9. My Writing Skills in Spanish improved as a result of the Proyecto Especial	4.1	0.41
10. My Listening Skills in Spanish improved as a result of the Proyecto Especial	3.7	0.55
11. My Speaking Skills in Spanish improved as a result of the Proyecto Especial	4	0.62
12. The instructor interacted with me to facilitate difficulties in Spanish for this project	4.1	0.55
14. The tasks I performed on this project were relevant to a real-life experience	3.6	0.31
15. I enjoyed doing a personal web page in Spanish as the Proyecto Especial	3.6	0.64

4. Conclusions

Preliminary data in the pilot study showed there was an improvement in academic performance with the majority of the students in the study with a task-based approach. The research also showed the effectiveness of the incorporation of Web 2.0 technology tools to motivate most students in their language learning as well as promoting communication in the classroom with real language in Spanish. However, in future studies, the researcher believes it will be useful to involve a control group to compare findings with subjects in different groups.



References

- [1] Alba, J. M., and Zanón Gómez, J. (1999). "La enseñanza del español mediante tareas" (Teaching Spanish with Tasks). (Colección E . Serie estudios, 2; Colección E , Serie estudios ; 2). Madrid: Edinumen.
- [2] Blake, R. (2013). "Brave new digital classroom". Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press
- [3] Brumfit, C. and Johnson, K. (1983). "The communicative approach to language teaching". Oxford University Press.
- [4] Candlin, C., and D. Murphy. (1987). "Language learning tasks". Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- [5] Nunan, D. (1989) "Designing Tasks for the Communicative Classrooms". Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [6] Usma, J., and Orrego, L. M. (2007). "La Autonomía del Estudiante y del Profesor en Estudios de Investigación. Acción: Hallazgos y Retos desde la Universidad de Antioquia, Medellín" (Student and Professor's Autonomy in in Research Studies: Findings and Challenges from University of Antioquia, Medellin). Escuela de Idiomas, Universidad de Antioquia.
- [7] Zanón, J. (1990). "Los enfoques por tareas para la enseñanza de las lenguas extranjeras".(Task-based Approach in Foreign Language Teaching). CABLE. Revista de didáctica del español como lengua extranjera.