International Conference
ICT for Language Learning

Apprising Teacher Trainees of New Language Approaches: an ICT Task-Based Training Course

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Abstract

Most language practitioners advocate for the introduction of ICT in their teaching since this is a motivation booster for students of all levels and, above all, because it prevents them from sticking to the textbook. This idea paved the way for reinventing the language teaching praxis and adding a sense of realism to whatever happens in the language classroom. To achieve this, we designed a training course for teacher trainees where ICT and Task Based Language Learning Approach (TBLL) merged together. This is the underlying premise behind the European-funded project PETALL (Pan European Task-Based Activities for Language Learning, Reference number 530863-LLP-1-2012-1-NL-KA2-KA2MP). We will examine the structure, contents and delivery of the national training course held in Spain. Thus, this is geared towards the development of strategies to provide teachers with the necessary tools to include ICT-based tasks in their teaching activities. Contents shift from the theoretical tenets of TBLL to the practical empowerment of attendees so that they get a clear idea of how this approach can be part of their future lessons. In this sense, participants were taught first how to do the task, then they we did the task together, and finally we transferred the leading role and they were requested to do the task on their own (I do, we do, you do). At the end, we present some conclusions based on the feedback provided by teacher trainees who kindly pinpointed areas for the betterment of the original plan.

1. Introduction

To waken interest and kindle enthusiasm is the sure way to teach easily and successfully.
(Tryon Edwards)

The teaching of foreign languages has shifted towards the pragmatic use of language instead of being anchored in predictable communication. Leaners demand input which can be transformed into meaningful language chunks and that is liable to be utilized in real language contexts. This was the key idea which revolved in a group of language practitioners' mind when we first met back in 2012. We quested for an innovative, motivating and appealing way of teaching foreign languages across Europe with an emphasis on ICT and Task-Based Language Learning (TBLL). This embryo plan was brought to fruition in the form of a European funded project entitled Pan European Task Activities for Language Learning (PETALL) (reference number 530863-LLP-2012-NL-KA2-KA2MP). Since then, we have been working hard for three years and we have come up with an interesting bunch of ICT based tasks which will be available for the whole educational community (in Europe and beyond) on the webpage http://petallproject.eu/petall/index.php/en/.

2. Course design

This training course was organized into four modules, starting with the theoretical underpinnings underlying the project and moving on to the practical side in order to foster autonomous learning. In the following lines, it will be described the structure of the course combining our initial proposal and the implementation experiences.

Module I: Definition of concepts (4 hours). Students were familiarized with the concept of *Task* but firstly tackling this topic from a historical perspective. That is, we revised former and current teaching methods in order to fully understand what tasks add to the teaching dimension. This historical overview goes back to the Grammar-Translation methods and goes through Audiolingualism, Notional/Functional teaching (communicative approaches), and culminates in the Task-Based Language Learning (TBLL) approach. Regarding the very definition of task, we relied on two authors: Nunan and Ellis. The former defined it as "[a] piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form" [1]. The latter stated that:

"A task is a workplan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content

has been conveyed. To this end, it requires them to give primary attention to meaning and to make use of their own linguistic resources, although the design of the 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. Like other language activities, a task can engage productive or receptive, and oral or written skills, and also various cognitive processes. [2]."

Thus, a task is goal directed, it involves a primary focus on meaning, the participants choose the linguistic resources needed to complete the task, and it must have a clearly defined outcome. Regarding task typology, we prioritized focused (encouraging the processing of linguistic features) and unfocussed tasks (unspecified language use) which are subdivided into pedagogic and real world tasks. Real-world tasks require the learner to perform a behavior similar to the one he or she will carry out in the real world. On the contrary, pedagogic tasks require the learner to do things that he or she will not do outside the classroom. Some typical examples would be information-gap tasks, reasoning tasks, personal tasks or role-play tasks. However, the distinction between pedagogic and real-world tasks is not always crystal clear. To this matter, Nunan [1] concluded that:

"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."

Once tasks have been framed, we need to give some thought to the use of ICTs. New technologies are significant and a good way to engage and motivate students in class, and help learners to understand our current world which is totally immersed in the language of technologies. Technologies have almost taken part in every aspect of life. It is the medium through which one can be informed of the latest news or gathering some useful information in any field of knowledge. Moreover, digital competence involves an increase of motivation, autonomy and curiosity for learning. Thus, if we combine ICTs and TBLL, we are likely to maximize and make the most of the teaching time.

Module II: Designing ICT-based tasks (10 hours).

The second module was organized in a series of practical workshops to transfer knowledge to students and empower them to use them autonomously. Our motto was: "I do, we do, you do". So, in this module we taught participants the process of two tasks, and afterwards we did them together. The first ICT-based task is entitled *Finding Zemo* whose goal is to create a comic strip using target vocabulary (we exemplified it with parts of the house and prepositions of place). The online software which works well for this task is *GoAnimate* (for younger learners) and *BitStrips* (for older learners). The lecturer designed a 6-frame comic strip containing one frame with the questions *Where is Zemo? What is he doing?*; five frames with different parts of a house and prepositions (at least two of them must contain a sentence telling what Zemo is doing). Another task was based on the online software *storybird.com* named *Once upon a time*. The final goal was to write a story with illustrations. The chosen topic was *Violence at School* and the lecturer wrote a three-page story using pictures from storybird.com as hints.

For the next step, students' participation was solicited as a first attempt to familiarize them with the actual performance of tasks. So, we organized attendees in groups and with our help they were taught to create a comic and an online story such as we had done previously.

Module III: Creating tasks and assessment (10 hours).

In the third module the power was shifted to the students (*you do*). The ten hours allocated in the schedule were evenly distributed into face-to-face lessons and at-home lessons. We organized the participants in five groups and, consequently, we selected five tasks: *Watch, discuss and create your commercial*; *NGOs: A better world is possible; Map task* (from Italy); *Webquest on addictions;* and *Come and visit my hometown* (from Portugal).

The first one, *Watch, discuss and create your commercial*, aimed to create a TV commercial using their mobile phone. After activating students' schemata through the viewing of several commercials (www.youtube.com/watch?v=OAlyHUWjNjE,*www.youtube.com/watch?v=pfxB5ut-KTs,* *www.youtube.com/watch?v=cZGghmwUcbQ&list=PL5iL6ZuuVIEQyMStAkOg7h5up2uMk8ch-*), this group had to film a commercial (one minute long) with the topic "*books for all*". The aspects they had to take into account were the audience, the story, the message, and the music. The second task was a Webquest based on http://zunal.com/webquest.php?w=254893 under the title *NGOs: A better world is possible*. The product was a slide presentation which analysed an NGO in depth. We chose an NGO to care for the environment (*Greenpeace*). In this group there were four experts: expert on the organization itself, expert on the problems dealt with in the organisation, expert on the projects of the association, and expert on volunteer work. With the help of the Internet (although the actual task was to be performed in the NGO local headquarters), the lecturer helped them to gather the needed information (for more information, see [3]). As for the third task, *Map task*, the target group was given

the instructions to prepare it. They had to choose a picture and cut it into pieces using the online software from www.jigsawplanet.com. In parallel with these events, they wrote (and then recorded) ten sentences describing the picture and those were used at a later stage to recompose the jigsaw. Once everything was prepared, they tried it out in class with the rest of the participants. The next task, *Webquest on addictions*, was accessible in http://zunal.com/webquest.php?w=251825 and aimed to design an anti addictions campaign following instructions from the webpage. The last activity, *Come and visit my hometown*, targeted at the creation of a promotional video about students' own town. They chose three monuments of Granada city and with a video editor added their own voices, music effects, credits, etc. At the end of the training course, participants presented their final products and shared their opinions on the process.

3. Conclusions

This course responded to the demands of teacher trainees who usually complained of the need of more training innovative methodologies where ICTs play a leading role. That is why we tackled it from a very practical viewpoint where our main goal was to empower students to take the lead in the introduction of ICT-based tasks. At the end of the course, we collected an evaluation sheet where participants expressed the strong and weak points of the 24-hour-training course. All of these were carefully listened to and considered for the writing of this paper.

References

[1] Nunan, D. (1989). *Designing Tasks for the Communicative Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[2] Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based Language Learning and Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[3] Ruiz Cecilia, R., & Guijarro Ojeda, J.R. (2014). "ICT-Based Tasks for Language Learners: The Spanish Proposal. In IATED (ed.), *Proceedings of the 7th International Conference of Education, Research, and Innovation*. Seville, 17-19 November 2014.