ICT in Task-Based Language Learning – Analyzing a Lesson Plan in PETALL Project

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Abstract

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is a communicative approach with focus on language meaning while performing some real-life task, rather than on language forms (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004). Students are believed to learn more effectively when their minds are focused on the task, rather than on the language they are using (Prabhu, 1987). Although TBL emphasizes meaning, form is not put aside (Bonces & Bonces, 2010). Each of the task models have a period in class to focus on form which is different from focusing on language (Willis and Willis, 2007). Task as a work-plan involves any of the four language skills, engages cognitive processes and has defined communicative outcome (Ellis, 2003). Besides defining the concept of TBLT in general, its framework and tasks as well, this paper offers critical analysis of the task model designed as a part of PETALL (Pan-European Task Activities for Language Learning) project. The project involves a consortium of 20 partners, organized in 10 tandems, each formed by a teacher training department from a university and a secondary school. The paper presents critical analysis of experiences in designing and implementing tasks. The PETALL task has two dimensions: linguistic and ICT. It comprises Ellis (2003) and Willis (1996) model of TBLT framework with all characteristics of "open" and "creative" task. Created task is the example of interdisciplinary project involving geography, history, art and all other content integrated with language and it presents the CLIL approach which involves student-centered work and ICT skills, integrating language and content at the same time (Coyle et.al., 2010; Dalton-Puffer, 2007; Mehisto et. al., 2008). Therefore, it would be necessary to create the assessment instruments that incorporate both content- and language-focused criteria.

1. Introduction

Task-based language learning is an educational approach and a teaching methodology of L2 as an integral part of communicative language teaching where focus is on a language form (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Samuda & Bygate, 2008; Van den Branden, 2006). The basic notion of TBLT (task-based language teaching) is a task. A task is "what people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in between" (Long, 1985), activity with specified objective (Crookes, 1986) requiring students to "arrive to an outcome from given information through some process of thought" (Prabhu, 1987). Such task involves learners in "comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language" (Nuan, 1989) where meaning is primary (Skehan, 1996a), i.e. learners use language with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective (Bygate, et.al. 2001). Learners learn language structures by interacting communicatively while engaged in the tasks focusing on task completion and meaning. TBLT derives some of its rationale from a distinction between "conscious learning" or "knowing that" and "subconscious acquisition" or "knowing how" (Nunan 2004: 77). TBLT focuses on the use of authentic language, target language. Referring to these definitions, students use their knowledge as to achieve their goal; if any new information is needed (e.g. linguistic forms or vocabulary), the teacher will act as a knower who provides it so that students do not interrupt the process and achieve the expected outcome (Bonces & Bonces, 2010) and, finally, tasks are goal-oriented activities and meaning-centred, as well.

The interest in TBLT is based on strong belief that it facilitates second language acquisition and makes L2 learning and teaching more effective. Students learn more effectively when their mind is occupied with a concrete task (Prabhu, 1987) offering besides concentration on language, its structure, functions or vocabulary also other practical experience (fulfilling tasks with problem-solving elements, making decisions, etc.). Students communicate in the target language and use wide range of language items. Language is used for attaining successful communication in real-life communicative situations. When learners are engaged in task work it provides a better context for the activation of learning processes" (Richards and Rodgers, 2004:223).

Bonces & Bonces (2010) suggest that although TBL emphasizes meaning, form is not put aside. Each of the task models have a period in class to focus on form which is different from focusing on

language, i.e. focus on forms at the end of each task cycle, which is defined as a sequence of tasks related to one another (Willis and Willis, 2007).

2. Tasks in PETALL

The project Pan-European Task Activities for Language Learning (PETALL) promotes task based language learning through ICT in FL with emphasis on improving both language and ICT competencies at the same time. Many issues are considered in the project outline as it follows.

In general, tasks are learner-centred and involve problem-solving procedures or the development of products, help learners meet practical challenges, facilitate interaction and make learners responsible for the outcomes of the communication process. There are a lot of issues teachers need to be aware: the amount of work involved in preparing the task, the difficulty of making learners communicate solely in the foreign language or the challenge of monitoring several groups at the same time in the course of the activity, and finding the most suitable strategies to enhance the quality of the student's learning experience as well. These problems may be discouraging to many FL teachers, who prefer to hold to conventional teaching practices in which they feel more confident and less exposed to the contingencies of real-time communication between learners. PETALL project partners aim to promote TBLT through ICT, plurilingualism, linguistic diversity and mutual understanding, all of which are at the core of the Council of Europe language education policies.

This paper aims to present a task made for the necessity of PETALL project and offers the critical analysis of the task that may serve as proposal for effective task and sample of good practice in language learning environment. The project involves a consortium of 20 partners, organized in 10 tandems, each formed by a teacher training department from a university and a secondary or basic school. Each tandem is to work with two tandems of the neighbouring countries. Serbia (Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade and Aviation Academy, secondary school) make tandem with Hungary and Turkey. The tandem is to design four ICT-based language tasks, two of which are to be trailed and evaluated in the neighbouring country. The members from each tandem are supposed to design and implement the tasks and decide on their implementation. For this purpose, one out of four tasks has been made and it will be presented in this paper.

The title of this task is Traveling and this task is intended to Hungarian partners and designed for the needs of Hungarian students with respect to their level of language and ICT skills. The task has two dimensions: linguistic and ICT. Referring to linguistic dimension, the task is at B1/B2 CEFR level and practice reading, writing and speaking skills. If we consider ICT dimension, it must be noted that following competences are expected to be developed: make a power point presentation, find relevant information on internet using appropriate search engine.

Following the Ellis (2003) framework for describing tasks, predicted outcomes of tasks can be product and process. If we speak in terms of product, in the task presented in this paper, it is obvious that predicted product is 'open', which implies that there are several possibilities (Ellis, 2003) (e.g. present interesting facts and events about city through a city presentation). "Open tasks are those where the participants know there is no predetermined solution (….) and learners are free to decide on solutions" (Ellis, 2003:89). According to Willis (Willis, 1996 in Ellis, 2003) pedagogic classification of tasks, this task sample has characteristics of "creative tasks, i.e. projects, often involving several stages that can (….) include the need to carry out some research" (ibid. p.212)

In terms of Ellis (2003) framework for designing the task-based lesson, we may notice all components of TBL lesson: pre-task, during task and post-task. The purpose of the pre-task is to prepare students to perform that task in ways that will promote acquisition (ibid. p.244). Performing a similar task in the pre-task phase serves as "preparation for performing the main task" (ibid p.245). Students are given a map of their hometown, Budapest, and they need to mark on the map the most interesting places tourists should visit and see. They write a short description of marked places and read it to the rest of the classroom playing guessing game. Other students try to guess what it is about. It is supposed to be carried out as group work activity completing a task of the same kind as and with similar content to the main task.

One assumption underlying TBLT is that learners have a variety of resources at their disposal independent of both their immediate learning environment and their present teacher. The learner may possess prior knowledge of the topic that the task requires, be familiar with the task in his/her native language, have the necessary linguistic abilities and confidence and be motivated to carry out the task. When performing the task for the first time, students often have difficulty estimating how successful their interaction will be. Time is a significant factor. Therefore students are assigned to do the task as homework, allowing students sufficient time to prepare and sometimes repeat the negotiation task or to perform a similar task has proved to increase effectiveness. In 4 groups, students need to prepare power point presentation "Come and Visit Rome, Paris, London, and

Vienna" (each group different city) following the pattern given and done previously. They are supposed to be creative using photos, videos, animations, etc. If we consider this stage of task-based learning through Ellis (2003) task performance option during task phase, it is obvious that teacher does not apply time pressure factor, but "allow students to complete task in their own time" (Ellis, 2003:249). Giving students an unlimited time to perform task results in language that is both more complex and more accurate than language used in task under time pressure (Yuan & Ellis, 2003 in Ellis, 2003:249). According to Willis (1996) framework, report is a part of task cycle, where students in groups present their reports to the class, or exchange written reports, and compare results. Teacher then comments on the content of the reports (ibid.). In Ellis (2003) TBL lesson framework, report is a part of post-task phase where students present their presentation to the rest of a classroom, as a report on how they did the task and what they discovered (Willis, 1996). As in Willis (1996) third phase of task-based lesson plan, teacher may ask students to practice new words, phrases, and patterns occurring in the presentation, in this case, to write a postcard from Belgrade describing what they have seen, done, tasted, following the pattern of the main task. Teacher can ask students to report "uptake" (Allwright, 1984 in Ellis, 2003:259), i.e. what language they learned from the task.

3. Conclusion

Task-based language teaching method is inevitable part of a communicative approach of language instruction. There are many advantages of this learning strategy. The greatest is that students learn language better when they are not aware of language but their attention is on meaning, not on form, while performing a task in a simulated real-life situation. However, Willis and Skehan emphasize the need to provide opportunities for focusing on form in a task-based lesson (Ellis, 2003). Task needs to be planned, outcomes need to be clear to students, and lesson is student-centred. PETALL task outlined in this paper has elements of Willis (1996) and Ellis (2003) TBLT framework and represents the sample of good practices in language teaching developing both ICT and language competencies. While designing the task form, it was carefully planned following the pattern of three stages of TBLT framework. Activities used in this task are supposed to motivate students. Task is "open" (Ellis, 2003) and "creative" (Willis, 1986). It is of great importance task to be evaluated and revised by external evaluators, and tested in the classroom, as to check adequacy for implementing in different cultural, social and educational context. Many language testers have recognized the value of tasks for assessing learners' language capacities to communicate in an L2 (Ellis, 2003:278). We suggest additional researches as to find out the useful and applicable model for assessing students' competencies, pointing out the difficulty of separating language and content, in terms of CLIL context.

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