



A Qualitative Study on Technology-Mediated TBLT for Soft Skill Development in an ESAP Course

Maria Christoforou, Eftychia Xerou¹

Cyprus University of Technology, Cyprus¹

Abstract

The present study explores the implementation of technology-mediated Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in an undergraduate course and to what extent that affects the students' soft skill development. The qualitative study involves 11 English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) first-year students of the Fine Arts Department and implements three technology-mediated tasks: a gallery interview, increasing audience engagement with books and creating an artefact for promotional purposes, all designed by author one. The tasks provide real-content and reinforce the development of three soft skills: convincing, problem-solving and creativity skills, pertinent to a Fine Arts context. The purpose of the study is to explore a) to what extent the students believe the technology-mediated tasks affect their soft skill development throughout the semester and b) which set of skills they believe they have developed more through the tasks. The study uses the collection and analysis of qualitative data through two semi-structured interviews conducted in weeks 3 (beginning) and 13 (end) of the semester. Qualitative research aims to offer a more exploratory investigation of the development of the students' soft skills. Research findings reveal that the tasks positively affect the students' soft skills to a large extent, while convincing skills are more developed through the tasks. Thematic analysis also illustrates that students feel the whole ESAP curriculum and the class oral discussions conduce to the development of their soft skills.

Keywords: *technology-mediated TBLT, soft skills, transferable skills, ESAP*

1. Introduction

TBLT is a student-centred, communicative approach which enables students to use the target language meaningfully to complete an assigned task [1]. What is integral to TBLT is the focus on meaning. All tasks are purposeful and real and imitate features of language use that one would use outside the classroom. The concept of a real-world "task" is intended to result in language use that resembles the way it is used in the real world [2]. A conceptual basis for TBLT is experiential learning, according to which the learner actively participates in the learning process which can foster opportunities for personal growth, task engagement and reflection. Focusing on language as a tool for communication rather than a set of phonological, grammatical and lexical items to be memorised led to the emergence of English for Specific Purposes as a subcomponent of Communicative Language Teaching since the communicative needs of English language learners were conducive to a more functional concept of the language. The latter underpins the use of assignments, tasks, and activities that reflect the world of specialist students [3]. Developing English-language materials for particular groups and purposes, however, does not imply that students are equipped to survive the competitive professional world they will be entering. Apart from hard skills, they need to possess soft skills to increase their employability chances. Employers are turning away from an exclusive focus on academic excellence and are focusing on soft skills as an important asset of recruitment. In terms of technological innovations, they require careful design if they are to be used for educational purposes to avoid becoming nothing more than entertainment. TBLT was extended in a new framework called "technology-mediated TBLT" to provide better organisation in the blending of technology, tasks and language learning to achieve more productive results [4]. The purpose of the study is to a) explore to what extent the students believe the technology-mediated tasks affect their soft skill development throughout the semester and b) which set of skills they believe they have developed more through the tasks.



2. The Study

2.1 Context and Participants

The course used in the study is a compulsory ESAP course. It familiarises students with Art-related topics, and acquaints them with basic principles in their professional field. Students learn to communicate competently at B1-B2 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

Eleven students aged from 18 to 40 participated in the study (4 males and 7 females). Eight out of eleven participants came from 3 towns of Cyprus and spoke the Greek Cypriot dialect whereas 3 were of Greek origin and spoke Standard Modern Greek. All participants studied English as a foreign language subject in primary and secondary education. They were frequent internet users and used English in their own social media profiles. However, they did not have any experience with student-centred educational tasks in English.

2.2 Tasks

The current study incorporates the five definitional features of a task in the context of technology [4]: 1) primary focus on meaning, 2) goal orientation, 3) learner-centredness, 4) holism and 5) reflective learning.

Soft Skills	Tasks	Tools used for the Tasks
Convincing	Gallery interview	Facebook, Google Drive, Google Docs, Websites, YouTube
Problem-solving	Increasing audience engagement with books	Facebook, Google Drive, Google Docs, Websites
Creativity	Creating an artefact for promotional purposes	YouTube, Websites, Google Drive, Google Docs

Table 1. The three technology-mediated tasks

The practice of convincing skills involved students convincing a gallery curator to hire them for an internship in English. In Part A, they introduced themselves and in B they had an interview with the instructor acting as a curator. Classroom seating arrangements were adjusted accordingly to simulate an authentic context. As a pre-task, students studied English phrases independently and collaboratively, using digital tools (Table 1). The phrases and language models of familiar structures and expressions aimed to activate their language skills and reproduce them in novel ways [2]. For problem-solving skills, students pretended to work in a Youth Centre, participating in a campaign to increase book awareness among teenagers. As artists, they thought of two ways to help change the disproportionately large percentage of preference for films and attract teenagers to books. In Part A, they identified the problem and in B they analysed two ways of solving it. Creating opportunities for experiential learning, students brought in their personal experiences and explored with the spoken and written language to produce a meaningful task. They presented the tasks in the course social media. Finally, for creativity skills, students explored the significance of critical thinking, curiosity, imagination and creativity on YouTube and artistic websites and provided oral and written input in class. The task used the song "Thank You" by the singer Alanis Morissette. The instructor briefly analysed the song, and later students decided, wrote and justified what kind of artefact they would create (statue, painting, sculpture, etc.) to promote a theme derived from the song and transmit their own knowledge.

2.3 Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by author 1 and the language used was Standard Modern Greek to probe more answers from students. Interviews were audio-recorded, translated from Greek to English and transcribed. The collected data were analysed and coded into themes by the



researchers. The interview questions were identical in both sets of interviews to corroborate validity for the research questions.

3. Results and Discussion

Tables 2 and 3 present the most common coded data in Weeks 3 and 13.

Categories	Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The students believed their soft skills had been developed little up until that point in their lives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Little development of Soft Skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expectation that the students' soft skills would be developed more throughout the tasks and the course 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expected future development of Soft Skills

Table 2. The most common emergent themes – Week 3

Thematic analysis shows that students had, initially, believed their soft skill level was low. Participant 1 said “I believe I developed my soft skills **a little**” and only his “convincing skills **have been developed lately** through the **task**”. Participant 2 confirmed little development and acknowledged his weakness, “I’m a very shy person so it’s **difficult** for me to talk to other people and open up, **do communications**”. They were also optimistic about the future. Participant 4 developed her soft skills “to a **satisfactory** degree but **surely** there is a **chance of development**”. Participant 5 said “I believe from the beginning of the semester until now, I developed them **enough**. But that is, **the more time passes, the better they will become**”. Participant 6 confirmed that his “**soft skills are not very good at the moment**. I **haven’t developed them much**”, followed by Participant 7 “I believe I need **a lot of work**” and 8 “**enough but in the future, they will be developed more**”.

Table 3. The most common emergent themes – Week 13

Categories	Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Through the tasks, the students believe their level of soft skill practice is better than how it was in Week 3 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Soft Skill level better than before
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students feel they have developed convincing skills more 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Convincing skills better than other skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The students believe the ESAP course and the class conversations also helped them practise their soft skills. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Class conversations and course contributed to Soft Skill practice



Thematic analysis indicates that students believe in Week 13 their soft skill development was developed to a great extent compared to Week 3. Participant 2 expressed, “with the tasks we’ve done, I believe I’ve practised them **well enough, especially when I have to convince someone**. Some tips helped us **do better** in some situations or problems, and yes, I believe this helped us **enough**”. Participant 3 confirmed, “I believe, my soft skills have been developed **a lot**; it was something that helped me with my **personal experience with the English language**, too. Problem-solving **compelled me to think about some solutions that could help the world, generally**. The latter is an indicator of learner-centredness which corresponds to the literature of experiential learning and TBLT. One of its precepts is to encourage the transformation of knowledge within the learner rather than the transformation of knowledge from the teacher to the learner, encouraging the personal contributions of the learner to the process [2]. Participant 4 explained that “tasks **require** you to do some research, to **develop your skills. I loved the techniques on convincing. I couldn’t do that before**”. Moreover, Participant 5 emphasised how there is still chance for personal improvement, saying “I believe I’ve **developed** my skills **enough**, but I still have **a long way to go. I need to practise even more**”. Data analysis also illustrates that students feel that the ESAP course and the class discussions also conduced to their development. Participant 8 said “I’ve developed **to a great extent compared to before**, not only through the tasks but also **through the English course and through class conversations**” while Participant 2 confirmed “it was generally **the whole lesson, the conversations we had in class**”. Participant 11 said “**whatever we read gives us knowledge**, so I believe we learnt **more things about ourselves through the tasks, through class conversations and through studying**”. This highlights the contribution of the tasks as a means to lifelong learning and self-development rather than just the practice of soft skills,

4. Conclusions

The study explored the implementation of technology-mediated TBLT in an undergraduate course and to what extent it affected the students’ soft skill development. Qualitative analysis indicated that the incorporated technological tasks affected the students’ soft skill development to a great extent, especially their convincing skills. Class discussions and the curriculum also contributed positively. Students live in a digital world where technology is indispensable so a technologically-oriented TBLT curriculum can provide opportunities for a real-world context, blended with digital literacy practice. In the future, additional data can be collected in order for the number and the findings to be more representative. Moreover, follow-up research on which soft skills are considered more or less beneficial can be conducted.

References

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