

Using Technology-Mediated Task-Based Approach in Foreign Language Classes

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Abstract:

Research in the field of foreign language teaching found a plethora of language teaching approaches all with the aim of giving both teachers and students a good teaching/learning experience. The task-based approach (TBA) of language teaching was one of those attempts and its synergy with technology became an interest to scholars in the field of language teaching. Therefore, this paper offers insights into the characteristics of technology-mediated task-based language instruction, its advantages, and barriers to its successful implementation.

Keywords: task-based approach, technology, technology-mediated language learning, technology-assisted language learning, technology-mediated task-based instructions.

الملخص:

توصل البحث في مجال تدريس اللغة الأجنبية إلى عدد كبير من مناهج تدريس اللغة بهدف منح المعلمين والطلاب تجربة تعليمية / تعليمية جيدة. كان النهج القائم على المهام (TBA) لتدريس اللغة أحد تلك المحاولات وأصبح تعاونه مع التكنولوجيا محل اهتمام الباحثين في هذا المجال إذا كان تدريس اللغة. لذلك ، تقدم هذه الورقة نظرة ثاقبة لخصائص تعليم اللغة القائم على المهام بواسطة التكنولوجيا ومزاياها والعوائق التي تحول دون تنفيذها الناجح.

كلمات دالة: النهج القائم على المهام ، التكنولوجيا ، تعلم اللغات بمساعدة التكنولوجيا، التعليم القائم على المهام بواسطة التكنولوجيا

1. Introduction

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is one of the latest approaches to language teaching/learning. It is a sub-category of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) that promises good results by engaging learners in communicative tasks. It is also considered an alternative to the PPP model of language teaching (Presentation, Practice, Production), which was attacked for its inability to satisfy learners' needs for communicative language skills. TBLT; however, was thought to help learners by creating tasks closer to their real –life experiences.

The inclusion of technology in education is a standard practice. Researchers such as Gonzalez-Lioret, Ortega, and Thomas Reinders wrote about the advantages of the synergy between technology and task-based language instruction. For instance, Gonzalez- Lioret (2020) stated that: “One of the main affordances of second or foreign language (L2) technology-mediated tasks is that they facilitate engagement among speakers of the L2 that are geographically remote, providing international education with a framework to foster intercultural understanding.” Learners can work in groups to finish tasks or solve problems related to their learning virtually with the help of the multiple technology tools afforded to them.

However, despite its efficacy, merging technology with task-based instructions is not a simple matter. The use of technology must follow the guidelines for task-based instructions. This paper aims to explore the result of integrating the computer technology and other forms of instructional technologies in task-based instructions. It also tries to point at the different ways the merging of computer –assisted language learning (CALL) and task-based approach (TBA) can improve learners' academic performance in different language areas such as writing, speaking in addition to grammar.

1. Literature Review

The approach of task-based language teaching stems from the communicative view of language. It came as a reaction to the shortcomings declared by scholars such as Harmer (2009) against the “3 Ps” teacher-centered model of teaching. According to Woodward (1993, p.3), the PPP draws on the Descartes belief that language should be broken into pieces to be analyzed. Language items are better learned when broken into chunks rather being presented as a whole.

In his influential article “Is PPP Dead?”, Harmer stated that despite being an influential method, PPP has been criticized for many reasons. Lewis (1993, p. 190) noted that “...the model (PPP) is discredited and reflects neither the nature of language nor the nature of learning”. Additionally, Ellis (2003) wrote that: “TBA can only be fully understood if it is contrasted with preceding methods and analyze it within mainstream communicative methodology”. That is to say, to determine how the task-based approach can be used, it should be compared with its preceding model of teaching (PPP). This would; therefore, offer a clear image of the way the task-based instruction works to address the different language issues that were inefficiently dealt with in the presentation-practice-production model.

In addition to being a reaction to the Presentation-Practice-Product approach to language learning and teaching, the task-based approach (TBA) is believed to be the result of the sort of criticisms and resentments expressed by pedagogues such as (Nunan, 2004; Willis and Willis, 2007) . Task-Based Language Instruction (TBI) draws on the belief that learners are to better acquire a language when engaged in task completion rather than to focus on structure or function solely (Harmer, 2001, p. 71). Willis, on the other hand, stated that one way to think of the task-based instruction (TBI) is to see it as “a a sort of PPP upside down” (Willis, 1994, p.19). That is to say, once the learners finish the task they were assigned, teachers intervene by talking about the language used and providing some corrective

feedback in case learners face some problems when working on the communicative task.

2. Defining a “Task”

According to Richards, Platt and Weber (1985, p.289) “tasks” are any act that happens as a consequence of language treatment or decoding. They further note that these actions or “tasks” might lead to language production. Prabhu (1987, p.24) defined a task as “an activity that required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process, was ‘task’. Following this definition, a task is any type of activities in which learners are engaged in a discussion to reach the outlined results and in which the teachers’ intervention by managing and adjusting the operation is welcomed.

Richards and Renandya (2002, p.94), on the other hand, noted that: “A task is activity which learners conduct using their available language resources and leading to a real outcome”. Examples of tasks are playing a game, solving a problem or sharing and comparing experiences. In conducting tasks, learners are said to take part in such processes as the negotiation of meaning, paraphrase, and experimentation, which are thought to lead to successful language development. Tasks, according to these and other definitions, are what learners do using the linguistic knowledge they have acquired in problem solving, game playing, and other tasks. Once learners are engaged in discussing meaning and other activities like paraphrasing and experimenting, they will end up with effective language production.

1. Advantages of Task-Based Language Instruction

Scholars such as Freeman, 2000; Nunan, 2004 tried encouraged the adoption of TBA by listing many of its advantages. Freeman (2000, p.144); for example, noted that the implication of task-based approach boosts learners’ academic performance by giving them the

chance to practice authentic language as used in real life contexts. Task-based language teaching has a number of advantages; automaticity, communication, vocabulary and motivation.

3.1. Automaticity

DeKeyser (2007, p.3) defines automaticity as “ the whole process of knowledge change from the initial presentation of the rule in a declarative format to the final stage of fully spontaneous, effortless, fast, and errorless use of the rule, often without being aware of it anymore.” In other words, automaticity is the act of getting to the point of native like the mastery of language where learners’ production is error-free. At this level, learners’ use of the language will not require too much effort; it will be spontaneous.

According to De. Ridder et al., (2007), task-based instruction/learning has a lot to do with automaticity because the activities it uses are built around the aspect of transferring “appropriate processes and other positive features of communicative activities.” Task-based language teaching is believed to pave the way to a better learning because it gives learners the opportunities of taking what they have learned as far as language aspects are concerned and adopting them to new communicative settings (DeKeyser, p. 2007).

3.2. Communication

Being able to communicate and interact in a foreign language is the end goal of each learner. According to Nunan (2004, p.12), task-based instruction motivates learners to interact, in pairs or groups, and share ideas and experiences with each other. Elsewhere, Ganta (2015) stated that when learners are engaged in a task completion along with their peers, they will receive new ideas and vocabulary, which would pave their way toward self- esteem. It is the type of activities used in task-based lessons that require the participation of learners and subsequently the communication of the group members. Learners will be engaged in problem – solving tasks which urges them to use the

language they learned and they will finally develop the necessary communicative skills.

3.3.Vocabulary

Scholars such as Newton,2001; Sarani and Sahebi, 2012; Khoshsima and Saed, 2016 tried establishing links with the task-based approach to language teaching. Newton (2001) presented a study in which he tried establishing links between task-based instruction and vocabulary development. He stated that learning lexis through task-based framework helps increase learners' vocabulary knowledge and retention. Sarani and Sahebi ,2012; Khoshsima and Saed ,2016 made comparative studies as to which approach is better for vocabulary teaching, traditional approaches or TBLT. They concluded that learners better learn and remember the new vocabulary when it is presented through a task-based mode of teaching.

3.4.Motivation

A study by Namazian Dost, Bohloulzadehn and Pazakh (2017) explored the effect of task-based teaching on learners' motivation with respect to grammatical achievement and approved the positive correlation between the two. Furthermore, Le and Nguyen (2012) examined the role of task-based instruction on learners' motivation to learn vocabulary. They stated that the use of this approach is very helpful and thus, teachers should consider it as a good option to enhance their learners' lexical performance. When learners collaborate with their fellows or members of the same group, they will experience some fun, which will make the learning process agreeable. This will subsequently make them motivated to learn in such settings and will help them attain better results.

4. Computer- Assisted Task-Based Language Learning

There has been an increasing interest on the part of scholars and teachers to merge these two fields of CALL and TBLT. A shortage in the studies investigating this synergism was noticed but they started to increase gradually. Many books were published in for the sake of

exploring the way Technology-mediated task-based approach will change the way language aspects are taught. Thomas and Reinders (2010) released one of the significant contributions: “Task-Based language Learning and Teaching with Technology” .The authors shared many studies investigating the extent to which this combination can succeed in bringing up the most satisfying results as far as language learning and teaching are concerned. The application of any technology or theory has its shortcomings that may stand in the way of its successful use. Technology-mediated TBLT, according to research, is found to be effective in some situations and fails to reach the outlined outcomes in others. This of course is a result of the handiness of some factors that will be discussed later in this section.

5. Merging Computer Technology into the Task-Based Approach

In his book “Computer Applications in Second Language Acquisition,” Chappelle (2001) stated that: “...anyone concerned with second language teaching and learning in the 21st century must grasp the unique technology mediated tasks learners can engage in for language acquisition and how such tasks can be used for assessment...to meet the challenge, the study of the features of computer-based tasks that promote learning should be a concern for teachers and for SLA researchers who wish to contribute to knowledge about instructed SLA (Chappelle,2001, p.2). In addition to praising the role technology plays in education, Chappelle (2001) stressed the importance of tasks when used in computer-based settings.

Scholars like Thomas and Reinders (2010) believed that the collaboration between technology and TBA will lead to optimum results than when these two fields are being applied separately (Hiradhar, 2015).As explained by Doughty and Long (2003), technology offers applications with authentic venues that work better in realizing the underlying principles of task-based teaching. Scholars did not largely support the integration of technology in instructional contexts. Thomas and Reinders (2010) assumed that this

marginalization of CALL by many researchers was mainly because research in TBLT focused solely on face-to-face communication. Historical accounts, then, show that researchers held very skeptical views as to the attempts of merging computer applications into task-based learning. However, Lioret and Ortega (2014, p.3) asserted that this scarcity of publication on technology-mediated TBLT is not a matter of eliminating each other, but the endeavor of combining the two in one field were “tenuous.” Integrating technology into task-based course would bring up manifest changes to the way this approach was practiced. In other words, the reason behind the poor support of this new approach is the scarcity of studies made in the field to prove its effectiveness will subsequently increase scholars’ suspicions as to its efficacy and it would take a while before they feel safe about applying this technology-assisted approach.

6. Advantages of Integrating Technology into Task-Based Instruction

The benefits of using the ICTs and any other forms of technology in language classrooms are numerous and so are the benefits when they are used to support the task-based instruction. Doughty and Long (2003), in their seminal paper, noted that the underlying principles of TBLT are better realized when technology is used because it offers the class opportunities for using authentic input. However, they agreed that using a framework like that of TBLT allows a more appropriate choice and application of technology. Moreover, Ziegler (2016) pointed out that as a result of the use of technology, learners’ choices became big. He alleges that before having it applied in task-based contexts, participants only had the classroom as a space of interaction. However, technology has expanded the space of interaction and offered learners unlimited choices for practicing language thorough web conferences, computer – mediated-communication, and other ways. He further added that: “the use of TBLT in this online platform encouraged learners’ participation, reduced their cognitive burden, and provided the instructor with improved opportunities to individualize instruction.”

Furthermore, allowing technology to enter the task-based classroom increases students' interest in learning and paves the way for extra learning sources and opportunities. The intersection between technology and TBLT has been examined by scholars like Doughty and Long, 2003; Thomas and Reiders, 2010; and Lai and Li, 2011. Despite the pitfalls, this potential synergy was found to be effective on both the psychological level (lowers learners' affective filter and increases their motivation), and the cognitive level (increases learners' linguistic input and enhances their productions. Technology - mediated- TBLT is central to enhancing students' receptive and productive skills. It solves the problem of place when the learners have nowhere to use and it also increases their motivation toward learning the language and using it.

7. Teaching the Four- Language Skills through Technology-Mediated TBLT

Applying technology into the teaching of the four language skills and aspects such as grammar and vocabulary was not a modern matter. Similarly, task-based language teaching had gained popularity among practitioners for the role it plays in the structure of language skills such as writing. Researchers such as Abraham (2015) pointed out that learning to write using the task-based approach to teaching will help learners improve their writing mainly grammar and vocabulary. They claim that when engaged in task completion, participants will be constantly and actively improving their vocabulary and easing their grammatical knowledge. Besides, he believes that getting familiar with the task and having fun when accomplishing it are crucial for overcoming writing- related issues.

Willis and Willis (2007, p.58) have also shared task-based activities, which they believed to be helpful in improving learners' writing skills; listing, matching and problem solving activities, to mention a few. In a study investigating the influence of task-based pedagogy on Malaysian learners' writing skills, Ahmed and Bidin (2016) concluded that the writing skills of the Malaysian university

students (the sample of the study) were- improved in terms of L2 complexity, accuracy, and fluency. Therefore, the growing interest in the impact of technology-mediated task- based language instruction led some enthusiastic researchers to investigate its usefulness with the productive skills; speaking and writing. The fact that the number of studies conducted with the aim of measuring the efficacy of technology-mediated task-based writing is stingy. Despite that, there are some endeavors that perhaps laid the basis for other researchers to be tackled in this respect.

Elola and Oskoza (2010) carried out a study to probe the degree to which technology and more particularly social tools such as web 2.0 social chats combined with the principles of task-based approach can improve learners' skills in writing argumentative and expository essays. The findings revealed that, generally, learners spent more time and devoted much effort to revise and edit their writings and that their production developed in terms of accuracy and fluency. An additional work in this regard was conducted by Hiradhar (2015), which looked at the efficiency of technology-mediated learning in task-based settings. The results of the study revealed that the participants' writings improved in terms of cohesion and coherence while no significant difference has been noticed in terms of the other aspects of language like grammar and vocabulary.

8. Technology for Technology-Mediated Task-Based Approach

A plethora of technology tools and software are available to both teachers and learners, which gives them full access to the information they can rely on. Foreign language teaching is known to be a fertile field for containing a great number of publications on task-based instruction. In contrast to that, little has been published to address the different aspects related to technology-mediated TBLT like curriculum design, the type of tasks to be implemented, and many other issues. There has been some discussion about the effectiveness of technology tools when mixed with task-based principles. Eskoz and Elola (2010), for instance, studied the role of

web 2.0 tools and tasks in improving learners' foreign language collaborative writing. Gonzalez-Lioret (2015) pointed out that technologies such as blogs, wikis, multiplayer online games, and many others "fit perfectly within the TBLT principles of learning by doing, authenticity, and meaning and goal orientation".

The task- based approach encourages the use of authentic language and negotiation of meaning. Learners' chances: therefore, to naturally learn language skills can be doubled with the integration of technology applications such as blogs and wikis. Virtual Learning Environments are recently gaining popularity among practitioners as a pedagogical tool. They allow learners to participate with each other in groups via the internet to present knowledge and discuss activities. Weller (2007, p.5) defined the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) as "a software system that combines many different tools that are used to systematically deliver content online and facilitate the learning experience around that content." He further points that such a virtual learning environment helps improve e-learning (p.5). Second Life, Active Worlds, and Final Fantasy are examples of VLE.

Gonzalez (2015) stated that using such technologies is the best way of showing the interrelation between tasks and technology. Comment Games of quest-based nature can be [at](#) perfect nominee for task-based lessons. Gonzalez (2015) said that when learners take parts in role-play games, they will use language to read instructions, find someone, or ask for something. This would encourage the learning by doing; one of the task-based principles. In addition to games, web 2.0 tools such as blogs, and wikis are good options for technology-mediated tasks, and their usefulness has been investigated especially for teaching the writing skills.

9. Challenges of Implementing Technology Mediated Task-Based Teaching

Many factors can hinder the effective integration of technology-mediated TBLT. Lai and Li (2011) stated that notwithstanding the valuable advantages technology brings into the TBLT class, it can

pose many demands on learners, teachers as well as researchers. They noted that in order for learners to perform appropriately in technology-supported TBLT contexts, they must, first, have the adequate technological skills to manipulate the different tools i.e. digital literacy.

Researchers such as (Hampel, 2006; Kress, 2003; Reinders and White, 2010) pointed out that the problem is that learners are not being fully conscious about the uses of technology and what it can afford to their learning. Teachers, on the other hand, can be considered as one of the main reasons why the implementation of computer-assisted TBLT can go wrong. Teachers must “go with the raw” and be ready for the updates, the new technologies and instruction software brought up to the field. Chapelle (2001, p.2) reported that "anyone concerned with the second language teaching and learning in the 21st century should grasp the unique technology-mediated tasks that learners can engage in for language acquisition”. In order to enhance the quality of language teaching, teachers must embrace the changes brought in by technology and learn about the different ways the integration of CALL applications can effectively alter the foreign language instruction. In addition, Lai and Li (2011) stated that the profession of foreign language instruction is becoming even more exhausting for teachers themselves because of the new roles added to their list. They must design tasks that meet learners’ needs, increase their knowledge about the technologies to use, and monitor their collaborations. They stated that in addition to lacking the appropriate training in technology use, teachers appear not to trust the advantages of technology tools and the way they can help learners overcome their intercultural and linguistic issues (Lai and Li, 2011). Designing tasks with technology poses a challenge to most teachers, especially those who are less familiar with computers or any other form for ICT.

Conclusion

The emerging field of technology-mediated task-based approach to teaching (TMTBA) poses many challenges to educators in the field of language teaching. The difficulty of blending these two fields together is because they require certain digital skills on behalf of teachers and learners in addition to the need of providing the necessary technology tools for Technology-mediated task-based classrooms. Still, looking back to the body of research we shared earlier in this paper, the inclusion of technology in task-based instruction should be considered to improve the quality of foreign language teaching and learning.

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