

Mind the gap: task design and technology in novice language teachers' practice

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Abstract. This paper focuses on the possibilities/challenges for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers designing tasks grounded in Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and taking advantage of the affordances of technology – Interactive WhiteBoards (IWBs). Teachers have been shown to confuse tasks with exercises or activities. The interactive Technologies in Language Teaching (iTILT) projects revealed that when it comes to IWB use the focus often shifts from interactive teaching to interactive technology. To better prepare novice EFL teachers for their future teaching practice, an ‘IWB for TLBT’ training programme introduced the affordances of IWBs. Our analysis of how (un)successful they were at marrying TBLT and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) operationalised TBLT criteria from Nunan (2004) and Erlam (2016). Supporting evidence of the participants’ aptitude in TBLT practice is provided by a traditional, non-IWB-oriented task each individual had designed earlier. Combining both elements in the analysis, our study answers the question: to what extent are pre-service teachers able to design a TBLT environment involving modern technology that adheres to iTILT principles and current theories of TBLT methodology?

Keywords: TBLT, task design, EFL, IWB, teacher education.

1. Introduction

The objective of the European interactive Teaching In Languages with Technology (iTILT2) project, launched in 2014, is to explore the affordances of devices like smartphones and IWBs. More specifically, it investigates the effective use of

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these interactive technologies within a TBLT approach. iTILT2 builds on, and extends, the EU project iTILT, focusing on IWBs for teaching foreign languages. However, iTILT2 moves beyond IWBs and includes effective educational design for foreign language learning with a wider range of new interactive technologies (tablets, laptops, mobile phones, videoconferencing software). The educational contexts vary from primary and secondary schools to vocational colleges and universities.

TBLT theory is central to iTILT2 and requires students to do meaningful tasks in the target language, having to choose for themselves the linguistic means for task completion. A task is “an activity in which people engage to attain an objective and which involves the meaningful use of language” (Van den Branden, Van Gorp, & Verhelst, 2007, p. 1). An objective can be anything from producing a poster or website to expressing opinions or writing song lyrics. As learning the target language means making use of it, learners are primarily seen as language users.

Research shows that many language teachers find it difficult to distinguish tasks from simple grammar exercises or activities for vocabulary practice. To help teachers, Shintani (2013) discussed the principles behind TBLT and outlined the main features of language learning tasks:

1. activity focus is on meaning, i.e. learners encode/decode messages, no grammar or vocabulary drilling;
2. communicative/information gap, e.g. learners need to ask for information they do not have (= gap) or need to express their opinion;
3. learners draw on their own (linguistic/non-linguistic) resources to complete tasks. They are not ‘taught’ the language nor the form to use to complete the task but are free to choose their ‘means’, although they could for example borrow from the input, use dictionaries/online resources, ask the teacher, etc.);
4. clearly defined outcomes other than mere language use, e.g. poster, form, handout, opinion, or reaching a compromise in discussions. While “performing a task, learners are not primarily concerned with using the language correctly but rather achieving the goal stipulated within the task” (Ellis, 2003, p. 35).

2. Method

2.1. Dataset

Our study goes beyond Erlam's (2016) by not limiting itself to applying criteria for task design (e.g. from Ellis, 2003, in Erlam's (2016) study) to evaluate foreign language teachers' self-made TBLT materials in a professional development programme; we also consider the conception of a task in the minds of (postgraduate) pre-service foreign language teachers ($N= 28$) by analysing a design task that had them formulate a *taaltaak* (integrated language/assessment task). Consequently, the dataset exists of (1) materials designed for use with the IWB, part of (the evaluation of) a series of lessons on TBLT, and (2) the somewhat more traditional *taaltaken*.

The latter tasks the participants designed before the IWB technology was introduced had to contain a step-by-step description with process and product requirements for one or more open-ended B1 tasks fostering the autonomous use of (a) language skill(s) in an authentic context. The choices student teachers made when designing these tasks revealed what they consider meaningful language use for learning and/or open communicative contexts.

Each set of IWB TBLT materials (i.e. the aforementioned (1)) consisted of a lesson plan and the TBLT materials for the IWB (Smarttech Notebook®). The assignment required student duos to plan a lesson on a cultural topic with B1 TBLT activities involving the IWB and to develop accompanying materials.

2.2. Data analysis

The criteria to analyse the pre-service teachers' TBLT approach and materials against were inspired by Nunan's (2004) aspects of qualitative task design: task objective, input quality, quality of activities, classroom setting, and teacher and learner roles.

Given our study's affinities with Erlam (2016), an evaluation grid was used that is based on the central features of TBLT in Nunan's (2004) paradigm and includes some of Erlam's (2016) task criteria (Table 1). The lesson material suits (min. three task slides) were independently evaluated by the first and second author (inter-rater reliability).

Table 1. Task evaluation grid

1. Meaning versus form	(yes) 1/0.5/0 (no)	Comments/ Justifications
Are pupils acting as language users (rather than learners)?		
Are pupils mainly concerned with expressing/comprehending meaning (not focusing on form)?		
2. Information gap		
Do pupils close an information gap as a result of communication taking place?		
Do pupils find out something they did not know as a result of the communication?		
3. Learner resources		
Has not all language needed for the task been specially pre-taught?		
Does the task allow learners to use language learnt on other, unrelated occasions?		
4. Result/outcome		
Do pupils use English to achieve an outcome (not as an end in itself)?		
Do pupils have to achieve a result to demonstrate task completion?		
5. Technology use		
Is the use of technology integral to the task design? (Is it impossible to do the task without technology, not just more difficult?)		
Does the technology have added pedagogical value (not just motivational)?		

3. Discussion

With an M score of 6.375/10 ($SD=1.398$), it cannot be claimed that all participants were successful at applying the programme's input in practice. Of the 14 IWB lesson designs, two were rated unsatisfactory, two achieved the highest score of 9/10. Zooming in on the task design criteria, the trainee teachers struggled most with the TBLT 'Information gap' element (No. 2 in the grid): utilising communication to close an information gap ($M=0.429$) and allowing pupils to find out something new ($M=0.571$). 'Meaning vs form' (No. 1) and 'Learner resources' (No. 3) were the aspects they performed best on. Having learners mainly concerned with expressing and comprehending meaning (instead of focusing on form) appears to have been easiest to achieve ($M=0.833$). Discussing

further results would go beyond the scope of this short paper, but the study's practice-based output allows for fine-tuning of the criteria (within the iTILT2 project) so that researchers will have better tools to analyse the TBLT approach of (novice) teachers, and the teachers themselves a clearer idea of what sound TBLT requires.

A Pearson's r hypothesis test did not reveal a (significant) correlation between the IWB group assignment and the individual classic task design ($r=-0.105$, $n=7$, $p=0.6084$) that was to demonstrate causality between TBLT comprehension and task design quality. This does imply, however, that the pre-service teachers benefited from the collaborative aspect of the IWB assignment (and/or from the 'IWB for TBLT' programme itself) and – we would like to think – from the affordances of technology to facilitate meaningful, realistic tasks in class.

4. Conclusions

The effect of TBLT can be increased considerably, but besides specific affordances, using new technologies like IWBs also entails constraints. From our study and our broader experience with technology, we infer four hypotheses.

1. Tasks should be made more motivating by focusing on their mental acceptability and students' willingness to carry them out. Meaningfulness ('What's in it for me?') and usefulness ('What's in it for others?') are key concepts in this respect.
2. Tasks should be seen within a wide range of possible activities, from simple drill-and-practice exercises to co-construction of knowledge. Bloom's Digital Taxonomy (Churches, 2009), the SAMR model (Romrell, Kidder, & Wood, 2014) or 21st Century Skills can be inspiring in this respect.
3. There is too much focus on the properties of the task as a product, and not enough on task design as a process: how to select and adapt tasks to the specific and variable context of language learners and teachers.
4. Tasks should always be seen as hypotheses. The validation of these hypotheses should be carried out by comparing the expected outcome with the actual outcome.

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