Changing teachers' attitudes towards ICT-based language learning tasks: the ETALAGE Comenius project (the Portuguese case)

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Abstract

Many foreign and second language teachers are reluctant about shifting from traditional language instruction to TBLT. Another challenge has been the use of ICT in the classroom, a problem addressed in previous Comenius projects. The ETALAGE project aimed to build on the achievements of such projects and to address these challenges, by collecting, re-designing, adapting and disseminating samples of good practice of ICT-based language learning tasks (A1-B2 CEF levels) in primary and secondary education. Partners produced in-service teacher training courses adjusted to local needs. Independent experts in language teaching monitored the quality of the products at a national level. This paper explains the project setup and its implementation in Portugal, describing a) the specific challenges and constraints that the local reality poses to an international project like this and; b) the perceptions of the Portuguese trainees in pre- and post-course surveys concerning the use of ICT in TBLT.

1. Introduction

ETALAGE stands for **E**uropean **T**ask-based **A**ctivities for **L**anguage Learning: **a G**ood Practice **E**xchange. Its object was to promote the use of ICT in task-based language teaching (TBLT). It was coordinated by the University of Amsterdam, and involved partners from Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Portugal, Turkey and the UK. Each country participated with a tandem formed by a teacher training institute and a basic or secondary school. We sought to encourage the use of ICT in the classroom in a productive and target-oriented way by providing examples of good practices in consonance with the CEFR and the national curriculum guidelines.

2. The rationale

FL and SL teachers are reluctant about taking on new approaches, especially if they represent a significant departure from their consolidated set of teaching practices. Traditional approaches to language teaching keep the risks of unpredictability and dispersion to a minimum. Communicative language teaching (CLT) is a way to circumvent the pedagogical limitations of such practices (Ellis, 1982;

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Willems, 1987; Richards, 2006) but even so teachers continue to offer some resistance to CLT (Gatbonton and Segaliwitz 2005) as they do to TBLT, despite its being acknowledged as an effective approach.

   Another hotspot of resistance has been the use of ICT in the language classroom (Gray et al., 2007). All developments notwithstanding, teachers have failed to address the use of ICT in the classroom in an effective way (Standholdz et al. 1996; Leask & Parcher, 1999; Lankshear, 2000; Torgerson & Elbourne, 2002; Himanoglu, 2011). The ETALAGE project was intended to tackle these issues. Our perspective mirrors Schrooten's (2006), who argues that well-structured ICT-based tasks in LT a) elicit different learning strategies, b) have a problem-solving dimension which prompts interaction, c) be 'authentic' in terms of the content and of the interactional and cognitive processes involved, d) put the learners in control of the interactive process and e) stimulate the learner's self-determined exploratory process.

3. The layout

The project was divided into three consecutive stages:
   1. **Sources**: former European-funded projects; samples of already existing TBLT activities; the CEFR and other bibliographic sources;
   2. **Processing**: redesigning, adapting and disseminating good practices in learning tasks covering the first four levels of the CEFR (A1 to B2);
   3. **Outputs**: multilingual portal; national and international teacher training courses; international conference.

The tasks were subject to a preliminary selection process and tried out before being submitted to external reviewers, responsible for their evaluation and ranking. The tasks that scored higher were chosen to feature in the portal.

4. The Portuguese course

The training course—"New Technologies and TBL Activities in FLT"—, approved by the national authority, aimed to make TBLT activities part of the trainees' regular teaching practice and to encourage them to use ICT in the classroom by giving them tools and strategies to develop their own tasks. The course comprehended an introduction to the latest theoretical developments in TBLT and ICT, and a practical workshop where trainees analysed the samples and developed their own proposals, which were tried out and evaluated in accordance with previously defined observation and evaluation tools.

5. The Portuguese context

In a questionnaire survey for a previous Comenius project (ECNTLT, 2003) 40% claimed that they used ICT in their teaching practice, but with little diversification. It also revealed that only 31,8% saw the Internet as a useful resource. However, things have changed. Access to the Internet has been growing steadily (1,436,486 households in 2005; 1,898,026 in 2009). Moreover, in 2007 the Government set up the Technological Plan for Education to encourage the use of ICT in schools. These changes notwithstanding, computers cannot be said to have become the classroom focal point. Training in ICT for LT is almost nonexistent in the region.

   Besides, socio-economic factors undermine efforts to resort to ICT. The basic education school we worked with is located in a town where unemployment runs high and the low income of many families severely affects educational standards. The school, integrated in an education area of priority intervention, struggles with poor school results and a high early dropout rate. It has been falling nationwide (from 43,6% in 2000 to 28,7% in 2010), remaining however high when compared with other OEDC countries.

6. Pre-conceptions

In a pre-course survey, most trainees (72%) stated they wanted to take this course because they needed to learn more about TBLT and ICT. Only 16% argued they were interested in changing their strategies and trying out new approaches. All of them agreed that there is little or very little in-service teacher training courses not only in TBLT and ICT, but also in FLT in general. As for resources, 92% said they used textbooks often or quite often, seeking however a balance between production and comprehension skills (written and oral), which has led them to diversify resources and materials. Only 8% claimed that they seldom use textbooks.

Their expressed need for further training in TBLT has not prevented 96% of them from implementing it. Their reluctance to embrace TBLT is attached, they claimed, to their lack of preparation. They also feared TBLT was too time-consuming. Those who favoured it argued that it made learners meet practical challenges and facilitated communicative interaction. They also believed that it fostered the pupils' responsibility.

As for ICT, 88% claimed that they use it frequently or very frequently, arguing that it helps them to share materials and resources with learners and facilitates communication with them. They also stated that they use it either in classroom activities or as a means to create products.

The last open-ended question aimed to determine their acquaintance with the concept of TBLT. Their answers fall under five rubrics:

1. TBLT is about the creation and delivery of a final product, a process which should allow for the development of their communicative and linguistic skills;
2. It puts an emphasis on the learners' interaction in communicative situations close to real life so as to help them to become more autonomous and self-reliant;
3. It concerns the completion of a final task which may be useful for the learner and around which a set of other smaller learning activities revolve;
4. It leads the learner to reach a given final objective;
5. It puts the learner at the centre of the learning process.

7. Reappraisals

In the post-course survey, 88% answered that they not only knew how to design TBLT activities involving ICT, but also felt comfortable with the idea of integrating them in their teaching practice on a regular basis. Although agreeing that this approach improves the learners' communicative skills, 65% still believed that it should not take priority over other strategies that can be more effective in achieving the objectives set by the syllabus. Conversely, 30% of the respondents claimed it should definitively become the predominant approach in their teaching practice.

The benefits deemed the most valuable in this kind of approach were the fact that it helps learners to see language as a means of social interaction and sharing in communicative situations closer to real life. Another benefit that scored high was the fact that it stimulated both learners and teachers' creativity, adaptability and the ability to meet new challenges. Trainees also agreed that this it prompts learners to get involved more actively in the learning process and facilitates the learners' acquisition of communicative skills.

However, problems were detected. The most challenging one was the difficulty to make learners communicate in the foreign language. Trainees also complained it was difficult to supervise several groups simultaneously and to design adequate evaluation tools. Another downside was the amount of work involved in setting up tasks.

During the course, trainees agreed that the use of ICT in the classroom normally falls under four general categories: *communication*; *process*; *construction*; *memory*. In the survey, *communication* was elected as the dimension they valued the most. However, almost all proposals concerned *construction* (videos, ads, photo stories, animation movies).

8. Conclusions

Although trainees were given plenty of samples, they decided to design their own tasks, which were well received by their pupils. Two reasons guided their choice: a) they felt that the samples did not quite meet their specific needs (this was a very heterogeneous group of teachers, teaching different languages at different CEF levels to learners of all age groups); b) during the course they were encouraged to become more critical and autonomous, and to be more confident about their own creative skills.

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Lopes, A. (2012) "Changing teachers' attitudes towards ICT-based language learning tasks: the ETALAGE Comenius project (the Portuguese case)". *The EUROCALL Review. Proceedings of the EUROCALL 2011 Conference.* Vol. 20, pp. 100-103.

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