A TELL English course to meet the needs of a multilevel BA in ELT group: what was wrong?

María del Carmen Reyes Fierro[1] and Natanael Delgado Alvarado[2]

Abstract. A Technology Enhanced Language Learning (TELL) course was designed to meet the needs of a multilevel first-semester group of students of the BA in English Language Teaching (ELT) taught at the School of Languages of the Juarez University of the State of Durango (ELE-UJED), Mexico. Amongst the relevant needs, students were to reach a CEFR B1.1 level of English (out of two CEFR B1 sub-levels), notwithstanding their very different overall skill level of English. They also had to be immersed in active, student-centred learning approaches in spite of the wide diversity of language teaching approaches used in their 5-7 previous curricular English courses, or possible additional study in Mexico or abroad. After the results of diagnostic tests and self-assessment checklists, teams were integrated according to similar levels of command. Empirical research carried out throughout the course and a post-study survey demonstrated that the integration of collaborative learning and technology-enhanced language learning, including computer-based assessment and video clip outcomes, were very useful elements for reaching the course goals. However, it was also found out that the designed checklists for self-monitoring of progress were not used by students on a regular basis, even though the survey reported that only a quarter of them considered checklists as not useful/not very useful for raising awareness of their lacks, weaknesses, and strengths.

Keywords: task-based language teaching, course design, technology enhanced language learning, TELL, self-regulated learning strategies.

1. Juarez University of the State of Durango (UJED), Mexico, a PhD student at the University of Southampton, UK; mreyes@ujed.mx
2. Juarez University of the State of Durango (UJED), Mexico, a PhD student at the University of Southampton, UK; ndelgado@ujed.mx

How to cite this article: Reyes Fierro, M. d. C., Delgado Alvarado, N. (2015). A TELL English course to meet the needs of a multilevel BA in ELT group: what was wrong?. In F. Helm, L. Bradley, M. Guarda, & S. Thouësny (Eds), *Critical CALL – Proceedings of the 2015 EUROCALL Conference, Padova, Italy* (pp. 480-485). Dublin: Research-publishing.net. http://dx.doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2015.000379

1. Introduction

After the first cohort of graduates, a study was carried out to identify the real levels of English of selected groups. Among the most relevant findings from the application of the online Dialang exam, a complete heterogeneity of both overall average levels and each of the skills and language system components was found. To find out alternatives to this problem, a protocol for a PhD by research was designed: "how technology-enhanced learning could be designed for English courses taught to a BA in ELT multilevel group in a Mexican university" (Reyes Fierro, in progress).

After the international policies for higher education related to innovation in the knowledge society through the use of information and communication technologies, our 21st century students use technology for almost every aspect of their lives. Therefore, any innovation in language teaching (as promotion of learning) must fall into the TELL arena. Accordingly, this research is aimed at finding out a TELL design pattern for solving out the complex problem of poor learner development into a bilingual communicator, as a result of studying only under standardised contents higher or lower than the students' possibilities or achievement potential.

The TELL course under design is underpinned by current language learning approaches and curriculum-syllabus-course literature acknowledged as a domain for discussing "the concerns of language teaching" (White, 1988, p. 21). In the general technology enhanced learning, also identified as e-learning or educational technology, there is a current trend equivalent to the language course design: "Learning Design" (LD), defined by Conole (2013) as "a methodology for enabling teachers/designers to make more informed decisions in how they go about designing learning activities and interventions, which is pedagogically informed and makes effective use of appropriate resources and technologies" (Kindle location: 724-726). Thus, the richness of LD could be an excellent source of knowledge and technological advances transferable to the TELL arena.

The current design is intended to meet the requirements of the Competence-Based Approach (CBA) under which the ELE-UJED and the whole university must redesign their curricula for all careers. In ELT, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) offers a well-organised range of competences in terms of can-do descriptors and theoretical background for designing language courses. In addition to the CBA, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), the Lexical Approach, and Cooperative Language Learning, considered under the

umbrella of Communicative Language Teaching, are taken into account by the study.

2. Method

The first part of the study starts with an empirical research on the implementation of a course under the task-based teaching with technology approach, with a group of 28 first-semester students attending the English Language Development I course. A diagnosis of level of English, overall and per strand, was carried out, along with an oral exam and self-assessment of technological skills. After the results were obtained, five teacher assistants were identified on the basis of their above-average level of English. Teams were integrated with learners with similar levels under an assistant-teacher as the leader. A C1-level student was in charge of coordinating the team of assistant-teachers. At the end, it was found out that there were only two dropouts for reasons not related to achievement, as opposed to the usual average of six.

Apart from the teacher's records and results of assessment and evaluation, a survey was carried out to identify the learners' perceptions of the course.

3. Discussion

In the survey, learners acknowledged most of the benefits of the course, such as the usefulness of Dialang, Moodle, computer driven assessments, the use of Internet resources, peer and team collaborative learning, and individual development of generic competences selected for the course. These include knowledge and use of digital technologies, self-responsibility for own learning (both rated the highest), peer assessing classmates' work and performance, and self-assessing of own work and performance (both rated as the lowest).

Three main results within the survey and the teacher's record are worth mentioning. From the learners' perceptions in the survey, which were wrong, the most relevant were: (1) an overuse of the computer and/or platform; (2) having too much independent work which "stressed them and distracted them from learning"; and (3) it was found out, as reported in the teacher's records, that most of the learners did not use the checklists on a regular basis.

As these results show, learners are not used to reflect on their/others' learning and appear not to be aware of their learning gains nor the process they need to go through in order to reach them. Accordingly, main changes must be made to

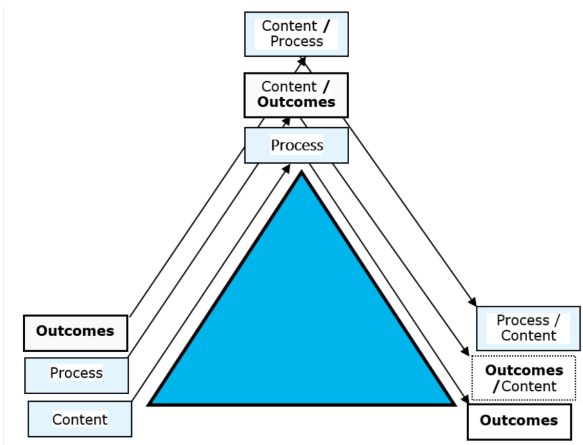
systematically incorporate self-regulated learning strategies and a whole redesign to prevent students' dependence on assistant-teachers, carrying out only activities prescribed in tasks.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Since the second stage of the research is the re-design of model and abstraction of pattern after which another course will be designed as a means of piloting, the following changes are proposed on the basis of the problems identified in the first design and implementation.

Concerning the lack of awareness of learners' learning gains and the learning process itself, it is proposed a systematic incorporation of self-regulated learning strategies, cognitive, metacognitive and resource-based, by means of the learning ePortfolio fostering self-regulated learning in three cyclical phases: Forethought, Performance, and Self-Reflection (Zimmerman, 2000). In the forethought phase, when learners set their own goals and design their own plans, they will be offered the opportunity of selecting and adapting critical thinking along with metacognitive and resource-oriented strategies (including exchange with other learners and help seeking). Then, in the performance phase, learners implement their plans in a first attempt to complete the task and publish it as a draft. Finally, in the self-reflection phase, learners reflect on feedback and improve their drafts in order to produce and publish a final version of the task in question.

Figure 1. The final, medium, or initial position of the outcomes determines the type of design as forward, central, or backward (based on Richards & Rodgers, 2014, p. 365)

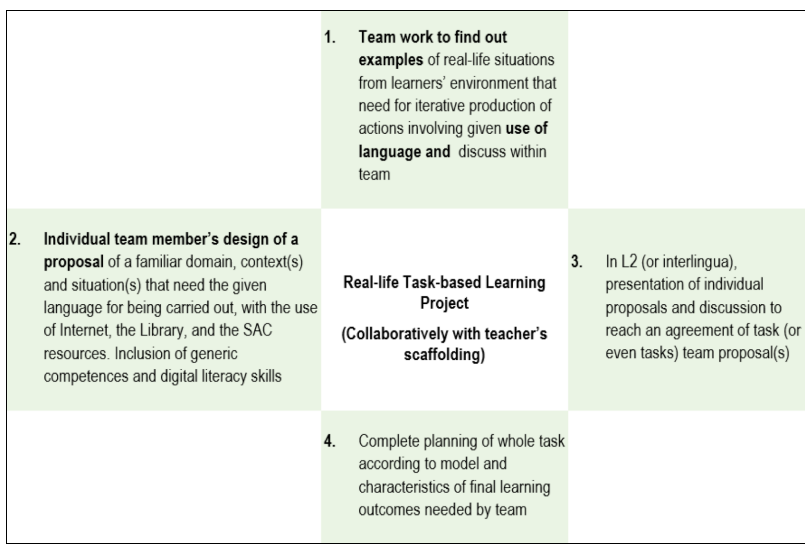


From Richards and Rodgers's (2014) classification of curriculum into forward, central and backward, based on the relationship among its elements and "the process by which they are arrived at" (p. 363), the proposed course can be designed as a backward one, that is, it will start with the outcome instead of the input (Figure 1). In doing so, learners first reflect on their previous knowledge and skills and design outcomes accordingly.

Instead of the TELL with technology tasks, a task-like project blended-learning course will be considered with the tasks designed by learners in teams of learners from the different learning levels resulting from the diagnostic exams. Four cycles instead of three will integrate the design: the Planning Cycle, exemplified in Figure 2, to develop a sense of learning, and the Pre-task, Task, and Post-task cycles, also designed by learners.

There will be two different groups of six tasks each: the core tasks aimed at developing the competences of the B1.1 course and complementary tasks to be carried out by teams or pairs with similar interests and/or needs in connection with can-does (CEFR descriptors of foreign language performance) they lack and need to study, can-does at upper levels, special learning interests such as songs, movies, conversations, etc. Both types of tasks will be developed in 16-hour classes and 16-hour independent study, as stated by the course (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Domains of language use that the learners need to acquire (Reyes Fierro, in progress)



5. Acknowledgements

Authors would like to thank their supervisors PhD Alasdair Archibald and MA(Ed) Vicky Wright, their common advisor SFHEA Julie Watson as well as the authorities at the University of Southampton, UK and the Juarez University of the State of Durango (UJED), Mexico.

References

Conole, G. (2013). *Designing for learning in an open world: 4 (Explorations in the Learning Sciences, Instructional Systems and Performance Technologies)* [Kindle Edition]. New York: Springer. doi:10.1007/978-1-4419-8517-0

Reyes Fierro, M. d. C. (in progress). *How technology-enhanced learning could be designed for English courses taught to a BA in ELT multilevel group in a Mexican university*. Doctoral thesis. United Kingdom: University of Southampton.

Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (2014). *Approaches and methods in language teaching* (3rd ed.). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

White, R. V. (1988). *The ELT curriculum: design, innovation and management.* Oxford, U.K. and Cambridge, MA, USA: Blackwell Publishers.

Zimmerman, B. J. (2000). Attaining self-regulation: a social cognitive perspective. In M. Boekaerts, P. R. Pintrich, & M. Zeidner (Eds.), *Handbook of self-regulation* (pp. 13-40). San Diego, California: Academic Press. doi:10.1016/B978-012109890-2/50031-7

Published by Research-publishing.net, not-for-profit association
Dublin, Ireland; info@research-publishing.net

Critical CALL – Proceedings of the 2015 EUROCALL Conference, Padova, Italy
Edited by Francesca Helm, Linda Bradley, Marta Guarda, and Sylvie Thouësny

Typeset by Research-publishing.net
Fonts used are licensed under a SIL Open Font License

ISBN13: 978-1-908416-28-5 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)
Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

ISBN13: 978-1-908416-29-2 (Ebook, PDF, colour)
ISBN13: 978-1-908416-30-8 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)

Legal deposit, Ireland: The National Library of Ireland, The Library of Trinity College, The Library of the University of Limerick, The Library of Dublin City University, The Library of NUI Cork, The Library of NUI Maynooth, The Library of University College Dublin, The Library of NUI Galway.

Legal deposit, United Kingdom: The British Library.
British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: décembre 2015.