PETALL: A European project on technology-mediated TBLT

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Abstract. The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) lays strong emphasis on task-based language teaching (TBLT). However, this approach constitutes a challenge for many foreign language teachers, not so much because they are not familiar with the approach or its benefits, but because of the requirements and practical conditions to be met. Most national curricula are clear about the importance of TBLT. The reality of the classroom does not mirror it. The consortium, coordinated by the University of Algarve, is constituted by Higher Education Institutions and secondary schools working in tandem from ten countries (Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Serbia, Spain, Turkey, and the UK). The consortium proposes to build on the outcomes of previous Comenius projects, extending previously acquired knowledge to other partners and constructing a transnational strategy for information and communications technology (ICT)-based task design management. This entails setting up regional networks to promote the languages of the partners involved in the project.

Keywords: LLP transversal project, technology-mediated TBLT, linguistic diversity, teacher training.

1.   Introduction

PETALL stands for **P**an-**E**uropean **T**ask **A**ctivities for **L**anguage **L**earning and is a Transversal Key Activity 2 (Languages) project funded by the European Commission. The main objective of the project (2013-2016) is to provide the teaching community with examples of good practices in which ICT is used in the language classroom to serve productive purposes and in a target-oriented way, as

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propounded by the CEFR. Coordinated first by the University of Amsterdam, and later by the University of Algarve, it involves a total of ten countries.

2.   Background to the project

Despite the emphasis that the CEFR places on TBLT, the approach still represents a challenge for many teachers. They may be familiar with the concept and its communicative benefits, since tasks are usually learner-centred and involve problem-solving procedures or the development of products, which helps learners meet practical challenges, facilitates interaction and makes them responsible for the outcomes of the communication process. However, some requirements and conditions are difficult to meet. The national curricula of many countries are clear about the importance of adopting a task-based approach in foreign language learning. The reality of the classroom, however, does not live up to that standard. Tasks may be rather accessible and intelligible in their design, but the ways in which they can be incorporated into classroom routines and effectively integrated into lesson planning present teachers with methodological and practical problems, which may be discouraging. As a result, they prefer to revert to conventional teaching practices in which they feel more confident and less exposed to the contingencies of real-time communication between learners.

Surveys conducted within the scope of the Comenius project ETALAGE revealed that the reluctance of teachers to revert to TBLT resulted from lack of support and the relatively low levels of collaboration between teachers. An added difficulty detected was related to the inadequacy of the ETALAGE tasks to the specific needs of the classes in each country. The process of adaptation of some ETALAGE tasks proved time-consuming and, given the specific characteristics of their design, sometimes demanded the introduction of significant changes (Lopes, 2012).

3.   Seeking solutions

One of the conclusions drawn from ETALAGE was that the international potential of the tasks, their ability to travel well and to be shared by teachers across Europe without too much entropy, should be furthered through cross-cultural task design management. This called for the creation of regional networks for methodological reflection and joint implementation of tasks. The collaborative work between teachers in different national settings, in particular the ones which rely on communicative exchange across cultural and geographic divides, is a prerequisite to circumvent some of the limitations identified in the previous project. Examples

are complications that resulted from the adaptation process, the lack of support and dialogue between peers, and the challenge of designing and implementing tasks that might make the best of the diversity of cultural experiences in each country.

4.   Relevant literature

Only in recent years have researchers paid closer attention to the integration of ICT into TBLT. Authors like Ellis (2003), Nunan (2004), and Willis and Willis (2001) have contributed to the development of the theoretical and methodological framework of TBLT, but usually technology-mediated contexts have been left aside. The features of such contexts demand a specialized approach, as the uses of language have also evolved to meet the rapidly changing prerequisites, constraints and potentials of ICT. In 2010, Thomas and Reinders edited a volume of studies dedicated to technology-mediated TBLT, encompassing such matters as intercultural exchanges with the application of computer-mediated communication (CMC), network-based CALL, synchronous and asynchronous CMC, teacher education, and virtual-world networking environments, aspects which PETALL intends to cover.

5.   Aims and objectives

The project seeks to:

- encourage collaborative work between teachers in different countries and teacher trainers by setting up regional networks for the development of ICT-based tasks;

- facilitate access to technology-mediated tasks that travel well, securing the quality of communicative exchange across cultural and geographic divides;

- promote mutual understanding and awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity through ICT-based TBLT;

- enhance the quality of teacher education in technology-mediated TBLT.

At a methodological level, the consortium members further aim to explore the following aspects:

- the dynamics of transnational collaborative work between teachers in task design and management;

- the way evaluation tools can leverage both the quality of teacher education in technology-mediated TBLT and the effectiveness of task-based language learning;

- the aspects that guarantee that the tasks proposed by the project travel.

6. Methodology

PETALL will pool the expertise of 10 tandems of teacher education institutes and practice schools to select samples of good practice of ICT-based tasks. Each tandem will select four task activities, two in cooperation with the tandem in one neighbouring country and two in cooperation with the tandem in the other neighbouring country. Tasks will be tried out by pupils in the practice schools of the tandem and of those of the other tandems so as to assure that they "travel well". Each tandem will also produce its training course.

The project is divided into six phases; the first being devoted to the selection and adaptation of learning tasks, which will be revised in the course of the second phase after try out and evaluation by end users and independent experts. The third one is devoted to the design of the training courses, which will be revised in the course of the fourth phase after try out and evaluation by end users and independent experts . The final year will be devoted to translation of the products first in English and then in all the languages of the consortium and their publication.

7. Impact, dissemination, exploitation

As mentioned by Curriculum for Excellence (n.d.), "[o]ne of the key aims of modern languages teaching is to develop young people's 'communicative competence' so that they are able to use and enjoy the language effectively in real situations and for a range of relevant purposes in work and leisure throughout their life" (p. 173). PETALL will allow teachers to use and adapt a set of tasks that are intrinsically interesting and motivating. PETALL tasks will allow students to develop a range of competences which go beyond the mere development of language skills and will promote the development of competences such as the use of ICT, enquiry skills, critical thinking, creative thinking, communication, collaborative working and interpersonal relationships, problem solving, decision making, organisation, management and leadership.

PETALL tasks and the information gleaned from the implementation and analysis of the success of the tasks with target groups (teachers, trainers, schools, policy

makers, students) will be shared with the profession in a number of contexts. Initially, project partners share their experiences with colleagues in their own, as well as neighbouring, institutions. Subsequently, this will be followed by presentations and papers at regional, national and international conferences, and refereed articles in professional publications. This engagement with a task-based learning approach and the pan-European nature of the project should lead to further research and collaborative development work within the project team and with the contacts made in the implementation and dissemination of the tasks.

The communication channels used for the PETALL project are the development of a website, production of brochures and posters, participation in scientific meetings, courses and publication of articles in journals, conference proceedings, lectures, etc.

A crucial element in the dissemination of the results is translation into different languages. This is a major venture as all the national samples of good practice and courses are to be translated into the project language (English) and into the other national languages prior to being uploaded in the website.

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