3 A task is a task is a task… or is it? Researching telecollaborative teacher competence development – the need for more qualitative research

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Abstract

The concept of task has become central not only to an understanding of language learning per se, but also to the design and research of Online Intercultural Exchanges (OIEs). While research on the design of tasks in OIEs has been very productive, we still lack insights into how teachers develop competences in task design on the micro-level. Consequently, this contribution looks at how OIEs allow pre-service teachers to develop such competences when designing telecollaborative task sequences for their future learners. Findings show that the most promising research approach to tackle this question at the interface between telecollaboration, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), and teacher education is a stronger reliance on qualitative research because it helps understand what pre-service teachers do when developing such competences.

Keywords: task-based language teaching, qualitative research, pre-service teacher education.

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1.   Introduction

Historically, tasks and task design have always played an important role when designing OIEs. Already in 1997 Furstenberg wrote that "our main role, then, is to design tasks […] since the task is what gives meaning to the learners' explorations. Only a well-designed task can ensure the quality of the learning process – which is a teacher's ultimate responsibility" (p. 24; see also Levy & Stockwell, 2006). Chapelle (2001) has been especially influential in CALL task design, suggesting a framework for the evaluation of CALL tasks which has since become prominent in telecollaborative research, but which still professes a Second Language Acquisition (SLA) approach with a strong focus on form. Other researchers, especially Hampel (2010), have put forward a more pedagogic approach to Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) task design by focusing on meaning, task type, and teacher/learner factors.

In the most recent book on technology-mediated TBLT, Gonzalez-Lloret and Ortega (2014) make a strong case for integrating tasks and technology by basing it on existing TBLT theory. They argue for a clear learner focus when they write:

> "Language learning tasks which are mediated by new technologies can help minimize students' fear of failure, embarrassment, or losing face; they can raise students' motivation to take risks and be creative while using language to make meaning" (Gonzalez-Lloret & Ortega, 2014, p. 4).

This is in line with Samuda and Bygate's (2008) call for a more pedagogic approach in TBLT:

> "broader understandings of the ways that tasks can contribute to language learning and teaching […] must be grounded in understanding of 'task' as a pedagogic tool in different contexts of use" (p. 219, see also Müller-Hartmann & Schocker-von Ditfurth, 2011).

When pursuing a more pedagogic approach to TBLT, the quality of the learning environment is central. Van den Branden and his research group have defined

variables at three levels which they represent in three circles each lying inside the other that facilitate a rich task-based interaction, and thus create a "powerful learning environment for language learning" (Devlieger & Goossens, 2007, p. 97). The outer circle (level I) represents the non-threatening, safe classroom atmosphere which is central to any learning, where learners can take risks when using the language. The second circle (level II) is characterized by the design and application of tasks that are motivating, meaningful, relevant, and also challenging. These tasks are learner-oriented, providing a rich interactive language learning experience. This process needs to be monitored by the teacher, which is represented in the innermost or central circle (level III). S/he is central in providing the safe learning atmosphere, designing meaningful and challenging tasks-as-workplans, and facilitating the tasks by providing interactional support. These are key competences teachers also need to develop when teaching OIEs. It is in this innermost circle, when engaging in group formation processes and interacting in their international teams, designing and negotiating tasks, that teachers-to-be begin to develop the central competence of task design. Engaged in a reflective approach to learning, they develop an understanding of what learners (their team partners and by extension their future learners) do. In his teacher competence model O'Dowd (2005) has integrated these pedagogic competences. While most of the competences focus on task design, some also focus on the facilitation of the task-in-process. This brings me to the research question. How can we find out how teachers develop pedagogic TBLT competences in OIEs?

In the methodology section I will argue that a qualitative approach allows us to better understand what pre-service teachers do when developing such competences.

2. Methodology

To understand learners' agency in the ecological contexts of OIE environments, a mere quantitative approach is not sufficient. Instead we need research designs that provide introspective or emic data to be better able to grasp what is happening in the task process. Stickler and Hampel (2015) have called for more qualitative

research in CALL contexts because it is connected to what learners are doing. This kind of research approach stresses the importance of trying to understand the learners' actions:

> "We use the term qualitative to mean an approach that favours understanding the subjective world of human experience over explaining objective reality and that may problematize social and political practice as part of their research agenda" (Stickler & Hampel, 2015, p. 380).

The tasks student teachers engage in are what Allwright and Hanks (2009) have called "potentially exploitable pedagogic activities" which facilitate research (p. 154). They are productive because, when triangulated with other data, they allow a deeper understanding of what learners do and think, and they have the advantage of growing out of the teaching itself, the pedagogic activities or tasks, allowing deep insights into the pedagogic process. Allwright and Hanks profess that "good research itself can be good pedagogy" and their main point of exploratory practice – this is how they call their research approach – is "not to get research done, but to get teaching done well" (Allwright & Hanks, 2009, pp. 154-157). This may sound strange at first, but in teacher education contexts, be they face-to-face, online or in blended learning environments, this is paramount.

Consequently, in terms of data collection and analysis, a mixed methods approach was pursued, focusing on one case study to show how data triangulation of chat transcripts of team interaction, classroom discourse in both local contexts (all sessions were filmed) and reflective learner texts allow an understanding of how student teachers developed TBLT competences when trying to facilitate the different levels of Devlieger and Goossens's (2007) 'powerful learning environment' model in their team interaction.

3.   Context

The OIE involved 25 teacher trainees from a Master of Arts (M.A.) course in the Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) teacher training

program at the Pädagogische Hochschule in Heidelberg, Germany, and 31 students of an M.A. TESOL at Jan Dlugosz University in Czestochowa, Poland. All students had extensive pedagogical preparation. The group consisted of 39 female and 17 male student teachers. They represented different levels of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), language proficiency and digital competence. Working in a blended learning format over 13 weeks, using English as a lingua franca, participants worked in intercultural dyads, using the online Canvas platform (http://www.instructure.com), which includes wiki, chat and teleconferencing functionalities. To facilitate task design participants used different technology tools (e.g. About.me), including Weebly (http://weebly. com/) – a tool for creating websites to host task sequences for prospective learners. Students completed the following tasks:

- A written and multimodal personal presentation (ice-breaking task) (Task 1).

- A group identity (reflected in its name) (Task 2).

- An ICC activity (Task 3).

- Evaluation of a partnering group's ICC activity (Task 4).

- Design of a sequence of ICC online activities (delivered via a Weebly site) (Task 5).

- Evaluation of the sequence created by a partnering group (Task 6).

- Reflection on one of the critical learning incidents in the course (Task 7).

As case study, a team of two German male students, Dirk and Sven, who worked with Maria, a female student from Poland, was chosen. Dirk and Sven, who were close to their final exams, had already developed quite a few competences in terms of task-based design. They both had teaching experiences from several internships. Maria came across as not very self-

confident. She was afraid of making language mistakes when chatting with her partners and she did not have the TBLT background. On the other hand she had quite a bit of technical competence, having already designed a Weebly page in the semester before.

A central approach my partner, Malgorzata Kurek, and I pursue in our classes is model teaching. We try to establish a safe atmosphere in class, be transparent about tasks, design tasks based on pedagogic task criteria and support students during the task-based interaction in a way that they develop their teaching competences through discovery and reflection.

4.   Data analysis and discussion

Quantitative data from an end-of-term questionnaire showed that students felt safe and that they realized the importance of the teacher role in creating a safe learning environment, designing meaningful tasks, and facilitating the task-in-process. But these data do not tell anything about the students' task-induced interaction and their learning trajectories. In the following findings, level I (establishing a safe learning atmosphere) and level III (supporting task-based interaction) of the above model will be discussed in light of the triangulated introspective learner data, learner texts, and classroom discourse data.

4.1.   Level I: safe atmosphere

In one of their first tasks, each local team had to come up with the rules of conduct in an OIE to help them understand how to establish a safe learning atmosphere. It is illuminating to see to what extent the students realized the importance of this for their competence development.

Rules of conduct (Maria)

> 1. Try to be friendly and tolerant
> 2. Be in touch with your partner and don't be shy to ask questions :)

3. Have a positive attitude toward the project
4. Express your ideas and expectations in a clear manner
5. Treat this project as a good intercultural experience

Rules of conduct (Dirk and Sven)

1. Always be polite
2. Be open-minded in terms of culture and other opinions
3. Be reliable
4. Be a good teamplayer
(These lists were published in the presentation tool Padlet)

As we can see they are quite different. Maria strongly states that she needs this safe/positive atmosphere by putting it into first place. It is a form of positive self-talk when she writes not to be shy to ask questions. The German group stresses the importance of strong group cohesion by being polite, open-minded and reliable, something that they adhered to in the project. For example, Maria is insecure about her language competence and corrects every misspelling in the chats and sometimes voices her frustration. It is obvious that Maria needs this safe environment where one can make mistakes when communicating to be able to function as a team member.

> **Maria**: It seems to me that you can use different web pages. What tdo you think about using about.me page as a first step?
>
> I look over them but I didn
>
> oh my god.. I can't write. Sorry
>
> I don
>
> wrrr
>
> never mind

(Chat transcript, Google Docs, Nov. 16th, 2015)

When asked in a reflective phase by her teacher what problems they have encountered so far Maria concedes:

> **Maria**: For me it's communication because I know I have problems with my language. It is not good enough. […] By talking with guys I have the opportunity to express my ideas and I try to be correct. I think I can learn a lot from them because Dirk lived in the USA for many years… and his language is very good.

> **Teacher**: But I can imagine the pressure on you.

> **Maria**: Yeah (chuckle) – I'm very stressed that I have to write something or write a complex sentence.

(Lesson transcript, Poland, Dec. 7th, 2015)

Dirk and Sven realized this need, providing her with the support she needs, as Dirk explains in his end-of-term portfolio:

> **Dirk**: My first impression was that Maria was a little bit shy. She didn't write a lot in the beginning of the collaboration, so I talked to Sven and asked him what he thinks we could do about this. I decided to try to involve her more in our conversations by asking her questions so that she actually HAD to write something back. While we were working on our IC task we had to create, she wrote me this:

>> **Maria**: I have to tell you something. Your English is so good. Im;re really impressed! Please forgive me my mistakes.

>> **Dirk**: Thank you very much.

>> **Dirk**: You're English is also very good. I make mistakes too.

Maria wasn't shy, she was just afraid of making mistakes, so I tried to make her feel more comfortable. From this point on, she wrote a little bit more than before. Not as much as Sven and I did, but I thought that she was making progress.

(Portfolio)

As Dirk points out, this polite support bears fruit. It takes them a while to connect and establish group cohesion. When Maria and Dirk wait for Sven in the chat, she relates to their common group identity/name *Busy Heads* (Task 2) and with that expresses her trust in her team, showing that she feels comfortable in terms of social presence:

Maria: Hi not so good. I'm very tired and you ?

Dirk: Sorry to hear that. I'm doing fine but I'm also a little bit exhausted

Maria: So we are really busy heads

(Chat transcript, Google Docs, Nov. 16th, 2015)

In his reflection Dirk stresses that as a teacher he needs this kind of competence to develop a powerful learning environment:

Dirk: It might sound weird, but I had the feeling I should be very sensitive with her and to encourage her from time to time. This seems to me a lot like the relationship between teachers and learners. The teacher always has to encourage his students to make them feel comfortable, so that they are not afraid to make mistakes. Like putting them into the right atmosphere. By the way, I felt comfortable too, because I think it really pushed our work efficiency forward. This makes me very optimistic for my future work with students.

(Portfolio)

The learners' chat transcripts proved to be very helpful, but the interpretation becomes more valid mainly by triangulating them with the introspective data from Dirk's portfolio and the transcript of Polish classroom discourse which provides Maria's reflective stance.

4.2.   Level III: interaction

Let us look at Maria's participation in the task design process. In this interaction – as Dirk reflected in his portfolio – Dirk and Sven try to involve Maria more into the task design process. For the first time in this group's interaction they have a longer exchange about task design (weebly – Task 5), and especially the choice of tool, which Maria is more of an expert on. While she does not have the TBLT knowledge her partners have, she has more competences working with technology. Given the safe learning atmosphere the partners try to create, as well as their attempts to involve her and the fact that she now can use her competences to contribute to the team effort, all of this allows Maria to participate as a full-fledged member of the team, making an important contribution to the task design. This shows how the different levels of the model work together, facilitating productive teamwork.

> **Dirk**: Ok, we already have 2 ideas for the first sequence. Do you have an idea for the second part, Maria? How could the students learn something about their partners' school day?

> **Maria**: Maybe they can use storybird in order to write a short book.

> **Sven**: What do you mean by writing a short book, Maria?

> **Dirk**: Do you mean something like a short text you could write into a diary?

> **Maria**: No, it's not a good idea. I thought about sth like that but we should use different tool to do that

> **Dirk**: Maybe a different tool but the idea is not bad at all

Maria: I think it gives them the opportunity to develop their writing skills

Dirk: Good and important point

Sven: Yes! I think that they would need a lot of task support or respectively a lot of pre- teaching in order to be able to perform such a task. But I really like the basic idea as well

Dirk: This also depends on their level. A 5th grader would definitely more support than a 9th grader *need

Maria: https://penzu.com/ our teacher suggest me this page. We can look into it later.

(Chat transcript, Google Docs, Dec. 7th, 2015)

As Dirk concedes, Maria is considered the expert for this phase.

Dirk: Honestly, I was kind of lost when I first looked at the Weebly homepage. Creating a homepage was new for me, and I was thankful that Maria was in our group because she already created a Weebly page on her own. I still feel confident when I face a new format or interface, but it helped a lot that Maria knew how to do it. It saved us a lot of time.

(Portfolio)

In another reflective phase Maria comments on the relationship between levels I and III:

Maria: It was the time when Dirk and Sven said they really liked our meetings, and they would be really missing this time. That our group is really a group and we did a lot of good work… and it was when I got the feeling they really appreciate our work, our collaboration that maybe we are a real team […].

Teacher: Was it different at the beginning?

Maria: Yes. Because we didn't talk at all. We didn't talk about our feelings and our opinions. But later on I think they saw I could do something more, that they can also rely on me and that I'm able to help them. And it was a really good feeling. I was so proud of myself.

(Lesson transcript, Poland, Jan. 25th, 2016)

While Maria is still at the beginning of her TBLT competence development, her comments show how important the learners' emotional stance is, and with that a safe learning atmosphere and trust-building activities in group formation to allow all partners to contribute and develop their TBLT competences; something which Dirk and Sven certainly learned from this exchange.

5.   Conclusion

This paper tried to show that by pursuing a mixed method approach with a strong focus on triangulating qualitative, i.e. introspective data, we can succeed in better understanding our student teachers' trajectories when developing task-based competences in OIEs. Using tasks as the possible exploitable pedagogic activities allows us to generate these data without intervening too much into classroom interaction, gaining important insights into student teachers' competence development in terms of pedagogic task design as well as process competences.

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