

11 How different are European and American foreign language teachers regarding the use of ICT in task-based language learning? Beliefs, attitudes and practices in the classroom

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Abstract

The results of a transatlantic survey on technology-mediated Task-Based Language Learning (TBLL) are presented and discussed. The study was conducted within the scope of the European-funded Pan-European Task Activities for Language Learning (PETALL) project. The aim was to determine the teachers' acquaintance with TBLL and with the potential of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) for enhancing that approach. The survey also allowed us to characterise the teaching practices used in the language classroom in terms of this approach. As it was also possible to compare the responses from several countries, including the US, this chapter looks into the differences in beliefs, attitudes, and practices that exist between EU and US practitioners. The analysis of the data (by frequency) shows that there is a difference between the US and the EU in relation to TBLL in terms of familiarity, conceptualisation, and forms of implementation in the classroom. There are also differences in defining the benefits of technology-mediated tasks, as the EU respondents put emphasis on the teacher's creativity and responsiveness to new challenges, whereas the US respondents underlie the importance of it providing

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communication contexts closer to real life, as well as the opportunity for collaboration and mutual assistance.

Keywords: task-based language learning, ICT in language teaching, teaching practices, teacher training, teachers' beliefs.

1. Introduction

In early 2016, an international survey on technology-mediated TBLL was launched within the scope of the European-funded project PETALL. The importance of ICT in TBLL has been the subject of a number of studies published in recent years (González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014; Lai & Li, 2011; Martins, 2015; Roessingh, 2014; Schmid & Whyte, 2014; Schrooten, 2006; Thomas & Reinders, 2010). The purpose of the survey was, on the one hand, to determine how well acquainted teachers were with TBLL and with the potential that ICT has to enhance that approach, and, on the other, to characterise the teaching practices used in the language classroom in terms of TBLL and ICT. As this was an international survey, it was also possible to compare the responses from several countries, including the US. In the particular case of the present study, the aim was to learn about the differences in beliefs, attitudes, and practices that exist between EU and US practitioners regarding TBLL, and in particular regarding the use of ICT in TBLL, while probing, at the same time, their understanding of other approaches and methods.

There have been several studies conducted within the European context comparing foreign language teacher training in different countries (e.g. Eurydice, 2001), but studies between EU countries and the US do not abound. Allen (2013) carried out a study on the perceptions and beliefs about the development of language proficiency of a group of US teachers of French as a foreign language in the context of a three-week workshop in France. Although this was a transatlantic experience, the study did not seek to match the US teachers' teaching practices with those of their French colleagues, the aim being

solely to find out whether such beliefs about the improvement of proficiency within the context of study abroad were compatible with the literature on foreign language teaching. Another study by [Yturriago and Aguirre \(2015\)](#) discusses the differences in the dominant frameworks of language acquisition, language teaching policies, and underlying ideological principles between North America (including Canada) and Europe. It further seeks to explain the differences in perspective in terms of teaching methodologies. Still, it offers a predominantly theoretical perspective, without actually delving into classroom practices. A relatively similar study by [Cañado \(2010\)](#) focusses predominantly on foreign language teaching in the context of higher education and seeks to understand the ways in which globalisation, technology, and competition end up shaping language teaching policy frameworks on both sides of the Atlantic. Based on the analysis of such frameworks, the author concludes that the best way to achieve significant reform in higher education language teaching is to transcend frontiers and to work towards closer collaboration, integration, and internationalisation. Although the paper mentions some methods and approaches that have gained a predominant position within those policy frameworks, no substantive information is given about the teachers' perceptions and what actually takes place in the classroom. This chapter aims to shed light precisely on those practices, more specifically in the use of ICT in TBLL, and on the teachers' own beliefs and attitudes towards technology-mediated tasks.

The main objectives of this study were to:

- determine how well acquainted US and EU teachers are with TBLL;
- pin down the differences in the ways TBLL is conceptualised in the US and the EU;
- identify what other methods or approaches are mostly used on both sides of the Atlantic; and
- ascertain in what way ICT is being used in TBLL in the US and the EU.

2. Methods

2.1. Type of quantitative research

This quantitative study gathered data seeking to support generalisations *to* and *across* groups of teachers from different countries (Pedhazur & Schmelkin, 1991, pp. 229-230). Nevertheless, as far as the external validity is concerned, one should always consider that “attrition is almost inevitable” (Cook & Campbell, 1979, p. 73). As the intention was to establish comparisons between variables, the study assumed a descriptive nature, and was mainly based on an analysis by frequency. IBM SPSS 23 was used for the statistical analysis of data. As far as validity is concerned, the ANOVA test was applied to determine if there was a significant relation between the dependent variable (‘Country’) and the independent variables – all questions on the teachers’ knowledge of task-based language learning, and questions about (1) the teachers’ awareness of the potential of ICT in the language classroom and (2) the strategies to circumvent the lack of ICT resources in the classroom. Table 1 shows a significance level of .003.

Table 1. Results of the ANOVA test

ANOVA						
Model		Sum Sq	Df	Mean Sq	Z	Sig.
1	Regression	4.327	15	.288	2.404	.003
	Residuals	32.162	268	.120		
	Total	36.489	283			

2.2. Structure of the questionnaire

The data was collected on Google Forms from February 2016 to March 2017. The online questionnaire was comprised of 31 questions, six of them dedicated to the characterisation of the respondents (Sections A and B), nine to TBLL (Section C), five to ICT (Section D), eight to teaching practice (Section E), and three to training needs (Section F). In this chapter, the focus is placed exclusively on the questions related to the use of ICT in TBLL and the beliefs related thereto.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Geographical distribution of respondents

The distribution of respondents from the US and EU is shown in [Table 2](#) below.

Table 2. Geographical distribution of respondents

A3. Place of Origin					
		Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Accumulative percentage
Valid	US	43	15.1	15.1	15.1
	EU	241	84.9	84.9	100.0
	Total	284	100.0	100.0	

From the total of 284 respondents, 241 were teachers from nine member states of the EU (namely France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Spain), which corresponds to 84.9%, whereas the teachers from the US totalled as many 43 (15.1%). Although the latter number is almost six times smaller than that of EU respondents, it should be noticed that, in terms of individual countries, the US came fourth, just behind Italy, with 54 respondents (19.0%), Greece, with 50 respondents (17.6%), and Portugal, with 44 (15.5%).

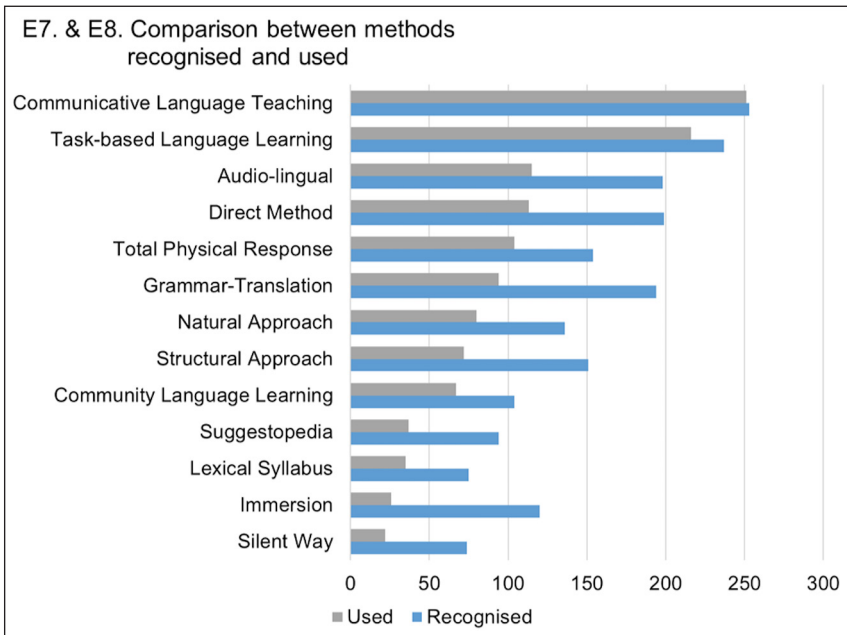
3.2. Methods and approaches

In order to determine how important TBLL was in regards to other methodological proposals, teachers from both the US and EU were asked about the diversity of language teaching methods and approaches they were familiar with (Question E7: ‘Acquaintance with different methods’) and the ones they claimed to use in the language classroom (Question E8: ‘Use of different methods’). These were presented with a range of methods and respective definitions adapted from [Shoebottom \(2007\)](#), and partly based on [Richards and Rogers \(1986\)](#). They were listed in alphabetical order: Audio-lingual; Communicative language teaching; Community Language Learning; Direct Method; Grammar-Translation; Immersion; Lexical Syllabus; Natural Approach; Silent Way; Structural

Approach; Suggestopedia; Task-Based Language Learning; and Total Physical Response.

Each teacher is familiar with an average of 6.7 methods. However, only 4.1 (about two thirds) of such methods are used. At the bottom of the list of known methods come the Silent Way method, Lexical Syllabus, and Suggestopedia (between 24.9% and 31.6%), which also matches the list of the least used (between 7.4% and 12.5%). Also amongst the least used is the Immersion method (8.8%), although it is recognised by as many as 40.4% of the respondents.

Figure 1. Bar chart displaying the comparison between methods recognised and used (Questions E7 and E8)



At the top of the list (Figure 1 above) comes Communicative Language Teaching, immediately followed by Task-Based Language Learning – recognised by 85.2% and 79.8% of the respondents, respectively, and used by 84.5% and 72.7%,

respectively. Unsurprisingly, the difference between recognised and used in both of them is the smallest amongst all the other methods and/or approaches (0.7% in the first case and 7.1% in the second).

Grammar-Translation, the method associated with traditional practices, is one of the most widely recognised and yet only 31.6% of the respondents claim to use it. Similarly, the Structural Approach is recognised by practically half of the respondents, but those who use it are in fact below a quarter. Within the communicative paradigm, the Direct Method, the Natural Approach, and Immersion score significantly less than Communicative Language Teaching and TBLL, as far as use is concerned.

The differences between the US and EU figures cannot be overlooked. On average, US respondents claim that they are acquainted with one more method (6) than their European counterparts (4.99). This shows that American teachers are familiar with 46.1% of the methods listed, whereas European teachers claim to know only 38.4%. This somehow echoes the differences in the variety of methods used in the classroom, as the US respondents are more prone to diversify methods than the EU respondents (3.71 versus 3.11 – 28.5% and 23.9% of the total of the methods listed, see [Table 3](#)).

Table 3. Comparing the number of responses and percentages of US and EU respondents to Questions E7 and E8

Method	No. of US respondents who recognise the method		No. of EU respondents who recognise the method		No. of US respondents who use the method		No. of EU respondents who use the method	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Audio-lingual	32	78.0	144	65.4	18	43.9	85	38.6
Communicative Language Teaching	37	90.2	186	84.5	34	82.9	189	85.9

Community Language Learning	11	26.8	75	34.0	10	24.3	50	22.7
Direct Method	32	78.0	146	66.3	23	56.1	78	35.4
Grammar-Translation	31	75.6	142	64.5	15	36.5	65	29.5
Immersion	29	70.7	80	36.3	5	12.2	21	9.5
Lexical Syllabus	4	9.7	62	28.1	2	4.8	29	13.1
Natural Approach	25	60.9	93	42.2	15	36.5	52	23.6
Silent Way	11	26.8	49	22.2	2	4.8	15	6.8
Structural Approach	27	65.8	108	49.0	13	31.7	50	22.7
Suggestopedia	11	26.8	68	30.9	2	4.8	29	13.1
TBLL	35	85.3	175	79.5	34	82.9	158	71.8
Total Physical Response	35	85.3	101	45.9	25	60.9	68	30.9
Total	320		1429		198		889	
Average (per respondent)	6.0	46.1	4.99	38.4	3.71	28.5	3.11	23.9

The most striking differences between the US and the EU in the methods recognised by the teachers can be found in Total Physical Response (where there is a difference of 39.4%) and Immersion (34.4%). US and EU teachers also diverge in their knowledge of the Natural Approach (18.7%), Lexical Syllabus (18.4%), and the Structural Approach (16.8%).

As far as the methods used are concerned, Total Physical Response is, once again, the method where the difference between the US and the EU respondents is more pronounced (30.0%), followed by the Direct Method (20.6%), the Natural Approach (12.9%), and Task-Based Language Learning (11.1%). The latter figure does not seem to be consistent with the result of the responses to Question C4 (Level of confidence in the implementation of TBLL), where US teachers' level of confidence scored lower than that of their EU colleagues.

3.3. Knowledge of TBLL

A more detailed analysis of their knowledge of TBLL (Question C1) shows that 67.68% of the respondents answered 'Yes' and that 27.95% answered 'Somewhat'. Only 4.38% answered negatively. This shows that what they claimed to be their overall acquaintance with TBLL (95.63%) is in sharp contrast with the percentages obtained in Question E7 (US=85.3%; EU=79.5%).

When comparing the results from the EU and the US, the percentage of EU teachers who claimed to be more acquainted with this approach was higher than that of the US. However, as the very concept of task lends itself to diverse appropriations, it was also important to see how the teachers' understandings differed from each other. In the next question regarding the meaning of the word task (C2), teachers were asked to choose one of the four definitions provided, which in turn had been borrowed from just as many authors offering distinct perspectives of the concept. The quotes were as follows:

“A piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form” (Nunan, 1989, p. 10).

“A task is a work plan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed” (Ellis, 2003, p. 16).

“An activity which requires learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allows teachers to control and regulate that process” (Prabhu, 1987, p. 24).

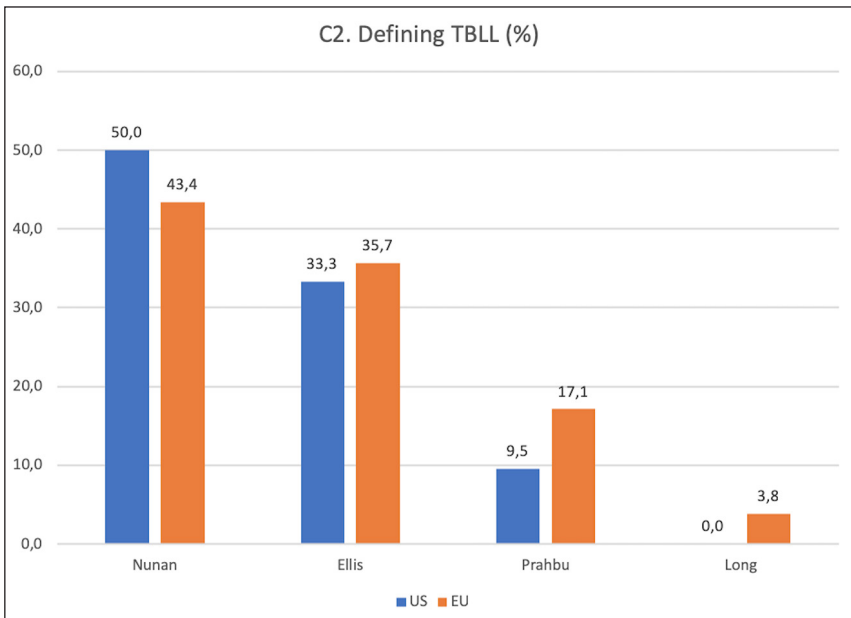
“A piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward” (Long, 1985, p. 89).

Nunan's (1989) definition came first (144 respondents=48.48%), and Ellis's (2003) came second (100=33.7%). Prabhu's (1987) attracted less than half of those who voted for Ellis's (2003) (44=14.81%). Only a residual number of respondents went for Long's (1985) shorter and somewhat vaguer definition (5=1.6%).

The comparison between the responses from the EU and the US (Figure 2) shows that the order remains the same (first Nunan's; second Ellis's; third Prabhu's). However, there were more US teachers subscribing to Nunan's (1989) definition

(with a strong emphasis on a more proactive attitude on the part of the learner) than EU teachers (50.0% vs. 43.43%), whereas Prabhū's (1987) (which focusses on the teachers' control and regulation of the process) received more responses from the EU teachers (17.14%) than from the US (9.52%). Concerning Ellis's (2003) definition, no significant difference exists between both groups (US=33.3%; EU=35.7%). Only EU teachers selected Long's (1985) quote.

Figure 2. Comparing the percentages of US and EU respondents to Question C2



The antinomy classroom/real world was the focus of Question C3. This was a closed question with three options:

- (1) tasks require the learner to perform a behaviour similar to the one he or she will carry out in the real world;
- (2) tasks require the learner to do things that he or she will not do outside the classroom; and

- tasks require both (1) and (2).

Most teachers (71.38%) chose item (1), which signals a departure in perception from the traditional classroom activities and the role played by the learners in that context. A negligible number of teachers (1.01%) elected item (2), whereas over a quarter of the respondents (27.61%) chose (3), indicating that, though requiring a behaviour matching the circumstances of the real world, the task would still have to be implemented in the classroom. In this respect, there are no major differences between US and EU respondents.

3.4. Implementation of TBLL

Concerning their confidence in their own ability to implement TBLL (Question C4, in a five-point Likert scale), 5.7% (17 respondents) claimed they did not know how to do it. Most of them (53.2%) rated their confidence at 4 (124 respondents) ('I have a reasonably good idea of how to proceed') or 5 (33 respondents) ('I know exactly what it takes to implement TBLL'). Ninety-one respondents (30.63%) rated their confidence at 3, that is, they had 'grasped the basics of TBLL', but did not feel sure about how to put it into practice.

There are marked differences between US and EU respondents, as the level of confidence expressed by EU teachers and US teachers varies (Figure 3). Only 9,5% of the EU teachers chose 'Very well' (in sharp contrast with 16.67% of the US respondents). However, almost half (42.1%) chose 'Fairly well' (as opposed to 33.3%).

Question C5 asked teachers about the frequency of implementation of tasks in the classroom. Three quarters of the respondents (225) stated that tasks were implemented more than once per school term: 57 respondents (19.19%) claimed it was done once a week or more, 73 (24.58%) more than once a month, and the remaining 95 (31.98%) once a month or less. A minority of 16 respondents (5.72%) never implemented it at all, a number that is consistent with the number of those who answered 'not at all' in the Question C4 (Figure 4).

Figure 3. Comparing the percentages of US and EU respondents to Question C4

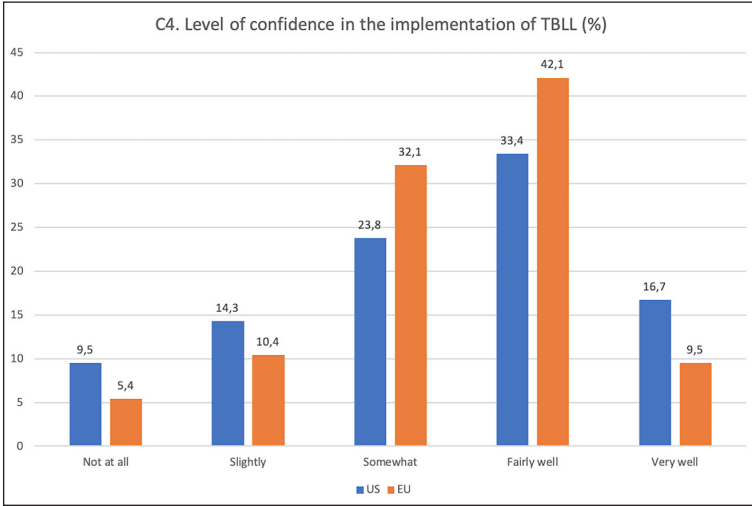
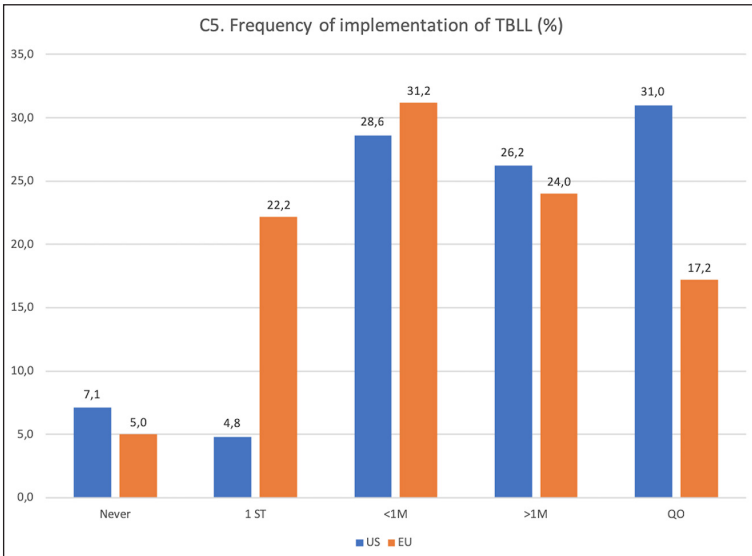


Figure 4. Comparing the percentages of US and EU respondents to Question C5

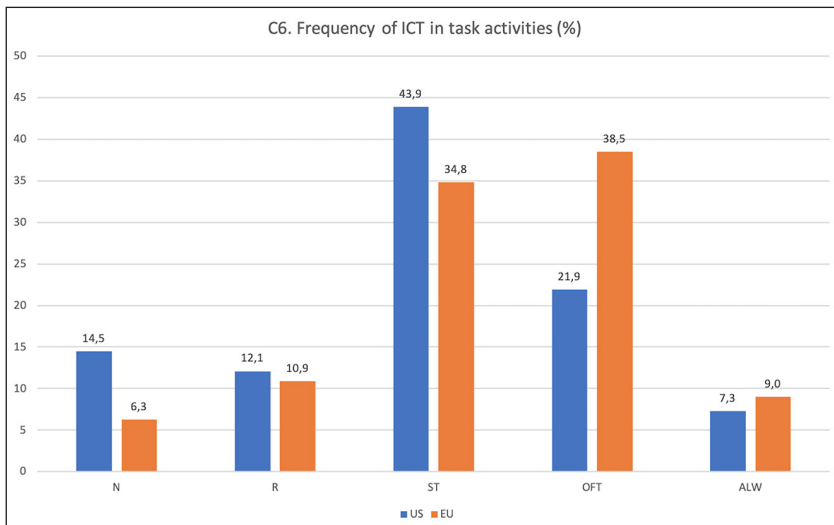


Despite the results obtained in Question C4, US teachers seemed to use task-based activities in the classroom more often than their European colleagues ('More than once a month' got 26.19% from the US against 23.98% from the EU; 'Quite often' got as much as 30.95%, as opposed to 17.19% of the EU respondents).

In Question C6, teachers were queried about the frequency of the use of ICT in the tasks. A significant part of the teachers answered affirmatively (Figure 5). 'Always' (23) and 'Often' (104) account for 42.7% of the universe, while 'Sometimes' accounts for 38.3%. Only 34 (11.45%) replied 'Rarely' and 22 (7.41%) 'Never'.

EU teachers seem more prone to include ICT in the tasks than US teachers, since the number of the former who answered 'Often' almost doubles the number of the latter (38.46% vs 21.42%). 23% more of EU teachers claim that they use it in relation to the US respondents (9.0% vs 7.3%).

Figure 5. Comparing the percentages of US and EU respondents to Question C6



3.5. Perceptions of TBLL: benefits and challenges

In Question C7, teachers were asked to rank the positive aspects of technology-mediated tasks from one (the most important) to six (the least relevant). The aspects were as follows:

- (1) they lead to greater, more active involvement of the learners in the learning process;
- (2) they increase/promote the development of the learners' communicative skills;
- (3) they put learners in communication contexts closer to real life;
- (4) they give students autonomy and decision-making abilities;
- (5) they promote collaboration and mutual assistance; and
- (6) ICT+TBLL foster the teachers' creativity, adaptability, and responsiveness to new challenges.

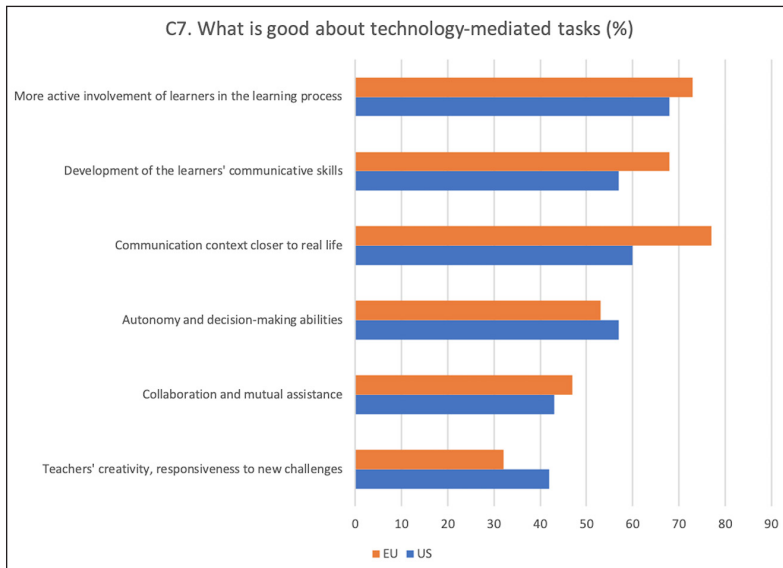
Item (1) was ranked as the most important (28.3%), immediately followed by item (3) (24.6%). Items (2) and (4) came out with a tie at 16.2%, whereas only 5.1% chose (5) as the most important. These percentages show that teachers attach more importance to the learners' active involvement and real-life contexts than to issues of autonomy and collaboration. The promotion of the learners' communicative skills does not appear as a priority, nor does collaboration and mutual assistance, although literature often presents them as important features of TBLL.

As teachers ranked the items in order of importance, further calculations were made to determine which item scored the highest based on a sum of points (where the one ranked first was worth six points, down to the one ranked last, worth one point only). Item (1) came first with 1244 points, followed by (3),

with 1184, (2) with 1102, (4) with 1089, (5) with 830 and (6) with 788. If we consider the first four items, the Standard Deviation (SD) is 63.1006141 with a Mean (M) of 1154.75, thus the SD being only 5.46% of M. Therefore, all four items are relatively close in terms of importance. Items (5) (promotion of the teachers' creativity, adaptability, and responsiveness), and (6) (collaboration and mutual assistance) scored markedly below the other items.

US and EU teachers responded differently to this question (Figure 6). More frequently subscribed by US respondents than their European colleagues were the notions that technology-mediated tasks deal with communication contexts closer to real life (respectively 76.01% vs. 61.17%) and that they promote the development of the learners' communicative skills (67.07% vs. 56.28%).

Figure 6. Comparing the percentages of US and EU respondents to Question C7



Question C8 was about the negative or challenging aspects of technology-mediated tasks. As in the previous question, options had to be ranked from one (the most important) to seven (the least relevant).

The aspects they had to rank were as follows:

- (1) lack of knowledge of what TBLL entails or how to implement it;
- (2) difficulty in getting samples of good practice in ICT+TBLL that can meet my needs as a teacher;
- (3) difficulty in simultaneously monitoring the work of several groups of learners during the ICT+TBLL activity;
- (4) the learners' resistance to using the foreign language in the course of the activity;
- (5) the learners' lack of language/linguistic resources (vocabulary and grammar) to apply to the activity;
- (6) difficulty in designing and applying tools for evaluation that may enable the teacher to evaluate the learners' performance; and
- (7) difficulty in finding time to plan and prepare an ICT+TBLL activity.

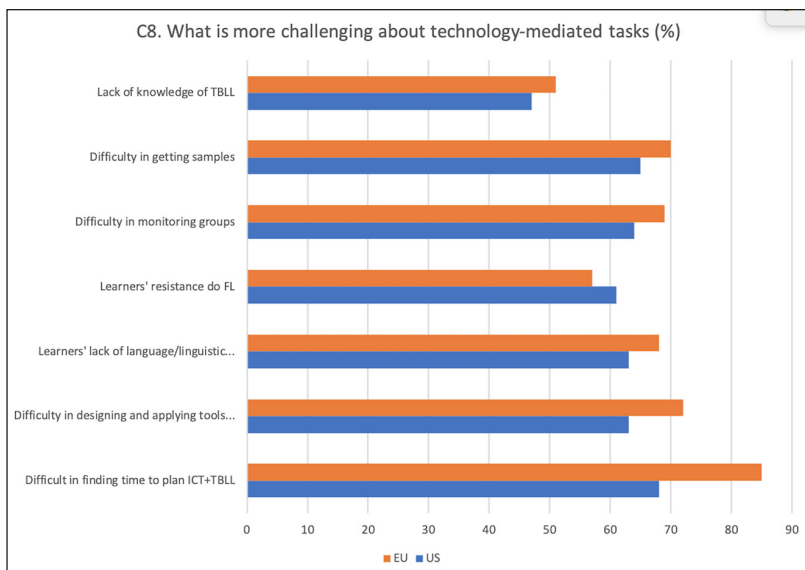
Item (7) was by far the most important aspect (ranked 1st by as many as 22.9% of the respondents), more than 8% higher than Item (3) (ranked second by 14.5%). The variance of the remaining five items is of 0.5096, with a standard variation of only 0.713862, meaning that there is little significant difference between the percentages. Therefore, one may assume that the factors that stand in the way of teachers implementing technology-mediated tasks are not so much related to methodological issues (Items (1), (2), and (6)) or with the learners' limitations (Items (4) and (5)) as they are to pragmatic issues, in particular time management and classroom management (Items (7) and (3)).

As the items were ranked in order of importance, it was possible to ascertain, through the sum of points (where the one ranked first was worth seven points down to the one ranked last worth one point only), which scored higher. Item

(7) scored higher (1333 points), followed by (2) (1240), (3) (1216), (6) (1213), (5) (1191), (4) (1145), and finally (1) (978). With the exclusion of the latter, the SD is 57.22 with an M of 1223, SD being 4.68% of M. Therefore, the first six items are close in terms of importance. Items (1) and (6) are markedly below the other items.

A comparison between EU and US responses shows that differences are more marked in items (7) and (6), where US teachers seem more concerned about time management (84.96%) and the evaluation tools (72.36%), than the EU teachers (68.78% and 62.78%, respectively, see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Comparing the percentages of US and EU respondents to Question C8



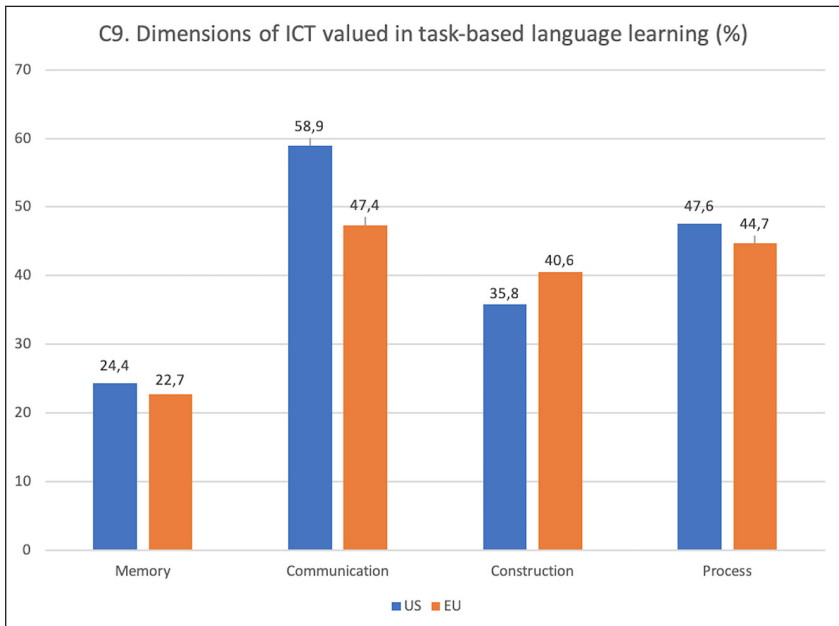
Question C9 addressed four general dimensions of ICT that teachers most value in TBLL activities. The dimensions were *Memory*, *Communication*, *Construction*, and *Process*. The most valued dimension was *Communication*, with 45% (in sharp contrast with the results of Question C7, where only 16.4% of the teachers claimed that ICT-based tasks promoted the development of the

learners' communicative skills). *Process* achieved 29% and *Construction* 23%. *Memory* only scored 3%.

Again, as the items were ranked in order of importance, the sum of points was also calculated (where the one ranked first was worth four points down to the one ranked last worth one point only). Here the differences between *Communication* (930 points), *Process* (869), and *Construction* (788) are less marked. *Memory* (453) is still well off the mark. With the exclusion of the latter, the SD is 58.16 with an M of 862.33, thus the SD being 6.74% of M. Therefore, the weight of each of the first three items is relatively homogeneous.

There are no significant differences between US and EU respondents (Figure 8). However, as far as the *Communication* dimension is concerned, US teachers are more inclined to prefer it (58.94% vs. 47.38% of EU respondents).

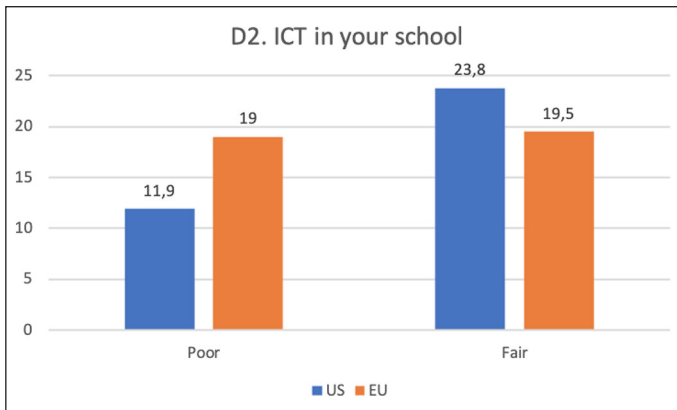
Figure 8. Comparing the percentages of US and EU respondents to Question C9



In order to establish the importance that teachers attach to ICT in the classroom, teachers were queried about the exploitation of the potential of technology in their teaching practice regardless of method or approach (Question D1); 90.24% stated that they exploit it. Nevertheless, EU teachers are slightly more prone to do it (92.3%) than their US peers (81.0%).

These figures match those of multiple choice Question D2 ('Do you believe that it is possible to circumvent the lack of ICT resources at school?'); 63.30% stated that, even if the school's resources were very limited, there would always be the chance to use ICT in the language classroom, though severely restricting their options. 28.62% chose 'Sure', while only 8.08% remained pessimistic, believing that there were no alternatives to school resources. Here US respondents were slightly more positive, as seen in Figure 9 below.

Figure 9. Comparing the percentages of US and EU respondents to Question D2



4. Conclusion

TBLL has now become one of the most used methods, regardless of it being in the US or the EU, although there is a higher percentage of US teachers using TBLL, and slightly higher percentage of EU teachers who prefer communicative

language teaching. Nevertheless, only about half of both EU and US respondents (52%) claim they are confident about how to implement TBLL in the classroom. Data also show that ICT is used in TBLL on a regular basis, although US teachers are slightly less prone to exploit the potential of ICT in language learning. The vast majority of teachers (90%) also often make other uses of ICT in the language classroom, as they believe that ICT-based activities can be carried out without having to rely heavily on the school resources (92%). Still, US teachers claim to be less dependent on school by a margin of almost ten percentage points in relation to their EU counterparts. There are also significant differences when it comes to defining what is good about technology-mediated tasks. EU respondents put emphasis on the teacher's creativity and responsiveness to new challenges, as well as on the development of the learner's autonomy and decision-making abilities, whereas US respondents underlie the importance of it providing communication contexts closer to real life, collaboration and mutual assistance, the development of the learners' communicative skills, and a more active involvement in the learning process.

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Professional development in CALL: a selection of papers

Edited by Christina Nicole Giannikas, Elis Kakoulli Constantinou, and Salomi Papadima-Sophocleous

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