



FLEXIBLE TRAINING MODELS: A RESPONSE TO THE CURRENT NEEDS

TASK-BASED LEARNING FOR TRAINING THE FUTURE ENGLISH TEACHERS

Learning language and content in an active and meaningful way

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1. **ABSTRACT:** This article shows how we have applied Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in the training the future teachers of English in an attempt to target both the improvement of their language skills and their knowledge about how to teach English. This methodology has enabled the learners to increase their participation, especially in small groups. This increasing has allowed the students to boost their oral fluency and their communicative capacities.
 2. **RESUMEN:** Este artículo analiza cómo se ha aplicado la “enseñanza del inglés basada en tareas” en la formación de los futuros maestros y maestras de inglés para perseguir el doble objetivo de mejorar las habilidades lingüísticas del alumnado a la vez que su conocimiento de cómo enseñar inglés. Esta metodología ha permitido aumentar la participación del estudiantado, especialmente a través de pequeños grupos. Esto les ha permitido incrementar su fluidez oral y su capacidad comunicativa.
 3. **KEYWORDS:** Task-Based Language Teaching, EFL, Methodology, Content-Based Instruction / **PALABRAS CLAVE:** Enseñanza de lenguas basada en tareas, Inglés como lengua extranjera, Metodología, Instrucción basada en contenido.



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4. DEVELOPMENT:

a) Objectives

To be aware the importance of using communicative methodologies in the training of future teachers of English

To identify Task-Based Learning as an active methodology that allows the students to learn through discovery, discussion and collaboration.

b) Description of my work

Introduction

The first step when planning a training course or a subject is to analyze the needs of the trainees. The learners of the subject “Knowledge and Use of the English Language - 2” were future primary school teachers that enrolled as part of their English teaching minor. The analysis of needs showed that they needed to be specially strong in two ways:

- They needed to have a good command of the oral English
- They needed to know how to teach the language in a motivating and active way based on communication.

The best way to tackle these two objectives at the same time is through example. The students should experiment how they improved their command of the language through motivating and active communicative activities that also helped them learn how to teach. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) seemed the best way to do so.

Another method to tackle the objectives of both English and how to teach English seemed the Content-Based Instruction (CBI), also a very widely accepted approach. Harmer (2007) said that “students learn better when engaged in meaning-based tasks than if they are concentrating on language forms just for their own sake”. Thus, TBLT and CBI complemented each other.



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In TBLT, you train the learners to be able to fulfill a final linguistic task. You prepare them through communicative tasks (the attention of the learner is on transmitting and receiving information) and enabling tasks (the attention of the learner is on certain language aspects that they will need to master to be able to do the final task). Some authors consider TBLT an evolution of one of the most extended and accepted approaches for teaching English: the Communicative Language Teaching (Richards, 2001).

The final task for the students in this subject had to be one that required them to communicate at the same time they proved they understood the intricacies of how to teach English: they had to create a one hour session related to a story. Andrew Wright (2008) said: “Stories [...] offer a major and constant source of life and of language experience for children. Stories are motivating and memorable, rich in language experience and inexpensive!”

Content and parts of the subject

In this subject, if the learners were to be able to do the **final task**, they should learn **how to choose stories**, how to **tell them**, how to **prepare activities** related to them **to exploit the language** and how to **manage the class**. As we worked through example, all the activities and tasks had to be **motivating and active** and, of course, **communicative**, given the learners also had to improve their oral English.

The mixture between TBLT and CBI forced a slight adaptation of the terms “**communication tasks**” and “**enabling tasks**” by Estaire and Zenon (1994). **Language micro-tasks** refer to activities specifically designed to provide the learners with certain language skills that they would need to do the final task properly. **Enabling micro-tasks** refer to activities that would enable the learners to do the final task properly in terms of non-linguistic competences; this is, the content knowledge they would need (important storybook authors, ways to manage the class, ways to tell stories...). They are “micro-tasks” because they are like little bits of what the learners would have to do in their final task.



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The subject is a 6 ECTS subject. In this case, this is 48 hours of class (24 2-hour sessions). I divided the subject in 3 parts:

- 1) The first part of the subject (15 sessions) was devoted to the **enabling micro-tasks** and consisted of 3 parts:
 - a. The first had to do with **classroom management**. In this part (the first 4 sessions) we dealt with: Whole Brain Teaching (WBT) as a classroom management system, varied places to use in the English class (walls and corridors...), teaching classes through corners, etc.
 - b. The second part had to do with **storytelling** and **exploiting the story with related activities** (9 sessions). The students heard stories and had to complete activities (mainly communicative) related to the story. The activities were, of course, adapted to the university students and their reality. Thus, they were often reminded that, if they wanted to use them with kids, they had to think about the adaptations they would need to do (language, skills, support and scaffolding...).
 - c. The third part dealt with **language acquisition**. As this content was also dealt with in a simultaneous subject (Didactics of the Foreign Language), this part only lasted 1 session. It dealt with how our brain acquires the language and what we can do with our learners to maximize this acquisition.
- 2) The second part of the subject (5 sessions) was devoted to the **language micro-tasks** and had 2 parts:
 - a. **Speaking** (3 sessions). The students had been interacting and communicating a lot throughout the first part of the subject, but they were doing so in pairs or in small groups. Now, they needed to practice using the language in front of whole-class settings to be ready to do so in their final task.
 - b. **Writing** (2 sessions). This part dealt with writing even though it was not one of the main linguistic objectives of the subject. Some authors (Terrell, 1986) claim that



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writing is a very important resource for the language acquisition process, especially in terms of accessing (passive language becoming active). Also, as part of their final task they had to present a written work where with explanations of their plan.

- 3) The third part of the subject (4 sessions) was for the final tasks. One of the sessions was for allowing the learners to prepare their tasks in the class (so they could receive help, orientation and support) and the rest were the presentations.

Examples of micro-tasks

As already mentioned before, one of the objectives of the subject was to provide the students with experiences and not only theoretical knowledge. They had to experiment a more active language learning process in which they became active roles in the class and in which they used the language to fluently communicate with the others. One of the techniques that helped them experiment and do a more meaningful learning (both in terms of language and of content) was the **loop input** (Woodward, 2003).

Woodward said that “loop input is a specific type of experiential teacher training process that involves an alignment of the process and content of learning.” Some of the content that the students learned through loop input were: WBT techniques and routines (Biffle, 2009) or some the activities through that same activity type.

Experimenting and having a clear idea of what the teacher expects from the learners for their final task is very important in TBLT. This is why the learners experienced many micro-tasks devoted to telling stories in very varied ways. We had Total-Physical Response (TPR) storytelling (Asher & Adamski, 2000), WBT storytelling, storytelling with the support of the storybook or through new technologies (like Prezi)...

The storybooks were of several, very successful authors and were designed for native learners, not for the acquisition of English as a foreign language. Some of the storybooks we used were: *The Gruffalo* (Donaldson & Scheffler, 1999), *The House that Jack Built*



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(Mayo, 2006) or Elmer (McKee, 1989). These three also illustrate the different types of stories that the learners heard in the class: repetitive, cumulative-repetitive and linear.

In the plan there was also a wide range of activities related to the different stories we used throughout the subject. These were for **before**, **during** or **after** the storytelling so the learners would realize of all the possibilities they had when trying to exploit a story linguistically.

Before telling them Winnie the Witch (Thomas & Paul, 2012), they received some written instructions on how to draw a witch. They sat by pairs and each had to draw their own witch. They helped each other understand the instructions. This activity helped the students get into the topic of the story and raised their motivation and expectations towards both the story and the learning process about to come. It was a practical way to make them see that they could do warm-up activities of the sort before telling stories.

One activity we did **during** a story was based on TPR storytelling. The students had to mime some of the words of the story, especially the ones that were repeated several times. Whenever they heard a certain word, they had to mime that word. This technique made the input more comprehensible and the activity more motivating and meaningful. In this case, the story was an adaptation of Aaaarrgghh, Spider! (Monks, 2006).

An activity we did **after** the storytelling was one related to the already-mentioned storybook Elmer. The students were organized in pairs. Each member received a paper with a different image (see Figure 1). Both pictures were incomplete and complementary. The students had to give instructions to each other about how to paint their picture to end with a whole Elmer. Of course, they were only allowed to see their own paper.



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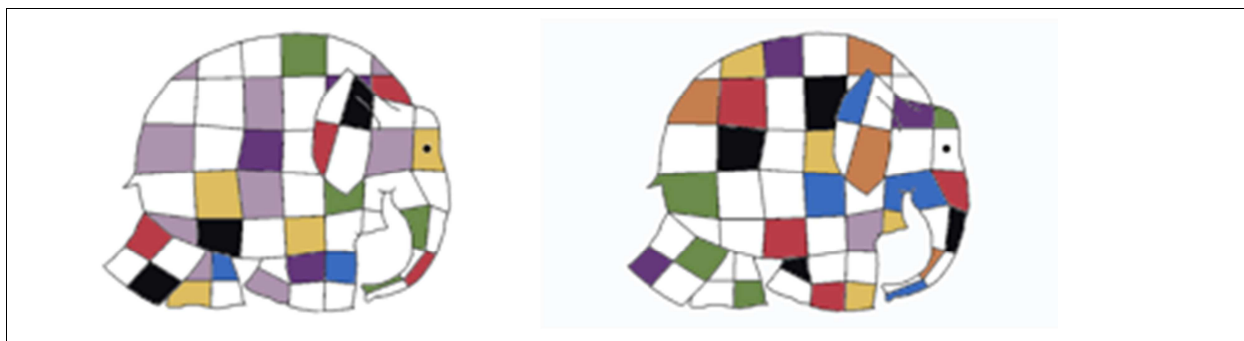


Figure 1: post-storytelling information-gap activity

All these are examples of micro-tasks that allowed the students to know how to choose and design activities to exploit the language of the story they chose for their final task. The double objective of transmitting both content and language is clear in all these examples. The learners are improving their English (especially orally) while they are learning how to exploit stories and while they are listening to wonderful examples of modern stories designed for native English speakers.

Assessment

A very difficult but basic part in TBLT, especially when mixed with CBI, is the assessment of the students. It is difficult because you cannot measure the progress of the students with classical tests such as content exams. The assessment of TBLT can easily become subjective because it can be affected by the personal beliefs and opinions of the teacher (in contrast to more objective tests with only right or wrong answers). Also, it is easy to give too much weight to the final product of the final task when the important part of a TBLT plan is the process rather than the result.

The assessment in this subject had 4 different parts and used several tools to avoid subjectivity and to make assessment easier and more systematic. The 4 parts were:

- 1) **Article summary** (T1): In this micro-task the students had to summarize the article “Storytelling as a method of EFL teaching” (Dujmović, 2006). One of the parts of the written work in the final task was to give a psycho-linguistic explanation of each choice



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they made. They needed to know how to look for information and how to summarize it. Also, the article was an introduction to the second part of the subject, a way to let them know what was about to happen and why. The assessment criteria were related to how much the learners understood the content and how well they expressed themselves in English. Some of the items that were part of the assessment were the grammar, the vocabulary and how much important information they included, amongst others. Every grammar mistake, for example, subtracted a 2% up to a maximum of a 20% of their grade in this task (the top mark was a 2).

- 2) **Storytelling recording** (T2): They had to record an audio file with a story of their choice. In this micro-task, they learned where to find stories, how to choose them and how to tell them.

The assessment criteria for this task dealt with the story choice and the quality of the storytelling. Again, the top mark of the task was a 2 and each of the assessed items had a specific value to add more objectivity.

- 3) **Final task** (FT). This was the most complex assessment in the whole subject both in terms of criteria and in terms of tools. The top mark was a 5. The tools for this part of the subject were:

- *Written work assessment.* A spreadsheet helped to calculate the grade each group deserved. It worked in a very similar way to the first task (the summary): each language mistake subtracted a bit of the grade.
- *Teacher's assessment of the presentation.* The teacher used a rubric and assessed factors such as pronunciation, grammar, non-verbal communication, preparation, etc.



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Oral Presentation Rubric : Storytelling				
Teacher Name: Mr. Lockhart		Assessed group: _____		
Student Name: _____				
CATEGORY	4	3	2	1
Preparedness	Student is completely prepared and has obviously rehearsed.	Student seems pretty prepared but might have needed a couple more rehearsals.	The student is somewhat prepared, but it is clear that rehearsal was lacking.	Student does not seem at all prepared to present.
Vocabulary	Uses vocabulary appropriate for the audience. Extends audience vocabulary by defining words that might be new to most of the audience.	Uses vocabulary appropriate for the audience. Includes 1-2 words that might be new to most of the audience, but does not define them.	Uses vocabulary appropriate for the audience. Does not include any vocabulary that might be new to the audience.	Uses several (5 or more) words or phrases that are not understood by the audience.
Uses Complete Sentences	Always (99-100% of time) speaks in complete sentences.	Mostly (80-98%) speaks in complete sentences.	Sometimes (70-80%) speaks in complete sentences.	Rarely speaks in complete sentences.

Figure 2: fragment of the rubric some learners had to fill regarding other group's performance in the final task.

- *Oral presentation assessment.* Some of the learners not presenting the task at that moment, filled-in a rubric regarding the group's presentation. This tool pretended to avoid the teacher being over-influenced by personal opinions. The learners had to fill-in the rubric taking into account the general performance of the group (see Figure 2). They also had a space at the back to write personalized comments regarding each member of the group. Each group was assessed by 7 different learners and each learner assessed, at least, 2 different groups.
- *Peer evaluation.* They all had to fill a sheet regarding their group work. They had to answer questions dealing with their the others' effort and they had to state what part of the final grade each group member deserved and why. This tool was used to try and avoid having people did not collaborate in the final task and ended up receiving the same grade as the others in the group. The result of this assessment affected the



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percentage of grade each learner received out of the common tasks (such as the written work), but did not affect the grade each learner received out of their presentation of the final task.

- 4) **Participation.** This was probably the most subjective of all the grades (up to 1 point) in the subject and it is something that has to be improved in future editions because there was no assessment tool to control participation. At the end of the subject the teacher combined his opinion of the participation of each learner with their participation in the virtual environment (Moodle).

There was yet another factor that affected the final grade: attendance. Attendance in the Universitat Rovira i Virgili has been compulsory since the Bologna process was launched. In this subject it was basic because did not do a theoretical learning out of a series of lectures but were building their own theories and understanding how to teach and how to use the language through various experiences. If they did not attend classes, they did not have these experiences and, therefore, could not benefit from the subject.

In spite of that, a student that had not regularly attended classes but that proved that had the competences that were expected from them, could still pass it. This is because attendance was combined with the grade they earned through the 4 previously mentioned parts (article, story, final task and participation) to give a final mark (see Figure 3).

$$z = \frac{(T1+T2+FT+Part)}{2} + \left(\frac{(T1+T2+FT+Part)}{2} \cdot Att\% \right)$$

Figure 3: formula to calculate the final grade of students.

Evaluation

The previous tools had the double aim of being tools for increasing the objectivity of the whole process and also of providing enough evidence of the progress and learning of each student. But the students also did an evaluation of the subject. The learners were asked to fill a survey with their feelings about each session. This evaluation has been helpful,



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through the different editions of the subject, to make little adjustments and tiny changes to improve the learning experience.

The survey had 4 parts that contained an item to value from 0 to 10 and a part for their comments about that item. At the end of the survey they had an extra space for general comments about the session. This last space was the only in the whole survey that was not required to fill in (see Figure 4).

1. Value the usefulness of the session in a whole* (0 - 10)
2. Why?*
3. Value the usefulness of the proposed activities* (0 - 10)
4. Why?*
5. Value your participation in the class* (0 - 10)
6. Why?*
7. Value the amount of language used in the classroom* (0 - 10)
8. Why?*
9. Open comments about the session

Figure 4: survey the students had to fill online after each session

c) Results and conclusions

Results

This was not designed as a research project but as a teaching practice. Therefore, we can only drag certain conclusions from the feedback received from the students. This feedback came both from the surveys and from the personal meetings between the teacher and each student (at least one during the year). Let us explore some of these results in some figures all related to the last edition of the subject. At the top we see the dots that are the average “grades” and their tendency line. At the bottom we see the standard deviation and its



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tendency line. The last two sessions were not included in the graphics due to the few students that submitted the surveys.

In Figure 5 we can see that the students tend to greatly value the usefulness of the different sessions. The grades are fairly high and the standard deviation is quite low and quite constant.

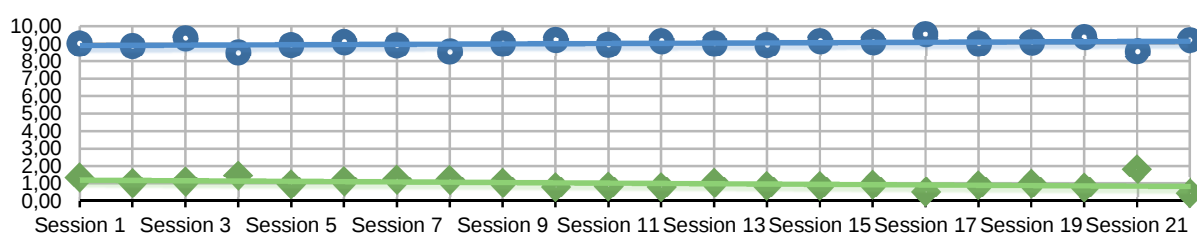


Figure 5: Students' opinion of the usefulness of the different sessions

We can see that the opinion regarding the activities (figure 6) is less constant than that of the usefulness of the sessions. There is more fluctuation in the averages (see sessions 6, 15, 17 and 21) and in the deviation (3, 15 and 21).

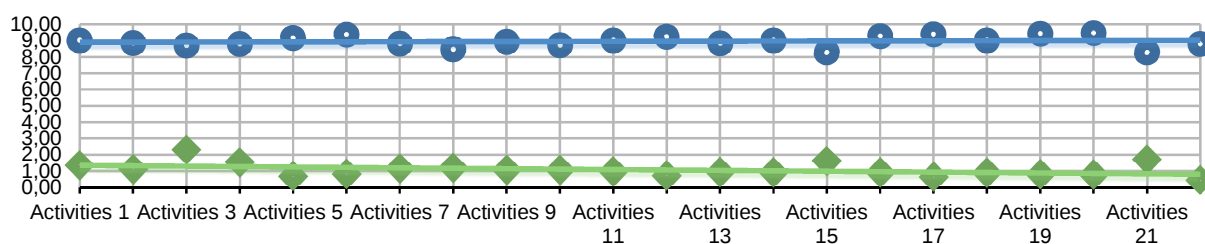


Figure 6: Students' opinion of the usefulness of the different activities

The students were reluctant to give themselves high participation marks at the beginning, but then they started to do so more often (figure 7). As a matter of fact, the tendency line of the amount of participation is in growth while the tendency line of the standard deviation is going down.



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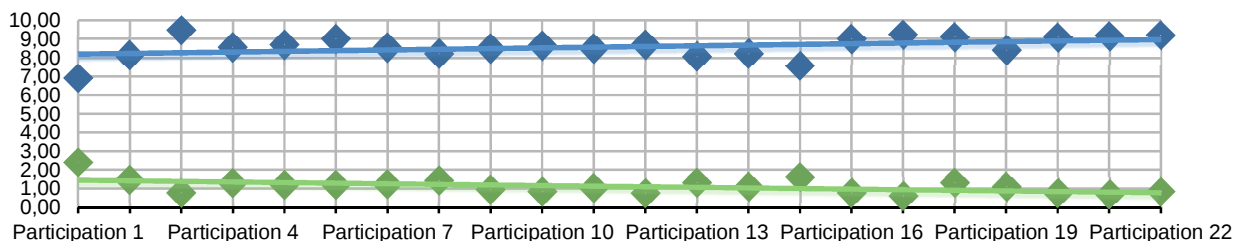


Figure 7: Students' opinion of their own participation

Figure 9 proves that one of the objectives of the subject was accomplished. The learners needed to use the language a lot and they realized they were doing so. None of the “grades” here is below an 8 and the standard deviation is quite low.

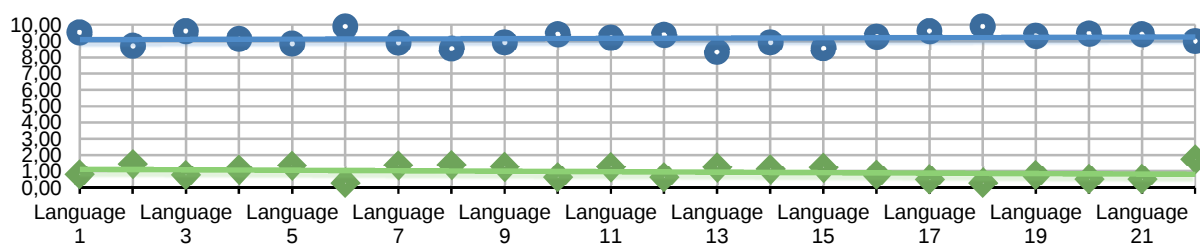


Figure 8: Students' opinion of the amount of language used

Some qualitative results from these surveys can be summarized in the following comments by the learners (note that there might be language mistakes, but, for the sake of the objectivity of the article, it was better not to correct them and leave them as originally written):

“I think all the class was useful, because we learnt a new important method of learning as the WBT and also we practised our English”. This comment represents how the learners realized of the double objective of the classes.

“We spoke a lot playing the game and then deciding about how to adapt it to Primary children”. The learner is highlighting the use of the oral language and the group work.



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These were two things that were important when selecting and creating most of the activities.

“English language had been used during all the lesson. Furthermore, communicating with my peers is getting easier for all of us everyday.” This quote, from the middle of the subject, refers to the improvements of the communicative abilities of the learner and her classmates.

“For me this session was original because of the games we did and the activities. I think its important to create original activities and try to not repeat and always do the same.” One of the objectives for choosing TBLT combined with CBI was to allow the learners to experience several and varied ways of doing things so they would become better English teachers. This quote symbolizes this objective.

Conclusions

The long term results are yet to be seen. One of the things that could be studied would be to what extent the learners, when they become teachers, end up applying any of the methods, techniques and/or activities that were proposed in the subject.

The feelings of the students regarding this subject are very good. They transmit that they enjoy, improve their English and learn how to teach. This can be seen in an open comment a student included in one of the feedback surveys: “I really enjoy the classes. We all have a great time while we are learning. The sessions are very useful in terms of acquiring material and resources and also to learn how be in front of a real class. So, I only want to say that I hope that this feeling last all the course!!!”

Planning a TBLT subject is difficult and it means a lot of work, especially if it is combined with CBI. Nevertheless, the results and the feedback you get from the learners make it worth it. Every session needed between 20 and 30 hours of preparation, because everything had to be linked and both needs of the students had to be catered for, but the effort is rewarded with the response and performance of the learners.



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