

Application for TLEF Project Funding**Title: Taking language teaching to task: Implementing a Task-Based approach in Spanish classes****Key Words:**

Task-based language teaching and learning; learning by doing; collaboration; language proficiency; students' perceptions and beliefs; development of educational resources

Abstract

This project examines the implementation of task-based instruction in beginner and intermediate level Spanish language courses. This type of instruction focuses on language use as the driving force for learning a language, and integrates the development of knowledge and skills within meaningful communicative practice in situations that students would encounter in the real world. This approach emphasizes learning by doing and collaboration among students as essential elements in language development. Despite its widespread acceptance among Second Language Acquisition scholars, task-based instruction is still not commonly used in language programs at universities. With the implementation of this approach, we intend to provide instruction that is tailored to the needs of students at the University of Alberta and that, at the same time, results in students achieving proficiency levels that match international standards.

Project Description

Many scholars in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) identify language use as the driving force for learning a language, which places the development of communicative skills at the forefront of pedagogical practice (Brandl, 2008). These tenets underlie Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) practices, and some CLT proponents argue that the organizational principle of these practices should be tasks. In this context, tasks are understood as "any classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is primarily focused on meaning rather than on form" (Nunan, 1989, p. 10). In addition, one key feature of tasks is that they resemble real-life activities (Long, 1985; Skehan, 1998). Thus, task-based lessons link grammatical and lexical content with topic content in the development of speaking, listening, writing and reading skills. At the same time, they emphasize learning by doing and collaboration among students. All these elements are aimed toward the completion of a specific outcome (the task) at the end of a given unit. This idea of integration, as well as the introduction of an end product or task, makes this approach significantly different from what students in Spanish language courses at the University of Alberta have experienced so far, and it is better aligned with the teaching philosophy of the Spanish instructors in the Department of Modern Languages and Cultural Studies (MLCS).

The proposed project examines the implementation of a task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach in the beginner and intermediate level Spanish language courses (Span 111, 112, 211 and 212) offered at the University of Alberta. A primary objective of this project is to evaluate the implementation of this approach by examining students' performance in proficiency exams, and by collecting data about their beliefs and perceptions regarding this approach. A second main objective of this project is to develop online educational resources that supplement the textbook used in the Spanish language classes.

We started using this approach in our language classes in Fall 2015. We adopted a textbook that follows TBLT principles, and we began examining how this approach worked during that term. An initial phase of the proposed project is already underway (Study ID Pro00058498). In this phase, 16 students from 200-level Spanish language classes volunteered to discuss their perceptions and beliefs about this approach in focus groups and in weekly journal entries. A cursory examination of the data gathered has helped us identify areas that need improvement. In Winter 2016, a research assistant funded by MLCS will help with the coding and analysis of the data collected in this initial phase, and with the development of a questionnaire that will be used in the proposed project.

In relation to the second main objective mentioned above, we need to develop educational resources that would make the textbook more suitable to our courses. Unlike other textbooks, the activities presented in the materials we adopted do a very good job of providing opportunities for meaningful communication. In a context such as ours, in which students get few to no opportunities to communicate in Spanish outside class, these types of activities are crucial for language development. However, the Spanish instructors and the students who participated in the initial phase agree that we need to develop more activities that specifically focus on grammar and vocabulary practice (e.g., activities of the fill-in-the-blanks type). While in a task-based approach such activities take a secondary place to those that focus on practicing grammar and vocabulary in real communication, they still play a facilitating role in language instruction by accelerating the process of establishing connections between specific grammar structures and the meaning(s) that they express. Thus, to better serve our students it is important to develop online educational resources that provide such additional practice on aspects such as grammar, vocabulary, reading and listening comprehension, and that are aligned with the topic content of each unit in the textbooks. The intention is to create interactive materials within the Moodle platform that students will be able to do on their own time to supplement the communicative activities done in class. These interactive materials will be housed on the eClass content templates that we currently use when requesting eClass sites for our language courses.

Innovation

There is extensive and varied literature on task-based language teaching in the field of SLA, and many scholars agree that “there are theoretical grounds, and empirical evidence, for believing that tasks might be able to offer all the affordances needed for successful instructed language development, whoever the learners might be, and whatever the context.” (Van den Branden, Bygate & Norris, 2009, p. 11). However, despite its widespread acceptance among SLA scholars, task-based instruction is still not a commonly used approach in language programs at universities, and it is even less commonly found in commercially available textbooks and

materials. Implementation of TBLT in university classes is hindered by institutional factors such as class size and mixed-proficiency classes, and by teacher and student factors stemming from beliefs about language learning (Shehade, 2012) (e.g., preference for traditional methods that focus on grammar and vocabulary knowledge over the development of fluency). However, the potential benefits of TBLT merit its implementation. Although many language programs and materials use some form of Communicative Language Teaching, most of them lack the integration of the different dimensions of language that TBLT offers, as well as the strong emphasis on providing opportunities for meaningful language use. While grammar and vocabulary development still have an important place in language instruction, the practice provided by meaningful communication is vital to the establishment of links between specific grammar structures and the meaning(s) that can be expressed through them. Such connections are at the basis of the ability to use language (DeKeyser, 2009). Task-based instruction is a learner-centered approach that emphasizes learning by doing and collaboration among students. Implementing such an approach in Spanish language classes means providing instruction in keeping with current educational theory in SLA. At the same time, it is innovative in relation to common practices in language teaching at many post-secondary institutions.

Collaboration

This project represents a joint undertaking that entails collaborative efforts at different levels. The first level of collaboration is among Spanish instructors. There are currently 14 instructors in the team (CAST & Graduate students), and we hold regular meetings at which we discuss, among other issues, ways to improve our teaching practices. In our Fall 2015 meetings, insights gleaned from the focus groups and journals mentioned above led to some changes that were implemented immediately. The Spanish instructors already develop their own teaching materials to supplement the textbooks we use, but they normally do so individually and when the need arises. The goal of the project in this respect is to pool these resources systematically so that the team of instructors works collaboratively to elaborate guidelines and recommendations for the development of educational resources. TLEF support will fund a graduate student assistant to develop these resources.

Another level of collaboration is with students enrolled in Spanish language classes. As discussed earlier, a group of 16 students contributed their perceptions and beliefs regarding TBLT by participating in focus groups and keeping a weekly journal. Student involvement in evaluating this teaching approach will continue throughout this project. At the end of each term, students will be invited to fill out a questionnaire that will be developed during Winter 2016, and also to participate in focus groups. With these instruments, we intend to collect both quantitative and qualitative data about the students' perceptions.

Finally, the learner-centered nature of TBLT itself entails that students participate actively in classroom activities that provide collaborative opportunities for meaningful language use in authentic situations (i.e., situations that resemble real-life scenarios). Students practice their language skills by interacting with other students, and by collaborating in groups to complete tasks.

Evaluation

The proposed project will address the following research questions:

1. Do students achieve the expected proficiency levels after receiving task-based instruction?
2. Are there any proficiency differences between students in year 1 and year 2 of the project?
3. What are the students' perceptions and beliefs regarding the TBLT approach?
4. Are there any differences in students' perceptions and beliefs between years 1 and 2 of the project?

One important aspect of the implementation of this teaching approach that will be evaluated is the students' language development. The textbooks we are using are aligned to the proficiency levels of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). At the end of the beginners' level (Span 111 & 112), students are expected to be at the A2 level, and at the end of the intermediate level (Span 211 & 212), they are expected to be at the B1 level (see <http://dele.cervantes.es/en>). Thus, at the end of the winter term we will evaluate whether students have achieved these proficiency levels. For this purpose, we will use the appropriate level of the Diploma de Español como Lengua Extranjera exams (DELE; Diploma of Spanish as a Foreign Language). These are the official exams created by the Ministry of Education of Spain, and are designed following the guidelines of the CEFR. Versions of these exams are available online free of charge. These exams will provide a measure of the success of task-based instruction (RQ1). Furthermore, in year 2 of the project we intend to make changes in the approach based on feedback from the students in year 1 (see below), and we will also implement the educational resources that will be developed during year 1. Thus, assessing the students' proficiency in year 2 and comparing the results to those of year 1 will allow us to examine whether those changes have an impact on the students' performance (RQ2). Data from the proficiency exams will be analyzed statistically to address research questions 1 and 2.

In addition to the students' proficiency, another important aspect of the evaluation of the TBLT approach is the students' perceptions and beliefs about it. Students' perceptions and beliefs about language learning act as a powerful motivating factor that shapes the actions and behaviours that students display in their learning (Gabillon, 2005; Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003; 2013). As noted earlier, we have already started requesting feedback about the implementation of the TBLT approach by asking students in 200-level classes to share their perceptions and beliefs. We obtained valuable information regarding aspects such as the types, amount and usefulness of classroom practice, the quality of the teaching materials, the pace of the class, the assessment tools, student engagement, and the participants' learning styles. However, 16 students represent only a small fraction of the total number of students who take Spanish language courses on a yearly basis (over 900 students). Therefore, in Winter 2016 we intend to develop a questionnaire that we will administer in the Spanish language classes at the end of every term in years 1 and 2 of the project. In addition, students will be invited to participate in focus groups to obtain more detailed information about their perceptions and beliefs in relation to the Spanish language courses. Collecting data from questionnaires and focus groups will provide both quantitative and qualitative data. Descriptive statistics of the results of the questionnaire and identification of emergent topics in the focus groups will be used to address RQ3 above. With respect to RQ4, independent samples *t*-tests will be computed to compare the results of the questionnaires in year 1 and year 2. Likewise, responses to open-ended questions in the questionnaire and the

emergent topics in the focus groups of year 1 and year 2 will be compared to identify any possible differences.

Sustainability/Impact on students

All educational resources will be developed and/or housed within content templates in eClass. The team of Spanish instructors already has access to content templates for each of the courses we offer. These templates are used to copy content when instructors request their eClass sites every term. These templates are updated regularly and include all the resources that we use in our Spanish language classes.

After the data from years 1 and 2 of the project are analyzed, we expect to have a thorough understanding of what works in task-based instruction within the context of the Spanish language classes at the University of Alberta. We intend to continue administering the questionnaire to Spanish students once the project is over, and to continue fine-tuning the materials developed during the project. Thus, this project will benefit all students (over 900 students per year) taking Spanish language classes at the 100- and 200-level beyond the duration of the project.

Dissemination

The outcomes of this project will be presented to MLCS (possibly as part of our lecture series), and shared with the other language program coordinators in Language Coordinators Committee meetings. The outcomes of this project might lead other language areas to implement task-based instruction in their classes. We will be glad to present our findings at workshops organized by CTL if the opportunity arises. In addition, findings of the project will be presented at academic conferences and published in academic journals in SLA.

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