TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING: PLANNING A TEACHER TRAINING PROGRAMME

ENSEÑANZA DE LENGUAS BASADA EN TAREAS: PLANIFICACIÓN DE UN PROGRAMA DE FORMACIÓN DE PROFESORES

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Abstract

In terms of second language acquisition research, there are both theoretical grounds and empirical evidence to support a belief that Task-based language teaching (hereafter TBLT) is a pedagogical approach able to meet all the requirements for successful second language learning and acquisition, in a variety of contexts and among a range of learners. However, despite the clear psycholinguistic rational for TBLT as well as several empirical evidence supporting the choice of tasks as the basis for second language teaching and learning, there have been few attempts to adopt this kind of approach in institutional contexts.

In this respect, a number of teacher factors have been found to challenge the adoption of TBLT, namely the fact that teachers inevitably bring their own beliefs and understandings about effective pedagogy with them into their own classrooms, or simply don't know how to implement it.

Given that language teacher education can have a significant impact in ensuring high quality language teaching, this paper offers an overview of a project that seeks to explore the necessity (and possibility) of challenging (and changing) teacher students' prior methodological beliefs as a result of critical reflexion on TBLT, by using quantitative and qualitative data, and devising, implementing and evaluating a training course for preservice English teachers in Portuguese primary schools, that will take place at Nova University of Lisbon and University of Algarve.

Keywords: Task-based language teaching; teacher education

Resumen

En lo que respecta a la investigación sobre la adquisición de segunda lenguas, existen fundamentos teóricos y evidencias empíricas que sustentan la creencia de que la enseñanza de idiomas basada en tareas (en lo sucesivo TBLT, del inglés *Task-based language teaching*) es un enfoque pedagógico capaz de satisfacer todos los requisitos para el éxito en el aprendizaje y la adquisición de una segunda lengua, en una gran variedad de contextos y entre una amplia gama de alumnos. Sin embargo, a pesar de existir una base psicolingüística sólida para el TBLT, así como varias pruebas empíricas que sustentan la elección de tareas como base para la enseñanza y el aprendizaje de una segunda lengua, ha habido pocos intentos de adoptar este tipo de abordaje en contextos institucionales.

Sobre este punto, se ha comprobado que hay una serie de factores que dificultan la adopción del TBLT, en particular el hecho de que los docentes inevitablemente traen sus propias creencias y conocimientos sobre pedagogía para la clase o, simplemente, no saben cómo llevarlo a la práctica.

Dado que la formación de profesores puede tener un impacto significativo en la obtención de una enseñanza de calidad, este trabajo presenta una visión general de un proyecto que pretende explorar la necesidad (y la posibilidad) de desafiar (y cambiar) las creencias metodológicas previas de los profesores como resultado de una reflexion crítica sobre el TBLT, mediante el uso de datos cuantitativos y cualitativos, y la elabo-

ración, implementación y evaluación de un curso de formación de profesores de inglés en escuelas primarias portuguesas, que tendrá lugar en la *Universidade Nova de Lisboa* y en la *Universidade do Algarve*.

Palabras clave: enseñanza de idiomas basada en tareas; formación de profesores

INTRODUCTION

TBLT has attracted increasing attention from second language acquisition research-ers and teacher educators, who claim that this pedagogical approach is more ef-fective for second language (L2) learning and acquisition than some of the more established methodological procedures, such as the Presentation Practice-Produc-tion method (Ellis & Shintani, 2014). In fact, there are both theoretical grounds (Ellis, 2003, 2017; Mackey, 2012; Ellis & Shintani, 2014), and empirical evidence to support a belief that TBLT is a pedagogical approach able to meet all the requirements for successful second language learning and acquisition in a variety of contexts and among a range of learners, including young learners (see Nunan, 2006; Van den Branden, 2006; Carless, 2007, 2012; McDonough & Chaikitmongkol, 2007; Gilabert, Baron & Llanes, 2009; Shintani, 2013, 2016). However, as it is often the case with innovative approaches, resistance can set in.

TBLT challenges mainstream views about language teaching in that it is based on the principle that language learning will progress most successfully if teaching aims simply to create contexts in which the learner's natural language learning capacity can be nurtured, rather than making a systematic attempt to teach the language bit by bit (Ellis, 2009). Therefore, and despite considerable theoretical and empirical support, TBLT remains a contested endeavour (East, 2017a), and globally there have been few attempts to implement this approach in instructed contexts, including in Portugal, as we have also previously noted (Castro, 2017).

In this respect, a number of teacher factors have been found to challenge the adop-tion of TBLT, namely doubts about the effectiveness of this approach, and the fact that teachers inevitably bring their own beliefs and understandings about effective pedagogy with them into their own classrooms (Nunan, 2004; Phipps & Borg, 2007), or simply don't know how to implement it (Adamson & Davison, 2003; Carless, 2009; Jeon, 2006).

Thus, a mismatch between theory and practice, as it seems to be the case above, does not have to suggest problems with TBLT itself. Rather, it suggests problems as the enactment of TBLT also interacts with teachers' beliefs about effective teach-ing (East, 2014, 2017a). However, when teachers' beliefs are acknowledged and ad-dressed within teacher education programmes, there is evidence to suggest that

new understandings can be established successfully (Cabaroglu & Roberts, 2000; Borg, 2003, 2006), and that critical thinking about past and present beliefs alongside actual experiences in the classroom will enhance the likelihood of changes both to beliefs and to future practice (Bullock & Muschamp, 2004; Chien, 2013; East, 2012, 2017a). Therefore, and given that language teacher education has a significant impact in ensuring high quality language teaching, innovation in language teacher education needs to be firmly grounded in principles of reflective practice as they are crucial in bringing success to language teaching environments.

TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING: GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

The rationale for TBLT draws on a number of different theoretical positions, namely the assumption that the goal of language teaching should be to develop the type of knowledge that enables learners to participate easily and naturally in communication. And given that it is implicit knowledge that underlies the ability to communicate fluently and confidently in a second language (L2), it is this type of knowledge that should be the ultimate goal of any instructional programme.

To this end, and even though second language acquisition researchers do not agree on how instruction can best facilitate language learning, there is now widespread acceptance that learners need the opportunity to participate in communicative activity to develop implicit knowledge. The underlying idea is that TBLT serves as a means for helping learners to develop implicit knowledge, and that the use of tasks in the classroom enables the teacher to replicate the conditions for language learning and for communicating that exist outside the classroom.

Traditionally, however, language teaching seeks to engage the learner in careful, controlled production, which is able to develop, perhaps, explicit knowledge. By other hand, there is controversy regarding the learners' ability to use explicit knowledge in actual performance, since there is often a problem of transfer of what the students are able to do in the classroom to what they are able to do when they are communicating in the real world, face-to-face with people (Ellis, 2008, 2006).

In this respect, Ellis (2009), unlike other authors, argues that TBLT does not have to be seen as a total alternative for more traditional methodologies such as present-practice-produce (PPP), and always felt that there is a case for engaging learners on intentional learning, although he does not consider that the learner can successfully develop interactional competences in L2 by relying entirely on a PPP methodology.

A second rationale for TBLT is the recognition that this approach caters to incidental language acquisition, that is to say, the acquisition that takes place without any deliberate intention on the part of the learner. It is argued that, in general, most of the learning takes place incidentally, and that there are limits to how much one can learn the language intentionally. In this regard, researchers have been able to show that incidental learning does occur as a result of performing tasks.

Central to TBLT pedagogy is also the notion of task, and, in fact, the growing interest in TBLT can be in part attributed to the inherent qualities of a task (Ahmadian, 2016). So, in order to talk about TBLT, one has to have a clear understanding of what one means by a task. Ellis (2003) identifies four key criteria that distinguish a task from the types of situational grammar exercises that are typically found in the more traditional language classroom. First, a task is a language teaching activity with a primary focus on meaning, in the sense that it requires learners to create and understand communicative messages. Second, the activity must have some kind of gap, and typically the gap is either an information gap (where one person has information that another person doesn´t have) or an opinion gap (where people have the same shared information, and use it to try to agree on a particular opinion or find a solution to a problem). The third criterion, perhaps the most central one, is that learners are allowed to use their own resources when performing tasks, which include both linguistic resources (the students can use whatever knowledge of language that they have in order to participate in the task), and nonlinguistic resources (gestures, drawing a picture, body posture, etc). And it is, perhaps, this particular aspect that distinguishes TBLT from other traditional approaches to language teaching because, in more traditional approaches, learners are given the language they need in order to do the task, and typically they are only required to manipulate that language, instead of creating a message using their own linguistic resources. A fourth criterion, also very important, is that it must require some kind of communicative outcome other than only the use of language, that is to say, in a task, language is used to achieve a communicative outcome (e.g. decide what kind of reward a group of individuals should be given; or listen to someone and draw a route on a map, so that the route on the map is the communicative outcome).

Figure 1 and 2 provide examples of language teaching activities for young learners. The extent to which these activities can be called tasks can be determined by evaluating whether they satisfy the criterial features of a task given above.

Figure 1. Example of an exercise
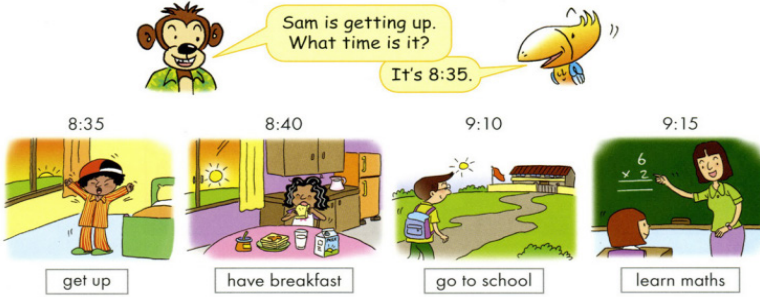
in *Fly with English (2006)*

Figure 2. Example of a task

in *Primary Handwriting Paper*

The first activity (Fig.1) seems more like an exercise since the work plan focuses primarily on form (specific numbers), and learners have no choice over the linguistic resources to be used. By other hand, the outcome consists only in the use of correct language (to ask and say the time in English), and learners know that the main pur-

pose of the activity is to practice specific numbers rather than to process messages for meaning.

The second activity (Fig.2) is a spot the difference task, which has been widely used as a tool for data collection (Crookes & Rulon, 1988; Long, 1981). In this case, students are asked to work in pairs and together locate five differences between the two pictures, by oral communication only, that is, without showing their pictures to each other. This activity has all the characteristics of a task: the focus is on meaning; it has some kind of information gap; the learners have to make their own selection of what words to use as opposed to being provided with, for example, multiple choice answers; and there is a definite outcome (to spot five differences).

So, in short, a task can essentially be differentiated from an exercise in that, in the latter, the focus in on using predetermined language to achieve a communicative goal, whereas, in the former, the focus would be on achieving a non-linguistic outcome using any language appropriate to the task at hand (East, 2017b). However, it is important to emphasize that the fact that the first activity is an exercise does not denigrate its worth as a language learning activity since, according to Ellis (2003), theoretical grounds can also be found for including exercises alongside tasks.

TBLT constitutes, undoubtedly, a major innovation for many teachers. However, some evaluations show that the implementation of this approach was not successful in some contexts due to the fact that teachers may lack confidence in their L2 proficiency, and, thus, feel that they cannot use tasks (Butler, 2011), or simply do not always have a clear idea of what a task is (Carless, 2004; Erlam, 2016). Therefore, and given that language teacher education has a significant impact in ensuring high quality language teaching, it is important to address these problems through carefully designed education programmes that take account of the characteristics of successful innovations, like the model that can be found in Van den Branden (2006), which involved extensive teacher training.

RESEARCH ON TEACHERS' UNDERSTANDING OF TBLT

School teachers appear to prefer long-standing PPP methodologies (Tang, 2004; Tong, 2005), and while it is clearly necessary to address the misconceptions that underlie some of the critiques directed at TBLT (Ellis, 2009; Long, 2016), it is equally important to acknowledge and try to address the problems of designing and implementing taskbased courses.

In this respect, a recent strand of research has focused on how teachers understand and implement tasks in real classrooms, but mainly with young adults and in univer-

sity settings (Andon & Eckert, 2009; Carless, 2003, 2007; East, 2012; Van den Branden et al. 2009; Xiongyong & Samuel, 2011; Ruiz-Cecilia, 2017; Lopes & Ruiz-Cecilia, 2017). In fact, the literature on TBLT in relation to schooling remains comparatively modest, and task-based teaching continues to be underresearched in young learners classrooms, with some exceptions (Van den Branden, 2006). This is because the implementation of TBLT seems to be more complex with schoolage students than adults due to challenges, such as large class sizes, classroom management, limited resources, school examination systems, and teacher factors (Carless, 2012).

By other hand, much of the research on TBLT has been conducted in ESL contexts, and only recently has received an increase in interest from EFL countries, like Thailand (McDonough & Chaikitmongkol, 2007), Turkey (İlïn, İnözü & Yumru, 2007), Korea (Jeon, 2005, 2006), Brazil (Lopes, 2004), China (Xiongyong & Samuel, 2011), Portugal (Lopes, 2012), New Zealand (East, 2012), or Iran (Zare, 2007), among others. These studies have focused almost exclusively on nonnative-speaker teachers, revealing their successes and challenges as well as the constraints placed on TBLT. And despite some problems in implementing TBLT in EFL contexts, they recognise the benefits of the approach and report that teachers and students have generally responded positively.

This strand of research has also highlighted that the notion of task is still "somewhat fuzzy" (Richards, 2006, p. 31) for many teachers, who tend to hold an eclectic understanding of TBLT (Nunan, 2004), and make context-specific adaptations of the approach (East, 2017b). Furthermore, research shows that, even teachers who may have some level of theoretical appreciation of TBLT make choices to select elements of a TBLT framework and to integrate these elements with more familiar or established elements (East, 2017b).

Nevertheless, there is also evidence that suggests that when teachers' existing beliefs and practices are addressed within teacher education programmes, new understandings can be created (Borg, 2003, 2011; Cabaroglu & Roberts, 2000). In fact, several recent studies have investigated teachers' perceptions of TBLT as innovation in a range of contexts, providing evidence of teacher implicit reflection on this approach (Van den Branden, 2009; Andon & Eckerth, 2009; Carless, 2007, 2009; Xiongyong & Samuel, 2011).

Based on these investigations, it has also been argued (East, 2012) that teachers' understandings about effective language teaching pedagogy strongly influence classroom practices, and even though introducing TBLT as innovation may not be easy, encouraging reflective practice seems to be one means of challenging teachers' thinking and facilitating change. So, if TBLT is to become more established in

classroom practices worldwide, teachers require support to come to their own theory, research, and practice informed understandings of what TBLT might mean for them, in their own local contexts (East, 2017b).

In conclusion, new ideas need to be mediated appropriately and, for teachers to be able to develop the full potential from TBLT, they need a variety of opportunities to learn about and to engage with taskbased teaching.

Teacher cognition and teacher practice

What teachers do in the classroom is the result of intense mental activity (Van den Branden, 2006), inspired by what they know, believe or think. As such, teaching is no longer being viewed solely in terms of behaviour, but rather as a cognitive process in which teachers can be described as "active, thinking decision-makers who make instructional choices by drawing on complex, practicallyoriented, personalized, and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts and beliefs" (Borg, 2003, p.81).

Research on teacher cognition aims, therefore, at enhancing our understanding of how and why the process of teaching looks and works the way it does, and, although it is only during the past 20 years that the study of language teacher education has developed into a major area of research, it is acknowledged that understanding teacher cognition is an essential prerequisite for understanding the processes of language teaching and teacher learning (Zheng, 2015).

Moreover, numerous studies in educational research have demonstrated that teacher beliefs and classroom practice exist in symbiotic relationships (Foss & Kleinsasser,1996), that is, teacher cognition not only feeds and inspires actions in the classroom, but actions taken in the classroom also feed their perceptions (Breen et al., 2001).

Given this interaction, teachers should be aware of their own beliefs, explore them, and see how they shape their own ways of teaching, so that those beliefs that are detrimental to learning can be challenged and modified during professional development (Freeman & Graves, 2004; Pajares,1992).

Empirical research has also shown that what teachers do in the classroom is not always consistent with what they believe should be or can be done (Fang, 1996; Basturkmen et al., 2004; Ulichny, 1996; Richards,1998; Bailey,1996), and a number of factors have been suggested to explain the inconsistencies between the way teachers' perceive things and the way they act (Van den Branden, 2006), namely, contextual factors (e.g. time limits, the external pressure of the curriculum, official

school policies, number of students); conflicting beliefs (e.g. even if teachers may theoretically support the notion that group work allows many opportunities to speak, these beliefs may clash with teachers' convictions that classes should be orderly); conflicts between beliefs and skills (e.g. teachers may be convinced, on a theoretical level, of a particular pedagogical approach but lack the skills to implement it). By other hand, teachers are frequently required to implement pedagogic innovations, developed by external agents that are not always familiar with the teachers' viewpoints or the specific classroom context in which the innovation is to be implemented (Carless, 2003).

The research on the relationship between teacher cognition and teacher actions is, then, highly relevant for teacher education (whether it be in pre-service training of students or the in-service training of experienced teachers) since it aims to influence teacher practice in an effort to allow teachers to develop their professional competence and/or raise the quality of education they provide (Van den Branden, 2006). Thus, what teachers do (or not do) in the classroom and the meaning that they give to these events play an important role on what they think and believe about education, and should be considered when designing teacher training programmes.

In fact, it has been suggested that training programmes that fail to consider what motivates teacher actions will probably have less success than programmes that take into account the many variables that have an impact on the decisions that teachers make (Richards, 1998; Richards & Lockhart, 1994). For example, evidence shows that many teachers primarily rely on their own experiences in the classroom (either as a learner or as a teacher) to take professional decisions, and appear to be resistant to external intrusion (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Lortie, 1975; Richards, 1998).

The field of teacher education must be bold in encouraging experimentation and innovation to be able to develop the skills and knowledge which will improve the quality of teaching. However, since innovations are not easily generalisable, and each context has its own constraints, affordances and dynamic (Edge & Mann, 2015), it must meet the needs and be familiar with the viewpoints of the teachers it is aimed.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

In order to explore the necessity (and possibility) of challenging (and changing) teachers' prior methodological beliefs as a result of critical reflection on TBLT, the project aims at devising, implementing and comparing a training course designed for pre-service English teachers working in primary schools in Portugal, that will be offered by Nova University of Lisbon in collaboration with the University of Algarve.

The project includes the following main phases:

Phase 1 (needs analysis): Before setting up a training strategy sensitive to teachers' perceptions and meet their needs while motivating them to use TBLT, it will be necessary to determine their main methodological points of reference and characterise their teaching practices. With these specific goals in mind, an online survey will be conducted to collect responses from teachers.

Phase 2 (implementation): After conducting the needs analysis and determining the teachers' main methodological points of reference, the second part of our project consists of an intervention programme aimed at promoting pre-service teachers' global competence regarding the benefits and implementation of TBLT in the language classroom. The training course will have a clear exploration of the theory and will provide opportunities for participants to try out TBLT, as well as to reflect on their practical experiences in light of the theory.

After implementing the intervention programme, a post-survey and two focus group sessions with a smaller group of teachers will be conducted. The participants will be asked about their perceptions, opinions and beliefs around questions related to TBLT. A qualitative content analysis will be used in order to describe the meaning of the data systematically, and assess teachers' global competencies as well as their perceptions and beliefs about TBLT, after the course.

Phase 3 (dissemination): This phase will be dedicated to adapting the intervention to a distance learning programme, and implementing it with other language teachers, as well as to sharing and discussing the research findings.

Expected outcomes

Results of this project are expected to contribute to the definition of recommendations for the national language teacher education programme. Activities of scientific dissemination are also integral to the proposal research: the final phase of the project will be dedicated to sharing and discussing the research findings, and the results of both the characterisation study and the intervention programme will be publicly presented at national and international scientific meetings.

The conclusions of this study will also be presented in articles to be submitted to both national and an international journals.

Finally, we plan to develop a distant teacher training course with similar goals, in collaboration with other Portuguese higher education institutions, so that more language teachers can benefit from these programme.

CONCLUSION

TBLT is an innovative learner-centred and experiential approach to modern foreign language, consistent with research findings into effective instructed second language acquisition (Long, 2015; Ellis & Shintani, 2014; Ellis, 2017). However, despite growing interest in the power of TBLT to transform language teaching and learning, the effective implementation of this approach continues to pose some challenges.

In this respect, evidence shows that there is still significant work to do if TBLT is to become more established in classroom practices worldwide, particularly, because teachers are often not certain as to what TBLT really does mean and appear to prefer longstanding PPP methodologies (Tang, 2004; Tong, 2005).

Teachers are undoubtedly a key element to the successful implementation of TBLT and, therefore, ought to have access to diverse opportunities of professional development to have their beliefs refined, renewed, confirmed or replaced, if necessary. So, one of the most important directions for TBLT research is to investigate what this approach means in practice for teachers who have reflected on it in theory, and are trying to implement tasks in class (East, 2017b).

It is also our conviction that reflective practice as part of teacher education is a useful vehicle for mediating pedagogical innovation, and that it can lead to the successful introduction of TBLT in language classrooms in Portuguese primary schools. And, giving that many teachers need support with understanding what tasks are in practice and how to implement them in their classrooms, this project aims at promoting a positive understanding about TBLT by providing future English teachers with an opportunity to examine their existing beliefs, through focusing on the phenomenon of TBLT.

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