PROMOTING INTERACTION IN AN EFL CLASS USING TASK-BASED LANGUAGE LEARNING

JENNY MILENA MONSALVE PULIDO

Jenny.monsalvep@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper is based on a pedagogical experience of the learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). It describes how task-based language learning (TBLL) influenced the interaction in English of a group of eighth-graders in a public school through activities based on familiar customs in their traditional celebrations. Also, the article presents some aspects related to the classroom setup that facilitated student-student interaction and describes in detail four phases within TBLL which were essential during the process.

Key words: interaction, task-based language learning, EFL learning, pedagogical experience.

Resumen

Este artículo se basa en una experiencia pedagógica para el aprendizaje del inglés como lengua extranjera. Describe como el aprendizaje de una lengua basado en tareas influyó en la interacción en inglés de un grupo de estudiantes de grado octavo de un colegio público a través de actividades basadas en sus experiencias familiares en fechas especiales. Además, el artículo presenta algunos aspectos relacionados con la organización del salón de clase que permitieron la interacción entre estudiantes y describe detalladamente cuatro fases en el aprendizaje de una lengua basado en tareas las cuales fueron esenciales durante el proceso.

Palabras clave: interacción, aprendizaje de la lengua basado en tareas, aprendizaje del inglés como una lengua extranjera, experiencia pedagógica.

Introduction

Interaction is essential for its mastery when learning a foreign language. Interaction is not simply the production of words or phrases without meaning in a context. Kurhila (2006) states that "interaction cannot be merely a factor consisting of the speaker's linguistic contributions, which can then be controlled and manipulated; instead, it is the essence of understanding, because it is through interaction that the speakers can display and achieve their shared understanding" (p. 10). Interaction goes beyond teaching linguistic forms without a meaningful context. Students need to be involved in different activities during which they are provided with the opportunity to use the foreign language to communicate. An example of this is shown when a group of 36 eighth-graders belonging to a public school in Tunja got involved through task-based language learning while working on presentations and costumes to enhance genuine and natural interaction in the foreign language.

Class activities at this public school are sometimes focused on having students filling in the gaps or completing work individually, thereby avoiding interaction in the target language. The use of task-based lessons can foster students' interaction by applying the language to specific tasks which makes for more meaningful learning. Ellis (2003) identifies how task-based lessons can be implemented usefully in contexts where there is no authentic communicative experience currently present, such as the context of this pedagogical experience. Nunan (2004) reports "an important conceptual basis for task-based language teaching is experiential learning" (p. 12). TBLL takes into account students' personal experiences while also engaging them in reflection and promoting consciousness about what they do. TBLL could be an alternative approach to guide students towards active participation in their own learning process through meaningful activities. As Rodriguez & Rodriguez (2010) state, "Task-Based Learning ... requires teachers to plan *lessons*, not merely class activities, for real communication" (p. 166). Teachers' activities need to focus more on communication based on aspects of students' lives, than on isolated vocabulary which can sometimes lack meaning for learners.

Theoretical Framework

Appropriate task-based language learning may lead students to continuous interaction in an English class. This interaction does not only involve the production of words or phrases in the target language, but also offers an environment to negotiate meaning and share different perspectives about the world. With that as a base, the first part of this theoretical framework is related to interaction, the second part pertains to TBLL and finally the importance of connecting real life situations in pedagogical tasks is addressed.

Interaction

Interaction is a process where students negotiate meaning to communicate. In an EFL class, visual contact does not equate to interaction, students need to share and exchange their knowledge and thoughts about the world to achieve meaningful

communication. Kurhila (2006) expresses the view that "In conversation, analytic thinking, understanding and interaction are inseparable – understanding is a continuous, dynamic process, which is constructed and modified in and through interaction" (p. 19). Teachers must teach students how to negotiate meaning through activities that involve continuous interaction. It is not enough to simply learn linguistic forms and rules but it is necessary to use them in a particular context for meaningful learning. Students need to be involved in activities in which they have the opportunity to use the foreign language and interact with their classmates about topics that are familiar and interesting to them. In this way, they can interact with more fluency because they understand the topics perfectly, which are related to the students' backgrounds.

Task-based Language Learning

Task-based language learning (TBLL) consists of creating a space in class in which students can practice the target language through different activities. According to Nunan (2004) the use of TBLL in pedagogy allows interaction through the use of the target language. Learners learn more effectively when they have the opportunity to relate their personal experiences because it is meaningful for them. García (2006) expresses the view that "The goals of task-based instruction are to promote language development in the areas of accuracy, fluency and complexity of speech, as well as comprehension, and task selection and classification are not constrained by the need to articulate pedagogic tasks with target tasks identified in a needs analysis" (p. 22). In EFL classes, TBLL may help to

ensure better interaction through activities which mimic real world situations of students.

According to Robinson (2011), a change of opinion is occurring regarding the belief that "task-based learning can facilitate comprehension of input through interaction and negotiation of meaning to more recent emphases on how task-based learning can facilitate attention to output and the development of increasingly target like speech production" (p. 10). So students acquire and practice the target language in a more effective way when the tasks are meaningful and deal with topics that interest them. For that reason, a variety of tasks are essential to produce good student interaction.

Ellis' model (2003) of TBLL describes three stages: pre-task, during task and post-task. During the pre-task stage, students acquire enough tools and linguistic forms to use the language. During the task, students are involved in a communicative activity through group/pair work. Finally, in the third stage, students share their work with the rest of the class. During the three stages the teacher acts as a facilitator and students perform an active role developing and interacting with their peers in the target language. This model allows students to go beyond solely the linguistic forms which students traditionally learnt; these tasks lead students towards communicative activities and interaction. Nunan (2004) states "language is more than a set of grammatical rules, with attendant sets of vocabulary, to be memorized. It is a dynamic resource for creating meaning" (p. 6). It is evident that students need to have knowledge about

linguistic forms to communicate but it is more important that they practice them in situations relevant to them in order to encourage active interaction. Their knowledge about linguistic forms should not stay static and isolated but instead should be applied in the different situations that can be created in an EFL class.

Real Life in Pedagogical tasks

Nunan (2004) reports that "not all pedagogical tasks have such a clear and obvious relationship to the real world" (p. 20). It is often found that English classes focus on isolated linguistic forms and vocabulary, where learners memorize without meaning simply to complete a set task. According to Nunan (2004) "[a] task is designed not to provide learners with an opportunity to rehearse some out-of-class performance but to activate their emerging language skills" (p. 20). These sorts of tasks, that encourage students to memorize, impede the use of the target language in real life. The design of tasks using information from students' backgrounds provides students with greater opportunities to interact because it is more relevant for them to work on themes related to their world.
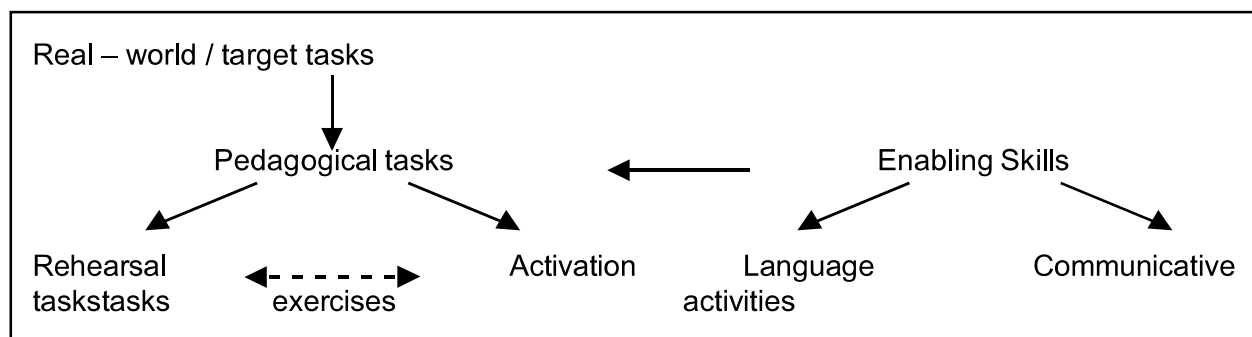

Real – world / target tasks

Pedagogical tasks

Enabling Skills

Rehearsal taskstasks

exercises

Activation

Language activities

Communicative

Diagram 1. A framework for TBLL Nunan (2004)

The above framework (Diagram 1) describes the process to involve the real world in pedagogical tasks to provide learners with opportunities to interact in the target language through rehearsal and activation tasks. These tasks require working on linguistic forms which are related to the context of the learners' backgrounds enabling those learners to develop different skills. In this pedagogical experience the use of students' backgrounds to enhance interaction in an EFL class was taken into account.

Applying Task-Based Language Learning

A description of the process of using TBLL in this pedagogical experience is presented in order to analyze every individual stage in detail and to identify the benefits for the eighth-graders in terms of interaction. The first part of this experience is related to the design of the lesson plan to involve students in TBLL. The second part shows a description of the development of the plan, and finally some key aspects of this pedagogical experience are described.

Lesson Plan

Context: I am new to town ('guest') and I am interested in knowing about the way to celebrate traditional holidays in this place.
Pre-task: Students work in groups of 3 or 4 students. Each group chooses a holiday to explain to the visitor. They can include details about activities, food, history, clothes, etc. They can use different books and magazines to work on.
Task-Preparation: Each group classifies the most important things about the holiday to show and explain to the visitor.
**Task-Realization**: Students make a poster with different materials.
Post-Task: Each group presents their poster in a creative way; they can wear different clothes or something that identifies the holiday. They answer and ask questions about the activities they do in each holiday.

Development of the experience

Seating arrangement and interaction vs. the traditional classroom setup

The traditional classroom setup did not allow any interaction among the students. They were obliged to interact only with the teacher. The desks were placed one behind the other (see graphic 1).
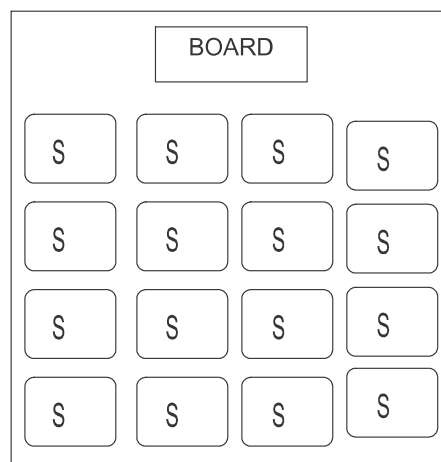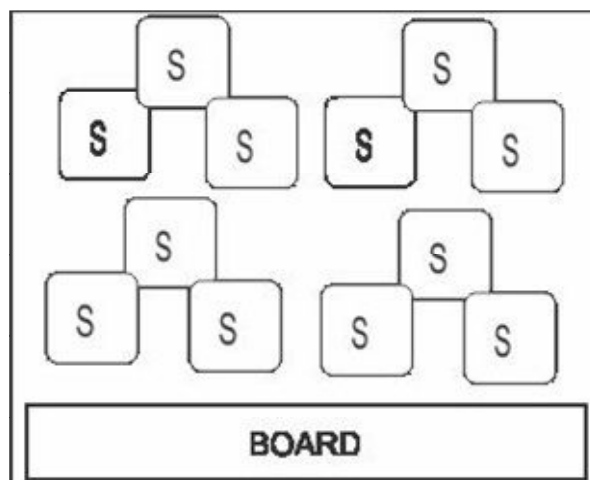

Graphic 1. Traditional Classroom Set-Up

First Phase: Lesson Plan – Pre-Task

During this stage students changed their usual seating arrangement to work in groups to allow interaction among them in an EFL class (see graphic 2). These 36 eighth-graders looked excited working on a new activity that required interaction with their peers. The topic was traditional celebrations. Each group of three students had to choose a celebration according to their backgrounds related to this topic. According to Nunan (2004) the purpose of TBLL is to "encourage learners to participate actively in small, collaborative groups" (p. 12). They used the mother language to choose the celebration they were going to work on. They did not use the target language to communicate because previously they were not used to practicing the language. In using the mother tongue, however; they named the celebrations in English "trabajemosacerca de Halloween o Christmas". When students did not know the way to say in English some celebrations, they asked me while others used the dictionary. At this stage the students started to interact among each other. I asked them to bring material that they needed for their presentations and to look for more information about the celebrations on the internet and with their family for the next class.

Graphic 2. Changing Traditional Classroom Set Up

Second Phase: Task-Preparation

In this phase, the eighth-graders showed the information about the celebration that they had gathered after having questioned their parents and/or grandparents and searched on the internet and in books. They then chose what was most relevant to them. Nunan (2004) reports TBLL encourages "the transformation of knowledge within the learner rather than the transmission of knowledge from the teacher to the learner" (p. 12). Some students did not have information but they contributed with details of their families' usual activities about the celebration. I did not intervene in this interaction because I preferred to observe. For example, they said things like

"...nosotrossalimos a comer en mother's day." or "...en Christmas yoviajo con mi familia." All students of each group interacted using the mother and target language.

Third Phase: Task-Realization

Students made a poster with drawings and key words about the celebration they had chosen to present. During these first three phases students were interacting among each other, the change of their traditional classroom setup helped with this interaction. The students used different materials to make the poster such as paint, markers, magazines, etc. (see picture 3). While one student wrote, another student dictated what to write. They did this part primarily in English but they also continued to use the mother language. I allowed my students to use their mother tongue but when I interacted with each group, I spoke to them in English to encourage them to do the same. When I asked questions such as "What are you doing?" – "What is your celebration?" some students answered in English but with words in Spanish. For example, they replied with phrases like "we are going to draw 'calabazas' because the celebration is Halloween." When the students did not know certain words in English I gave them new vocabulary depending on their own need to use it. I said "ah, you are going to draw pumpkins!... and what color are the pumpkins?" and this led the students to respond using this new vocabulary, "the pumpkins are orange." In this part, I realized it is more meaningful for students to learn new vocabulary and linguistic forms based upon their own need to use them. I asked them to prepare their presentation for the next class as a guest would be coming and they would have to speak to her about their celebrations (At this point the students smiled knowing that I was the guest).


Picture 3. Designing Posters

Fourth Phase: Post-Task

During this stage, the students again changed their positions to share their posters with their partners (see graphic 4). This position helped as they all had a good view of all of the posters. Each group presented their posters with a short presentation of the history of the celebration and the activities they usually did on these dates.
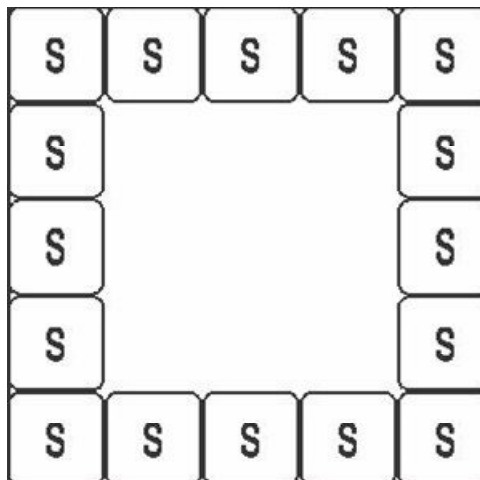
Graphic 4. Students' Position to Present the Posters

The students demonstrated their creativity in making the posters and giving their presentations with the use of different decorations. Each student spoke about what they did on these dates, although many of their comments were similar. For example, many of them said they were with their family during celebrations such as Christmas, Candles' Day, Mothers' Day, Easter, Independence Day etc. The presentations of the students' artifacts provoked interaction. After each presentation, the students adopted the role of 'guest' asking their peers about what they did in each celebration comparing activities such as being with their family, eating something special, traveling, etc.

This was the result of the last three stages. The students showed their posters, some of them were dressed as Santa, witches, mothers, etc. They spoke about history and personal experiences from these dates. For instance, a student explaining Mothers' Day said "in my family, we eat in a restaurant." The class respected the presentations of their classmates. To finish every presentation I, as the 'guest', asked questions such as "what did you do last Christmas?", "Do you like this celebration?" etc. After that I asked the students to ask their partners in order to invoke interaction between all of the groups. They used similar questions using the same grammatical structures as I had done at the beginning (simple present and simple past tenses). The students learned new structures by asking questions because they needed to ask about their classmates' presentations.

The following chart shows the steps that were used based on task-based learning.

Task-Based Learning (TBL)	Description
Lesson Plan – Pre-Task	Students chose an aspect that they preferred about the main topic.
Task-Preparation	Students searched for information about their chosen aspect on the internet and from their background (personal and family experience).
Task-Realization	Students chose relevant information to make a poster.
Post-Task:	Students presented the information in front of the class. They asked and answered questions about the topics. They later played the role of 'guests'.

This chart shows how TBLL functioned through specific steps to secure interaction during the full process between eighth-graders via the utilization of students' backgrounds.

Task-based learning's role focuses on continuous interaction in the target language where the acquisition of a language goes beyond working solely on linguistic forms to give opportunities to students to practice the language in meaningful contexts.

The following key aspects allowed eighth-graders to enhance interaction in English through the use of task-based learning:

• **Seating Arrangement:** students changed their traditional classroom set-up to have better chances of interacting. Task-based learning allowed interaction among students through the four stages: Pre-Task, Task-Preparation, Task-Realization and Post-Task.

• **Students' backgrounds:** working from topics of which the students have experience to allow a better participation and interaction.

• **Focus on Communication:** the students focused on negotiation meaning to communicate among each other and not on grammar; however, they asked for this grammar in order to communicate.

Conclusions

Throughout this pedagogical experience the process was always more important than the results. As Nunan (2004) reports on the use of TBLL, it is better to «emphasize process rather than product, learning how to learn, self-inquiry, social and communication skills" (p. 12). These eighth-graders from a public school changed their routine from classes without continuous communication among them to participate in task-based language learning focused on interaction. Classroom set-up was the key to allow interaction because the desks were no longer situated in lines impeding that interaction. This task-based language learning was implemented in relation to the topics within the school's educational program and based on Ellis' model: Pre-task, During task and Post-task. The study did not alter the topics of the curriculum, but worked on them in a different way. This indicates that it is possible to integrate TBLL without intervening in the development of the school's curriculum. Also, the work was not continuously focused on the learning of linguistic forms but included them meaningfully through activities in a context that interested the students.

TBLL allows negotiation in the target language through activities that demonstrate to students that they may later apply what they learn in their daily lives. It was essential to encourage students to negotiate by only providing them with linguistic forms and vocabulary when they required them and not just when I desired.

Teachers achieve better interaction among their students by doing more work in groups and working on topics about which students are aware and have experience. Speaking about something learners know about allows easier interaction. A teacher's role is not only to provide sufficient linguistic tools to speak but also to provide students with

opportunities to interact in class by using these tools in meaningful contexts.

References

Burns, A. (1999). Collaborative Action Research for English Language Teachers. Cambridge, United Kingdom. Cambridge University Press.

Chu, H. (2009). Gender dynamics in peer interaction and their influence on second language learning in the English-as-a-second-language classroom.University of San Francisco).ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, n/a. Retrieved from http://search.proquest.com/docview/305176967?accountid=43790. (305176967).

García M, (2006). Investigating Tasks in Formal Language Learning.Clevedon, GBR: Multilingual Matters Limited, 2006.p 22.http://site.ebrary.com/lib/bibliotecauptc/Doc?id=10156068&ppg=34Copyright © 2006.Multilingual Matters Limited. All rights reserved.

Ellis, R. (2003). Task-based Language Learning and Teaching. New York, United States. Oxford University Press.

Nunan, D. (2204). Task-Based Language teaching. New York, United States. Cambridge University Press.

Kurhila, S. (2006).Second Language Interaction. Philadelphia, PA, USA: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2006. p xviii.http://site.ebrary.com/lib/bibliotecauptc/Doc?id=10126042&ppg=18Copyright © 2006. John Benjamins Publishing Company. All rights reserved.

Robinson, P. (2011). Task-Based Language Learning. Oxford, UK. Language Research Club, University of Michigan.

Rodriguez, M. & Rodriguez, J. (2010). Task-Based Language Learning: Old Approach, New Style. A New Lesson to Learn. Bogotá, Colombia. *PROFILE Vol. 12, No. 2, October 2010. ISSN 1657-0790.*Pages 165-178.

THE AUTHOR

JENNY MILENA MONSALVE PULIDO has been an English Teacher for five years in "Colegio de Boyacá" of Tunja. She graduated from Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia in 2007, getting the title of foreign language teacher. She is currently studying the MA in Language Teaching at UPTC.