

The Task-Based Approach: a way to improve the didactic competence of pre-service teachers in Colombia using technology

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses its attention on an innovative application of the Task-Based Approach. It presents some features of the thematic worry, a discussion on the definition of "task" and how it has been adapted for the English language teacher professional growth.

KEYWORDS

Task-Based Approach, didactic competence, english teachers, teaching english.

RESUMEN

Este artículo centra su atención en una aplicación innovadora del enfoque basado en tareas. Presenta algunas características de la preocupación temática, un debate sobre la definición de "trabajo" y cómo se ha adaptado para el crecimiento profesional de profesores de idiomas Inglés.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Enfoque basado en tareas, competencias didácticas, profesores de inglés, didáctica del inglés.

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INTRODUCTION

The continual search for alternative solutions to the different complex situations that English teachers, teacher educators, and pre-service teachers face when implementing curriculum renewal or revision in "Licenciatura" programs, has motivated researchers, particularly the research group Didáctica del Inglés y Tecnología (DIT hereafter) of Universidad Distrital (recognized by Colciencias) to start working on the idea of gaining benefit from technological advances and technical mediation in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), in order to offer updated teaching-learning paths to those who are the teachers and professors of the third millennium.

This article focuses its attention on an innovative application of the Task-Based Approach. It presents some features of the thematic worry, a discussion on the definition of "task" and how it has been adapted for the English language teacher professional growth.

The term "task" was originally employed to design series of connected activities to develop the communicative competence in foreign language learners. However, through the research carried out by DIT, it was possible to conclude that the Task-Based Approach was an open door to the enhancement of other competences, and as a consequence it was studied and adjusted to help pre-service teachers improve their teaching abilities or "didactic competence". The considerations stated before lead the researchers to pose the following query:

To what extent is it possible to enhance didactic competence using the task-based approach?

In the presence of the 21st century, one of the major worries English teachers and educators still have is the need of a high quality of didactic competence. During the last decade the improvement of English communicative competence of pre-service English teachers at Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas has been notorious. Conversely, few advances have been made in the didactic competence. Two main reasons could explain this phenomenon: Firstly, the C.A.N. decree 272 impels pedagogy as

the main foundation of the educator and fifty per cent of the study plan should be devoted to that science and its branches. Though, most of the academic subjects offered are related to general pedagogy and scarcely 32 hours in one semester are assigned to didactics. Secondly, the implementation of the research component in teacher education has demanded special attention and time devoted to search for the appropriate direction to carry out action in this area. As a consequence, the science of pedagogy, that is didactics, has been neglected, and the teaching practice has resulted in low quality.

A recent research study carried out by DIT "TOWARDS AN IMPROVEMENT OF MY CHORE AS EDUCATIONAL ENGLISH TEACHER: *Educational software a means to solve some methodological difficulties in English Language Teaching by pre-service teachers*"¹ detected a low didactics performance in English language teaching in pre-service teachers at Universidad Distrital. The study results clearly lead to the conclusion that pre-service English language teachers are in need of more opportunities to enhance their didactic competences and that in the adopted study plans there is no space for more formal class sessions.

Some of the weaknesses detected arouse from the performance pre-service teachers in the "Pedagogical Practice" and "Pedagogical Project" subject matters². They refer to: the minimal usage of English to conduct classes, weak group handling and classroom management, inappropriate use of instructional materials, inadequate question techniques, few didactic strategies to teach English, and difficulties in the evaluation process, among others. To sum up, the problem basically falls on a low didactic competence.

The situation described above led DIT to reflect on and propose some alternative solutions according

¹ HERNÁNDEZ and QUINTERO conducted the second phase of a DIT research project. The report was published by Universidad Distrital under the title *Un espacio virtual para la metodología de la enseñanza del inglés* (2005)

² These academic spaces are studied in the Licenciatura program at Distrital University from the seventh to the tenth semesters. A semester is planned for the teaching intervention or practice with primary students, another with adolescents and young adults, and two semesters more to develop the research project according to pre-service teachers preferred population.

to students' needs, context, pace and the curriculum that included some extra-hours for independent study. One of the questions that arose was: How can you inspire dependent pre-service teachers to become independent learners?³ To answer these questions, it was necessary to think about how to take advantage from independent study hours and computer assisted learning. One of the options was to improve the didactic competence by means of the task-based approach using technological tools as a way of stimulating independent study.

TASK DEFINITION

A good starting point to begin the discussion is to define the term "task". The *Dictionary of Applied Linguistics* by RICHARDS and PLAT (1997:400) defines task as: "An activity planned to get a certain learning objective or an action that is carried out as a result of the process of understanding the foreign language". For example: "to draw a map while student listens to a piece of discourse".

On the other hand, DAVID NUNAN (1993: 25) refers to a "communicative task" as "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". Thus, the classroom task here refers to the communicative use of the target language to respond to a problem-solving situation.

With this in mind, it is pertinent here to consider the point of view that J. WILLIS (1999) gives to tasks. The author assumes that the task is an activity where the foreign language is used by the student with a communicative purpose to obtain a goal. The function of the educator, then, is to design a great variety of tasks that motivate, offer certain levels of difficulty, develop knowledge and promote the development of the language he/she is learning, as efficient as possible.

BREEN (1987:23) defines the task as: "Any structured effort of learning a language that consists of a

particular objective, appropriate content, a specific working procedure and a range of outcomes for those who undertake the task." It is possible to state that Breen assumed it as a tool to facilitate language learning, to solve problems or to make decisions in terms of performing the foreign language.

Preceding definitions of tasks show that there is a common element in all of them and it is in fact that "tasks" involve the use of the foreign language to communicate in order to learn the language aptly. Besides, users pay more attention to the meaning than to the linguistic structure. In turn, LONG (1991) mentions as an example of task the fact of filling a format, while RICHARDS (2004) considers the fact of drawing a map following instructions and BREEN (1987) speaks of solving problems. Nevertheless, it is also certain that in the implementation of a task and according to the goals stated, there are input tasks (those which provide the student with relevant information and do not demand the production of any piece of written or spoken language) and output ones, (those in which the learner demonstrates language level proficiency).

From the previous reflections it is possible to conclude that tasks may include the stage of production of the language. In this case, the task is defined under a pedagogic perspective and in terms of what the apprentice can do in the classroom. This claim is the open window that leads us to consider a task-based approach as a possibility to develop not only the communicative competence but the didactic one in pre-service teachers.

THE TASK-BASED APPROACH FROM A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

The authors of this article take advantage of WILLIS position (1999) when he proposes a framework for task-based learning that can be extended to improve the ELT didactics competence by challenging pre-service English Language teachers with the layout of different tasks that stimulate learning, present real life needs in terms of pedagogy and promote the development of didactics competence at their own pace.

Tasks help to facilitate ELT learning, to solve didactic problems and to make decisions in terms of methodology related to real life English language classes. It can be said: "Task is defined as

³ The possible time dedicated to discussion, reflection and counseling on teaching situations pre-service teachers live is always short (one hour a week) and creates strong dependence on tutors.

a series of activities or actions that form didactical units of reflection and production". A task is done as a result of the articulation of the theory and the practice processes in the field of English Language didactics.

Consequently, the task-based approach strengthens and develops an enhancement process of learning didactics. It guides the future English Language teacher into promoting his or her own knowledge independently. Furthermore, it permits individual growth, own interests, particular needs, flexibility in learning, variety of methods to find answers to certain difficulties. It offers different situations and strategies to solve and surpass problems in the area of learning how to teach English.

To continue with the discussion, it is possible to assert from the reflections above, that a task can be studied as a topic, an activity, or also as a teaching method. The tendency of English didactics in the last years is to move about from traditional teacher dependent paradigms towards self-reflection, self-construction and self-learning. The teacher is now an active creator; agent of his or her own processes and designer of his or her own materials. He or she is not an empty recipient who is filled with a series of methods that are applicable to specific contexts or for English-speaking countries. H

Hence, the task-based approach is an alternative for the Colombian context as it would allow a more effective development of English language teachers. This new perspective to focus tasks to the English Language Teaching Didactics is flexible and reflective as it promotes improvement in this area. As a result, it is more than a prescriptive model; it is a significant model whose main objective is to improve the teacher's personal effort with regard to his or her performance in the English classroom.

To summarize the discussion, a brief description of task based approach applied to the field of didactics is presented taking into consideration Willis' (1999: 40) components of the framework. They are divided into: pre-task, task cycle and language focus, and we adapted it to "Previous knowledge, task cycle and assessment".

The authors' proposal has been created for those students who have already followed or are taking

some formal courses on Didactics, which means that they have previous knowledge of the subject matter and that the task cycle role is to stimulate students' intellectual rigour and awareness. The task cycle has been planned to include a series of activities that take into account the areas that students are weak at. Each task has the following three main components: *Aims*: related to the main objectives of the task stated by the authors, or students may state their own. *Instructions* refer to the stages and procedures used to solve the task; and *Assessment* refers to self reflection about learning and the development of the task. In addition, the task permits discussion and reflection among students and tutor (virtually or face to face).

In the adaptation done by the research group, some ideas from Nunan (1989) were considered. He states that the components of a task are: goals, input, activities, the role of teachers and students and setting. In our proposal, the tasks offer relevant information or *input* by means of short reading texts or video clips⁴; each task has a pedagogical purpose, reflective activities and assessment. Besides, tasks are accompanied with a glossary to clarify any unknown concept. The teacher role here is basically a facilitator, question poser and decision maker.

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

In order to illustrate the previous assumption of task-based approach as a tool to improve and develop didactic competence examples can be observed in the ELT (English Language Teaching) virtual course loaded in the platform "Dit on-line" designed by DIT. The course layout illustrates a classroom board and classroom atmosphere in which students navigate to solving tasks. The screens display a menu with icons that guide the students through different tasks. The most important aspect of each task is the activity of self-reflection and awareness and the decision made to solve a particular classroom problem. In this way the future English teacher contributes to develop his or her own professional competence.

⁴ Video clips have been taken and adapted from genuine English classes conducted by pre- and in service teachers in different contexts in Bogotá.

CONCLUSION

From the research findings⁵ it is possible to conclude that English professors and educators in Colombia might assume the challenge of designing and developing materials to intend solutions in the field of didactics, methodology and multimedia materials to help in the resolution of particular educational problems of a community. It is also important to consider the possibility of adapting

foreign and second language teaching models to our particular Colombian needs in English language teacher education.

The adaptation and development of language teaching methods, approaches, educational materials and teaching tools seem to be the path that Colombian teachers and researchers have been studying and experimenting as an effort to offer better learning conditions for our students.

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⁵ Findings were reported in HERNÁNDEZ and RODRÍGUEZ (2002: 38-40) *Alternativa de un mundo virtual para mejorar su enseñanza de inglés*. Fondo de Publicaciones de la Universidad Distrital. Then, they were confirmed in the third phase of the research. Hernández y Quintero (2005: 16) "Desde una perspectiva general, los resultados del análisis sugieren la necesidad de continuar con el diseño de software educativo "English Language Teaching" por estar en directa relación con las necesidades sentidas de

docentes en formación en lo que respecta al desempeño pedagógico. Besides, one of the conclusions in Hernández doctoral thesis "El Desarrollo de la Competencia Didáctica del Futuro Profesor de Lengua Inglesa mediante el uso de tareas con mediación tecnológica" is that: "la propuesta de tareas con mediación tecnológica para el desarrollo de la competencia didáctica permite la construcción activa y personal del conocimiento de la didáctica de una manera reflexiva y desarrolladora".