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4. USING A TASK BASED APPROACH FOR AN ENGLISH FOR LOGISTICS COURSE

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Abstract This paper describes a task based approach and its rationale based on second language acquisition theory. It goes through the advantages and disadvantages of this approach for an English for logistics course, and how the disadvantages could be addressed. Finally it outlines a potential course and three example tasks that could be used on a course. The paper concludes by arguing that although LLOT English course is good for an online course on its own, the combination of a task based course along with the LLOT online English course would better prepare students for a professional life in logistics.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The LLOT project has followed a number of forward thinking approaches to learning a foreign language. Using a content and language integrated learning (CLIL) along with a gamification process, for online language learning, is a good method. No matter how good online language learning is, although this is not a criticism of the project as it was outside its scope, it is never enough and can only really be used as a useful supplement to language learning.

Therefore, if online language learning will never be enough, how should one go about developing an English for logistics course?

There are a number of different methods one could take in developing this course. In fact, one could go buy an off the shelf course. This, however, is not an approach I would suggest. Most follow a traditional syllabus, commonly in a presentation, practice and performance approach (PPP). Due to our understanding of second language acquisition, it is commonly acknowledged that this approach does work to some extent, and it is a rather inefficient method of learning a language.

So what method should be chosen? There are a number of approaches that could work more efficiently than off the shelf or traditional syllabus approaches. I would argue that instead of using any standalone approach, a combination or variety of approaches should be used to increase learning efficiency. In conjunction with the LLOT online language course, I would suggest a communicative language approach, or a special type called Task Based approach or Task Base Language Teaching (TBLT).

This paper will show how a TBLT logistics language course could be developed, the benefits of this approach and how potential disadvantages can be addressed.

The paper will first cover a description of TBLT and its rationale for its use. Then it will cover both the advantages and disadvantages for an English for logistics course and how those disadvantages could be addressed. Finally it will give a description of a potential course and some example tasks that could be developed for the course.

2. DESCRIPTION OF A TASK BASED APPROACH

TBLT is often held up as an alternative to the traditional presentation, practice and performance (PPP) approach. Where the PPP can be teacher centred, TBLT is meant to be learner centred.

For an activity to be considered a ‘task’ Ellis and Shintani (2014) outlined the following four criteria:

1. The primary focus is meaning
2. There should be some sort of communication ‘gap’ which requires information or opinion to be conveyed
3. Learners will have to rely on their own linguistic (or non-linguistic) resources in the activity. There is not any explicit teaching of language in order to complete the activity.
4. There is a defined outcome other than the language. The learners must use the language to achieve the outcome. Achieving the outcome is the main concern not using language correctly.

A common additional criterion (to what can be considered a ‘task’) that Skehan (2003) covers is that the ‘task’ is related to the real world. The real world criterion creates a number of concerns. As Skehan (2003) highlights this can be taken as meaning ‘things that people do in everyday life’ to ‘bears a resemblance to the way language is used in real life’. For Skehan, it is the reaction to the subject that is key, regardless or not if it has been used by native speakers.

It is important to distinguish between a ‘task’ and an ‘exercise’. Ellis and Shintani (2014) state that an exercise is designed to practise specific language items. So exercises do not need to focus on meaning, there is no ‘gap’, learners simply manipulate the language provided as the outcome is language focused.

A key pedagogy issue is how teachers structure TBLT lessons to enable improvement in language for their students, in particular, how to ‘focus on form’ rather than ‘focus on forms’. As Klapper (2003) defines them ‘focus on form’ means learners are involved first and foremost in meaning-based activities before any attention is paid to specific linguistic features, where as ‘focus on forms’ involves taking individual linguistic items out of context and isolating them for separate study.

Willis (1996), in Skehan (1998), suggests the following model to meet these needs

1. Pre-task
 - Intro to topic and task

2. Task cycle

- Task
- Planning
- Report

3. Language focus

- Analysis
- Practice

Skehan (1998) states that in Willis's model the pre-task stage needs to activate schematic knowledge and provides language samples. In the task cycle stage, focus should be doing the task, planning for reporting and post-task, and reporting back. The key in the task cycle stage is having the teacher in the permissible role of helper with the language, which should be supplied based on student need. In the final stage of language focus, the language analysed should be relevant to the learners and the tasks, which were not dictated by a syllabus. After analysing the language, there may be some practice of it.

Ellis and Shintani (2014) outlines implementation options in the different phases as follows:

- Pre-task phases - This phase includes, modelling of the performance, pre-teaching language, extending knowledge of the topic and planning for the task.
- Main-task phase – This phase is time limited, where students are allowed access to the input data, linguistic features explicitly useful can be taught, and a surprise additional information can be added.
- Post-task phase – the final phases options includes repeating the task, reporting to the whole class and language work related to linguistic problems experienced during the task.

There are similarities in both the structures by Ellis and Shintani (2014) and Willis (1996), in Skehan (1998). A common theme is the main language work is done once the task is complete and with linguistic support from the teacher during the main task that is helpful in performing the task.

The teacher's role in TBLT is different from a traditional role. Ellis and Shintani (2014) state that the teacher's role is a facilitator rather than a knowledge-provider. They say that teachers should play a supportive role encouraging students, help them negotiate the understanding of the task and get the learners to focus on meaning.

3. RATIONALE FOR TBLT

TBLT is an approach that seeks to enable language learner in a naturalistic way. As Foster (1999) states TBLT has been based research findings in both linguistics and psychology that forms the contemporary view of language learning. TBLT seeks to incorporate the understanding that learning is a messy developmental process.

Ellie (2006) states that it is commonly assumed that TBLT creates a discourse that's found outside the classroom. Although achieving this is challenging, Ellie (2006) gives a list of processes in a stereotypical traditional classroom compared to classroom with TBLT. For example, in traditional pedagogy the discourse structure is often rigid with initiate-response-feedback exchanges, turn-taking is controlled by the teacher, and there is little need to negotiate meaning. Compared to TBLT, the discourse structure is loose consisting of adjacent pairs whereas turn-taking is regulated by rules from everyday conversation, and there are opportunities to negotiate meaning when communication problems arise.

These processes, outlined by Ellie (2006), are examples of what Willis (2016) would describe as *opportunities for real use of language*, where student experiment and test hypotheses to mean what they say and express what they mean in a variety of circumstances. This is one of four conditions that Willis (2016) states need to be met to effectively learn a language according to the overwhelming evidence from Second Language Acquisition (SLA) researchers.

The other three conditions Willis (2016) outlines is:

Exposure of a rich but comprehensible input of real language – this comes in from teacher talk in the pre-task phase or language focus phases, but also from materials given to students to complete the task and from fellow students.

Motivation – Completing the task is a motivating factor for students, but also the potential variety of topics and fun student can have with different tasks.

Focus on language form – students will naturally focus on this when they report back in the task. Also the language focus phases will allow student to notice language forms with consciousness-raising activities.

Other rationales for using TBLT, away from SLA theory, is around how flexible tasks can be. As Willis (2016) mentions, TBLT can be used in a variety of contexts. These contexts could include: 1) for specific purposes (e.g. in the logistics sector), and 2) English as a second language for students living in the UK to help with job applications and other general living in an second language context. Willis (2016) also states that tasks can go over many lessons, allowing for

students to do research as part of the task phases. TBLT can also be used with mixed levels, allow weaker students to learn from stronger ones.

4. BENEFITS FOR AN ESP LOGISTICS COURSE

The first benefit of TBLT is that it would involve specific scenarios and tasks that logistics professionals would come across. This would help logisticians develop a communicative competence in the target language. They would develop strategies on how to negotiate the meaning of a topic, even where their English is not perfect. The potential for scenarios is numerous and could be developed with logistics professionals themselves. Example scenarios to be included as tasks could be:

- deciding on the location of a warehouse
- negotiating with a shipping company
- job interviews
- presenting on logistics topics at a conference

TBLT has been found to be effective in engaging students in topics in General English. East (2015) provides one example, from Flanders schools, where students have been engaged effectively in a General English. If there is a positive level of engagement for General English, the engagement is likely to be higher for an ESP course where the students are already interested in the subject. This high level of engagement and motivation will lead to student working hard and consequently helping to further improve the English of the students.

A great benefit of using TBLT is the ability to use actual material used by logistics experts. This way the actual texts and recordings are genuine using grammar patterns and lexical items that are found in the logistics world. With a TBLT course, grammar and lexis are not artificially fitted into text and recordings just to meet the requirements of a syllabus. This will lead to students getting accustomed to interacting and negotiating within the target language.

A TBLT course can also include repeating scenarios, or very similar scenarios. The effect of this will lead to improvement in students' performance. Bygate (2001) notes that there is a strong effect of repeating a task on performance. Bygate (2001) refers to the effect over 10 weeks of repeating a task. Lynch and Maclean (2001) also found a similar effect of the repetition of tasks. This evidence suggests that it is reasonable to expect a TBLT course that repeats an exercise will lead to improvement. As Lynch and Maclean (2001) state, it can be difficult for students to notice their own improvement. Therefore any repetition of tasks does need to include some form of monitoring in order for students to notice their improvement.

A result of students using language in a real world settings is it boosts students' confidence in using English. The use of realistic scenarios with actual English improves confidence as it is in effect giving students rehearsal opportunities for real live scenarios. Combine this with repetition of tasks will further boost the confidence and effectiveness of students.

5. PROBLEMS

There are potential problems with the use of TBLT. Some problems are associated with choosing appropriately difficult tasks for the level of students, which I will cover. But the major problem is around teachers' lack of experience with TBLT and how it differs from the normal culture of a classroom.

Teachers' unfamiliarity with TBLT has resulted in it being criticised. For example Klapper (2003) criticises it because TBLT moves away from the structure teachers are used to with the traditional approach of presentation practice performance (PPP). Furthermore Skehan (2003) states that due to the different role of the teacher, such as being ready to provide for almost any situation that may happen in the classroom, it is not surprising that teachers avoid TBLT.

TBLT could itself be culturally inappropriate for the students. Littlewood (2007) raises a number of issues with the cultural shift from a teacher centre to a student centre pedagogy in East Asia, and how particularly teachers struggle with it. Although Littlewood (2007) refers to teachers, I have been aware of how some students (certainly not all) have found a more communicative approach to language learning more difficult to cope with. Consequently students and institution administrators might not view it as language teaching as student would for the majority of their time not be studying actual words.

Choosing the task for the right language level for students is not straightforward. Balancing a task that is not too simple and not too complex is can be difficult to accomplish. As Skehan (1998) says, students will need to be able to handle tasks other than simple ones and pedagogic sequences will need to take students through similar tasks at different levels of complexity.

6. ADDRESSING PROBLEMS

There would need to be a programme of teacher education to solve the unfamiliarity issue. East (2015) notes that where TBLT have been incorporated in syllabuses, teacher education programmes accompanied it. This would be the case of a logistics ESP course. As the teachers would likely be carrying out other teaching responsibilities at the same time as delivering, there would be a need before the course starts for teachers to be introduced to TBLT and the syllabus. This would then be followed up with continued support given to teachers, including observing the teachers' performance to giving them feedback on how to improve.

To address the cultural issues with TBLT, it could potentially be combined with a more traditional PPP syllabus that focuses more on linguistic items. Hedge (2000) discusses both how a spiral and a parallel syllabus could be used to achieve combining TBLT and PPP syllabuses. Although this is an approach I would favour for a General English course, I am less inclined to for an ESP course. The reason being that although there can be some support for grammar issues by the teachers, lexical differences is the main challenge for an ESP course. By choosing the right tasks with the right texts and recordings, student should start to pick up the specialist lexical items. Any specific grammar support that might be needed could easily be done outside of class time. For example, students could use the LLOT online English course.

Choosing the right texts and recordings is just as complicated for a traditional syllabus. Choosing the right tasks does require some planning and to get this done correctly, a trial run of the syllabus and tasks would help.

7. HOW A SYLLABUS WOULD LOOK

The length of the syllabus could be variable, but I would suggest that it goes to a maximum of 20 lessons with each lesson lasting an hour and a half. This would give a total of 30 hours of classroom time.

The lessons would have a variety of different types of tasks. The tasks length would vary from 30 minute in classroom sessions to longer project style tasks where student would begin the task in a lesson, carry out homework and the task would complete in the next lesson.

The tasks would vary in style too including simple tasks such as completing import customs forms, negotiation tasks and presentation tasks. Below are three examples of how they could work.

Import customs form

The import customs form completion would be carried out in groups of three students. The students would have to successfully complete the customs form. Two students would be given different texts (as an email) describing the products being imported, and the students would not be allowed to share the information with each other. Each text would have incomplete information with slightly different descriptions of the same goods. The third student would have to complete the form based on what the other two students are telling them.

Negotiation task

The aim of this task would be to negotiate the location of a logistics warehouse in a county. This task would involve four students. Two students would be representing the logistics company and two students would represent the local authority of the county. Both teams would have a separate briefing read out (or played out on a video) from their 'board of directors' about what it important to achieve and what are the red lines in the negotiation. They would also be given a briefing paper on this too. There would be four potential sites for this warehouse with both positive and negative aspects for the local authority and the logistics company. Both teams would then negotiate to find the best location and also what additional measures the local authority or logistics company might do for each other to make the agreement work.

Rotating poster presentation carousel

This would involve teams of two students working together. In a class this would mean approximately 4 to 7 teams. Each team would be given a separate topic to research in English and to develop a poster and written handouts. They would be set the task in the lesson and would have to do the research, prepare the poster and written handouts for the next lesson. In the next lesson each poster would be displayed and one member from each team would explain the topic to students, one at a time in two minutes. After two minutes, the students would rotate onto the next poster until they had had them explained. Once this has happened the students would swap roles, with the ones previously listening would now present the poster and vice-versa.

Common elements

All three of these tasks would have common elements to them. The introduction would introduce students to the topics, give some basic information about it and explain the procedures of the task. The final phase of the task would include a feedback on the task, covering the topic and asking students for their thoughts.

Then it would move onto the language analysis, asking what students struggled with, going over pertinent lexis and grammar, and lexis and grammar students struggled with.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper has covered a description of TBLT and the rationale for using it. It has gone through the benefits of TBLT for an English for logistics course and discussed the disadvantages and how those disadvantages can be addressed. Further more it has covered a description of what a TBLT English for logistics course can be developed and the types of tasks it could include. A key aspect to the success of this course is to ensure that teachers are confident and able to successfully deliver the lessons.

Learning a language is complicated. Using that language in a professional setting with its own different terminology and own style of discourse makes learning languages even more difficult and complex. However, it is possible to overcome these and help dedicated students with a well designed course.

Using language in a classroom setting is different to using it in the real world. Teachers and course designers need to bridge the gap between the classroom and real world if lessons and courses are to be successful. TBLT is one such approach that can help bridge this gap. The aim of a TBLT course is to make the classroom setting as much like the real world as possible. Using tasks that are similar to those faced in the real professional world in the classroom is a very good way to achieve that.

A TBLT English for logistics course combined with the LLOT online CLIL and gamification English for logistics course, would provide the future logistics professional with a good basis of working in English with their international colleagues.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Rhodri Jamieson-Ball is the Director of Jamieson-Ball Ltd trading as Tea Learning. He is a qualified English language teacher (with a CELTA from International House London) and has been teaching English and designing English language courses for four years. He is currently studying a MA in Applied Linguistics and English Language Teaching at King's College London. His previous experience was working in the transportation sector with Transport for London, having previously gained an MSc in Transport jointly awarded by Imperial College London and University College London. His professional interests lie in syllabus and course design for a range of different course and purposes.