

Task-Based Teaching Strategies that Enhance Communicative English Skills through the Virtual
Classroom

Trabajo Teórico Práctico

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Abstract

This project focuses on analyzing which task-based teaching strategies which enhance students' communicative skills can be applied in virtual English courses at Universidad Técnica Nacional which enhance students' communicative skills. Based on the results, virtual tutors and English coordinators of this university will be given a proposal that describes the best teaching strategies they can apply in their online courses.

It first introduces the problem, the topic, the objectives and justification for doing this research. In addition, it mentions the main points of the historical background which is the place where the research is developed.

Then, it presents the theoretical framework which contributes to the development and understanding of the objectives. Moreover, it presents the main points of the research: task-based instruction, teaching strategies and virtual learning environments.

It also indicates the kind of research; including the approaches, description of data collection method and instruments and the process for gathering it. It constitutes the analysis of the information collected during the research. The findings are shown by graphs and tables.

Last, it entails the final conclusions, recommendations and proposals based on the findings.

“Acquisition requires meaningful interaction in the target language-natural communication-in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding.”

Stephen Krashen

Introduction

Developing communicative competence in a foreign language is a process that is affected by different factors such as the learning environment, learner’s motivation and skills, materials used, and teaching strategies. Currently, there has been a prominent shift within the field of language learning and teaching, changing not only the role of the teacher and the student, but also changing the learning environments. There has been a great interest on developing virtual language learning environments that promote the acquisition and development of the four communicative skills. Parallel to this new shift of interest, new approaches regarding language learning have arisen trying to fulfill students’ needs and expectations through the use of virtual platforms.

For this reason, it is important to determine which strategies instructors should promote, so their students are able to process the new information and perform tasks in an online learning environment. Since the amount of information to be processed by language learners is high, instructors need to implement different teaching strategies so that students can be able to process the new input. Moreover, these strategies are good indicators of how learners approach tasks or problems encountered during the process of language learning. In other words, by analyzing the implementation of different language learning strategies, researchers can get valuable clues about how their students learn, understand, remember, and apply new input presented through the

virtual classroom. Therefore, the research question for this study is: Which task-based language teaching strategies enhance learners' communicative skills in virtual learning environments at Universidad Técnica Nacional?

This paper provides the background of language teaching strategies based on task based instruction applied in virtual learning environments. It also stresses the importance of language teaching strategies for foreign language learning and the teacher's role during this process. It looks for answering the following hypothesis: Task-based approach enhance communicative skills in virtual learning environments.

Given the demands of the current society, the Universidad Técnica Nacional (UTN) has implemented the innovative English for Work curriculum which aims to develop language competencies that will increase the students' employability. Programa Institucional de Idiomas para el Trabajo (PIT) was created by the Comisión Conformadora on November 8, 2010 by Act No.33-2010, in accordance No.2. This department began in January of 2011 and belongs to the Academic Affairs Department. PIT is the department responsible for establishing academic policies and institutional guidelines in order to optimize the foreign language learning process. Since its inception, it has sought mechanisms to transform traditional language instruction through the development of innovative strategies that will encourage students' real language acquisition. PIT's commitment to learning focuses on meaningful and authentic experiences that promote real learning.

For the realization of this initiative, an English pilot plan was designed. This pilot is based on the institutional and philosophical framework including the pedagogical model which integrates language learning theories such as the social constructivism of Vygotsky, Ausubel's

meaningful learning, Task-Based Instruction, and Hutchinson and Waters' English for Specific Purposes. This pilot is offered on site, but also through the development of virtual learning environments.

The virtual pilot courses have been designed by instructors at PIT who have training on designing virtual courses. However, since this has been a new experience at the University and at the academic program where the course is implemented, there have been certain issues regarding the courses all related to the teaching strategies implemented by instructors and how those strategies really enhance students' communicative competence through a virtual classroom. There are other elements such as the role of the instructor when designing the tasks and the reinforcement activities created that will allow students to interiorize the input given. More importantly, it is relevant to analyze if the strategies implemented during the course are a factor that affect students' retention.

Objectives

General Objective

To determine which task-based teaching strategies enhance learners' communicative skills through the use of virtual learning environments in English courses at Programa Institucional de Idiomas para el Trabajo, Universidad Técnica Nacional.

Specific Objectives

- To identify the teaching strategies implemented in the virtual courses in the Programa Institucional de Idiomas para el Trabajo at Universidad Técnica Nacional.
- To describe the material and web tools that enhance students' communicative skills in the target language.
- To describe the instructors' role and its impact during the language learning process.

Description of the context

Universidad Técnica Nacional became the fifth public university in Costa Rica, it was established by merging the Colegio Universitario de Alajuela, Colegio Universitario de Puntarenas, Colegio Universitario para el Riego y Desarrollo del Trópico Seco, Escuela Centroamericana de Ganadería, Centro de Investigación y Perfeccionamiento para la Educación Técnica, and the Centro de Formación de Formadores. Since its creation, the university has tried to implement new and innovative programs that can meet twenty first century learners' needs. One of the programs created was Programa Institucional de Idiomas para el Trabajo (PIT), which promotes the development of different language programs in the university. The first program implemented is called English for Work in the Accounting and Finance major. It is a two-year pilot program integrated into this academic plan. This career was selected due to its high rate of employability, the consent of coordinators and students, graduate students' profiles, job requirements, and other factors that make this academic program optimal for testing PIT.

The first year of the English for Work experience, focuses on developing general communication skills in English. During the second year, students receive an English for Specific Purposes course, which focuses on business and finance. At the end of the program, students are supposed to reach an A2 English level based on the Common European Framework. Although this pilot course is implemented in four campuses, Sede Central, Atenas, Pacífico and San Carlos, the virtual courses are only offered in Sede Central. Therefore, this study will be carried out in Sede Central which is located in Villa Bonita, Alajuela.

The pilot experience was successfully launched in January 2012, with a total of 120 students and 5 instructors. Regarding the virtual courses, over fifty students registered last year. Currently, there are around sixty students registered in the on-site classes and twenty students in

the virtual courses. It is important to mention that this innovative program offers only the first three courses online aimed at those students who are not able to attend on-site classes due to their work' schedule.

Literature Review

Learning and acquiring a foreign language is an intricate process that requires constant reflection and analysis regarding the relationship between the teaching practice and what has been found out about the learning-acquisition process. This relationship is important so that researchers can be able to develop language teaching strategies taking into consideration some basic questions such as determining the context in which students are learning, their learning styles, the learning environment as well as the opportunities the student has to practice in order to succeed in the learning process.

Teaching strategies are not a new topic. Researchers and instructors have been looking for the teaching strategies that have a positive impact on the students regarding foreign language acquisition. In recent studies, most researchers have found that teachers apply more than one strategy in their “quest for language competence” (Brown, 1994, p.115). This entails a process in which teachers are able to combine different strategies in order to promote the effective acquisition of the target language. Although factors such as motivation, language level, and previous language learning experience might affect the learning process, the application of innovative and engaging strategies might help learners overcome any constraint. This is the reason why instructors need to know more about which teaching strategies can be applied not only in their classroom, but in other learning environments such as the virtual platforms. As Haverila and Myllyla (2009) mention “the learning environment should provide the students possibilities to utilize effective learning strategies like reflection, prior experience, conversations

and authentic experiences in order to achieve better learning results” (p.1) . This involves looking for the best tools in order to design activities in the platform that promote the acquisition of the language.

Jonassen cited in Haverila and Myllyla (2009), states that for instructors there is a model of eight criteria in order to create and design meaningful tasks, which are the following:

- **Activeness:** It means that the activities should be student centered. Learners should have the key role, so they can be responsible of their own learning process. In the virtual classroom, the activities designed should encourage students’ participation and interaction.
- **Constructiveness:** Students should integrate the new information with their prior knowledge. The activation of schemata helps learners reflect on their own learning. In the platform, instructors need to choose activities that allow students to reflect on their previous experiences or sessions. Therefore, there is a need for planning in advance activities that are connected and interrelated and might allow students to construct new information.
- **Collaboration:** This refers to working as a learning community sharing the same goals and benefits. Most instructors believe that the virtual platform isolates students from their peers. However, there are tools as wikis and blogs that focus on collaborative work. This all depends on how instructors apply the tools in their classes.
- **Intentionality:** Students’ intention is to learn. Therefore, the online learning environment should encourage learners to think, analyze and learn more every time they access the platform. The strategies instructors apply should enhance students’ critical thinking skills as well as encouraging them to keep learning.

- Complexity: The activities and tasks students carry out in the platform should be challenging. In this way, they create expectation about the next online session, keeping their interest and motivation level to the highest.
- Context: The activities proposed in the learning environment should be based on real-life situations instead of abstract or vague activities.
- Conversation: This involves designing tasks in which students seek other participants in order to ask for opinions or share ideas. In an online learning environment, carrying out forums or chats are really common since they allow participants to interact and make comments to each other reflecting on a particular issue or topic.
- Reflecting: All the activities or tasks presented by the tutor should lead to an analysis and reflection of what has been learned. In the virtual platform, constant feedback, and communication allow students to reflect on their own learning.

Language Learning Teaching Approaches and Strategies based on Task-Based Approach

Programa Institucional de Idiomas para el Trabajo promotes the idea that learning should be based on the individual; his skills and limitations as well as his holistic development would allow him to acquire the language. Since the pilot program is an English for Academic Purposes course, its theoretical foundations come from the theory of English for Specific Purposes. This requires the development of activities and strategies which would be specific for the learners' work environment. However, there are other theoretical considerations that should be taken into account such as PIT's Pedagogical Model for Language Programs that promotes Constructivism and Humanistic approaches based on Situated Cognition and Task-Based Approach. This last

approach is the one that will be analyzed in this research as well as the process of designing useful and effective activities for the virtual classroom.

The sociocultural Vygostkian approach called Situated Cognition which states that knowledge is situated; in other words, it is the outcome from a specific activity and context. In this approach, mediation, construction of meaning and learning strategies lead to a learning to learn approach. Situated Cognition is related to Social-Constructivism which is a model based on psychological constructivism that dictates that knowledge should be developed from the relationship between the environment, the subject and the social context. It helps students internalize, organize and transform the new information. This transformation occurs through the creation of new learning experiences, and as a result of new cognitive structures which allow learners to deal with similar real-life situations. Therefore, constructivism perceives learning as a personal activity since the learner is the one who processes the information, but as a collaborative construction because the student needs to interact within his context.

Learning a foreign language is constructing meaning through interaction, practice, and production. “A constructivist approach is designed to equip students with knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions that they will find useful... both inside and outside of school” (Parkay, Hass & Anctil, 2006). Furthermore, the methodology and teacher’s mediation will integrate the approach which would fulfill the necessity of a methodology to encourage students to use their social background and previous knowledge in order to produce the desired output within the desired social framework, in this case students’ workplace. This also entails a process of changing instruction from face to face interaction to online learning environments in which teachers have to find the best tools and strategies to promote learning.

The approaches abovementioned are the core of the course. However, the main focus of this paper is to analyze which task-based teaching strategies enhance the development of communicative skills through the use of virtual platforms. According to Ellis as cited by Nunan (2004) a task is a workplan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed. To this end, it requires them to give primary attention to meaning and to make use of their own linguistic resources, although the design of the task may predispose them to choose particular forms. A task is intended to result in language use that bears a resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world. Like other language activities, a task can engage productive or receptive, and oral or written skills and also various cognitive processes.

This means that a task is a visible outcome which shows how students process the new knowledge. Therefore, each task should be meaningful so learners can be able to monitor their own learning process. Nunan (2004) also emphasizes that a task should have the following characteristics:

- The content should be selected based on the students' needs, and not their wants.
- In order to communicate, students should interact in the target language.
- The use of authentic material promotes learning.
- Learners should be given opportunities to analyze their own learning process.
- Students' own personal experiences are essential in order for them to adapt to the new concepts and language experiences.
- There should be a link between the language students learn in the classroom and the one they are going to apply outside the class.

Another fact about the Task-Based approach is that it promotes students exposure to comprehensible input in real-life situations. In this way, students can be able to perform in the target language in different scenarios. This entails a process of changing instruction and adapting teaching strategies in order to use and promote comprehensible output. Saville (2002) states “Language input to the learner is absolutely necessary for either L1 or L2 learning to take place” (p.20). Therefore, in the virtual classroom, students should be exposed to authentic situations and lots of samples of the language. According to Schmidt (1993), “Processing input for the comprehension of message meaning is necessary to convert input to acquired knowledge (the comprehensible input), but the conscious knowledge of linguistic rules is irrelevant for acquisition, as is instruction”. In other words, what really matters during the learning process and development of teaching strategies is the amount and the quality of input the learner receives, based on that the student will be able to produce language effectively and really acquire it.

Based on the Task-Based Approach, instructors need to plan in advance and set up the strategies that respond to their learners needs. Nunan (2004) establishes three main aspects:

Schema Activation: This helps students review previous courses or identify previous knowledge (Brown, 1994).

Pre-task: These are controlled-activities as interviews, handouts, surveys, so the instructor is able to introduce the topic inductively and give general feedback. It can be an individual or in group activities, but all of them are modeled by the professor. The pre-task can be up to 30 minutes, and it is a controlled practice using the target language vocabulary, structures and functions (Nunan, 2004). In the case of the platform, instructors can use different tools such as presentation websites, videos, digital magazines, and others in order to present the topic and the target language.

Task: Based on the pre-task and the input received, students are asked to produce an outcome (video, pictures, reading, listening texts, and others). Once the instructor has guided them and has given them enough input, they can produce a conversation, a written paragraph, a collage, etc. Students should not be asked to do something without receiving a model or previous examples (Nunan, 2004). In the platform, learners can participate in forums, wikis, blogs, generating videos through VoiceThread or any other presentation that promotes production.

Post-task: Once students have produced, the instructor identifies the area that students need to improve and gives specific feedback on that (specific phonemes, language structure, vocabulary and others). During the post-task, there is a reinforcement activity (Nunan, 2004). Providing feedback is really important in an online course because students tend to feel anxious or insecure about their own progress. By providing constant feedback, students can identify the areas they need to improve.

Communicative Competence: New Language Learning Environments and Teacher's Role

Mckeeman and Oviedo (2013) mention, "Communication is the cornerstone of world language learning" (p. 39); therefore, communicating effectively has always been an issue regarding learning and acquiring a foreign language. Currently, due to the rapid changes in technology and instruction, there are new ways learning environments. The students or now called digital natives are a new generation craving for connectivity and demanding technology based instruction within the learning process.

The America Council for Teachers of Foreign Language (ACTFL) created the P21 skills Map for Foreign Language Content Area. According to Mckeeman and Oviedo (2013), language instruction should encourage students to communicate in order to:

articulate their thoughts and ideas through oral and written language; listen effectively to others by not just hearing them, but attending to their intention, meaning, knowledge, and perception; use communication skills for a variety of purposes and intents; effectively utilize multiple technologies and new literacies in order to construct knowledge and validate its impact; and communicate effectively in different environments (p. 41).

Therefore, the strategies that the instructor implements in the virtual classroom should take into account all those ideas in order to promote the real communication.

The Internet and the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) are changing the way we learn. By addressing different learning styles, closing the gap between technology and instruction, connecting people, enabling students to deal with new academic settings, and the like require a change of paradigms. Technology is a tool to enhance learning. For this reason, instructors should constantly research about the best tools and the best strategies they can implement in their on-site and virtual classrooms. One common problem is to believe that teaching online is just uploading PDF documents. This goes beyond documents or websites, “online environment requires of teachers increased written presentation skills, some technical competencies, virtual management techniques, and the ability to engage students through virtual communication” (Berge and Collins cited in Easton, 2003). Therefore, virtual platforms facilitate the development of different learning scenarios; however, it all depends on how instructors lead the learning process.

Methodology and Data Collection

The following investigation is a qualitative study applied to the virtual English courses of Programa Institucional de Idiomas para el Trabajo (PIT), Universidad Técnica Nacional. The

purpose of this research is to determine which task-based teaching strategies instructors can use in the virtual courses that will enhance students' communicative competence in the foreign language. Therefore, carrying out this research requires an organized process. In order to do that, researchers need to consider two framework elements: inquiry and data collection procedures. In the case of this investigation, it follows a qualitative approach since it is related to real-life situations. According to Woods (2006), this has a number of implications which are the following:

- They do not set up artificial experiments. Everything that is studied should be based on natural environments, real-life situations and problems.
- It is not necessary that researchers make assumptions. They do not need to know things beforehand; they tend to relate it with familiar environments, make as few assumptions in advance of the study as possible.
- Situations are important because they influence behavior. Therefore, the context is important, but it should be used as a parameter not as a measure.
- Researchers get involved in the natural setting.
- It is important for researchers to develop a rapport between the subjects of the study and them.

Another important aspect is that since it is a qualitative research; its basis is taken from the Naturalistic Design. This implies that there is an emphasis on social reality which takes into account all the experiences acquire from outside, in-depth gathering information methods, analyzing data by focusing on the process, and so forth. Moreover, according to Lynch (1996, p.107), the most common methods for gathering data in a Naturalist Design are: interviews,

observations, journals, questionnaires, and document analysis. For the purpose of this research, interviews and observations will be applied to gather data due to the nature of the virtual courses and students' availability to participate in the research process.

One important element that should be described is the unit of analysis of this research which is represented by the population of Accounting and Finance students of the virtual English courses offered by PIT and the instructor that is currently tutoring the course. Regarding the students, there are nineteen students who decided to enroll in the virtual course PIT- 201 during the second quarter 2013. In general, these virtual learners have full time jobs and are currently taking four content courses of their major. Most of them chose the virtual course because they could not attend on site classes due to their work schedule. In the case of the tutor, he has worked in the program for two years. He has had training on how to use platforms, integrate virtual tools in it, and task-based approach.

In addition, primary and secondary sources will be used to carry out this research. The primary source is an observation instrument that will allow the researcher to identify the strategies used by the instructor in the platform (appendix 1). The observation focuses on how the tutor develops and designs students' tasks, how feedback is provided to students, the ongoing evaluation, among others. Two interviews will be carried out; one for students and one for the tutor. These interviews are designed in order to gather in depth-information from the subjects regarding the teaching strategies implemented during the language learning process (appendix 2). The secondary sources are books and articles related to online English courses, teaching approaches, teaching strategies, and virtual teaching tools.

As aforementioned, for this research, the instruments that are used to collect data are two interviews and one observation instrument. The interviews are divided into three main parts:

background data, strategies used by instructors and the general opinion of students and instructors regarding the virtual courses. Both interviews have a range of ten and twelve questions following a less structured interview format that will guide the conversation. This kind of interviews, “allow the interviewer to specify a range of questions to be covered in advance, but also allows the interviewer to formulate the wording of the questions as well as the order for asking them as the interview progresses” (Lynch, 1996, p. 128). Therefore, the interviewer has some flexibility when asking the questions, so it will allow a more natural conversation.

In the case of the observation, the observational focus will be the teaching strategies used in the platform as well as the implementation of task-based instruction in order to promote communicative competence. This also takes into account students participation and interaction, use of material, assessment strategies, and variety of tasks. It is an unstructured instrument that combines “a standardized form that acts as a guide with open-ended note taking” (Lynch, 1996, p. 111). This allows the observer to record any additional behavior that is taking place in the observed context.

After collecting the data, the information would be analyzed using coding as an interpretive technique that seeks to organize the data and provide a means to introduce the interpretations of qualitative data analysis. When the coding is complete, the researcher reports the data through summarizing main points, comparing relationships between codes, and illustrating the content and the most relevant information of the study.

Analysis of Information and Conclusions

Learning a foreign language is not an easy process; it requires availability, motivation, time, and effort. In the case of the online English courses for the Accounting and Finance major,

it is necessary to identify how professors can reach the following goal: designing tasks that promote the development of communicative skills through a virtual platform. This goal entails a process where a lot of factors determine its success or failure. For this reason, the main purpose of this research is to determine the task-based teaching strategies that educators use in the platform and analyze if those strategies are really appropriate for learning English. It is also important to make an analysis of the collected data, in order to draw conclusions and recommendations regarding this issue.

Carrying out class observations and interviews are important for most foreign language researchers since they allow them to study the process of education in the natural setting. Researchers also have the opportunity to identify details and precise evidence which help them understand the classroom behavior, attitudes, and students' performance. Classroom observations have many valid and important educational purposes. Most researchers try to describe instructional practices in order to improve teachers' classroom mediation based on feedback. This is also an opportunity to see real-life teaching situations and reflect on various aspects of the class such as time management, instructions given, learners' interest, teaching strategies, and so forth. On the other hand, interviews provide in-depth information, and allow interviewers interact with the subjects.

Data-Analysis

During the language learning process, there are many aspects that should be taken into account such as the context, students' motivation, teacher's experience, and the like. Teaching through a platform might be a challenging task given the complexity of the technological tools, and students' background knowledge regarding the use of the language, and the use of platforms. Moreover, there are some aspects that were observed during this experience that should be

analyzed: the use of task-based instruction as an approach for planning and developing the online sessions which is part of the core of Programa Institucional de Idiomas para el Trabajo Pedagogical Model, the material and the web tools used during the process, and the instructor's role.

In order to carry out the observation, the researcher chose the online English course PIT-201 which is the second course students receive during the first year of the Accounting and Finance major at Universidad Técnica Nacional in main campus Alajuela. The observation was carried out for about two weeks, from July 15th to July 26th, 2013. There were nineteen students enrolled in the class, most of them between eighteen and thirty years of age. Currently, only seven students actively participate in the platform. This group was chosen because it is a new program the university is implementing, and it is also a course which emphasizes the development of communicative language skills through a virtual platform. The main idea of this program is for students to develop effective communicative competences in English that will allow them to have more opportunities for finding a job after they graduate.

The platform is divided into fourteen weeks; however, for this research the first eleventh weeks were taken into account during the past two weeks. There are certain elements that should be analyzed in regards to task-based instruction such as students' exposure to comprehensible input, designing meaningful and contextualized tasks, promoting interaction, providing effective feedback, and developing student-centered classes.

There are some positive aspects that were observed during the classes. The instructor motivated his students through motivational videos, messages, and songs. This creates a relaxing learning environment for the students who also mentioned that they felt comfortable in the class.

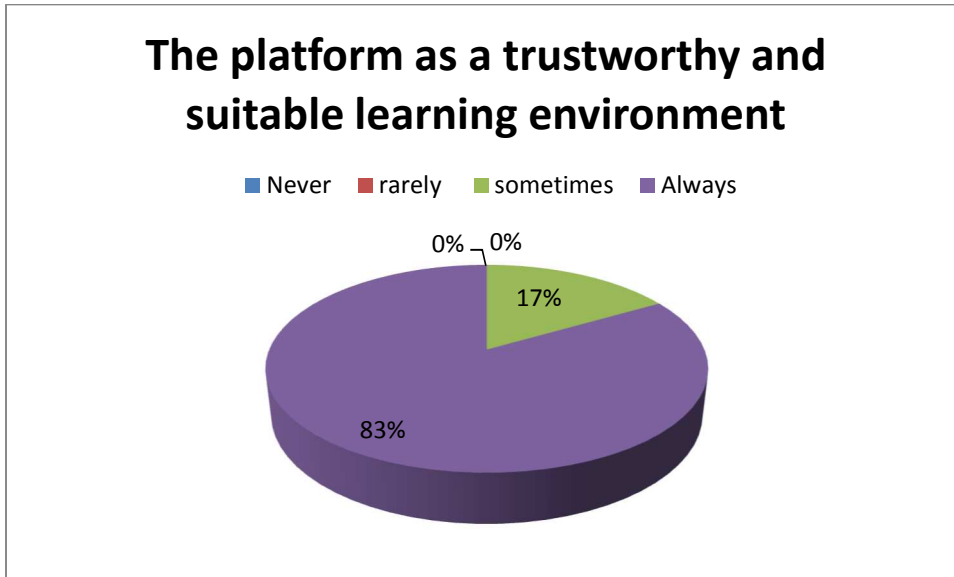


Figure 1. The platform as a trustworthy and suitable learning environment.

The motivation for learning that the student receives in the classroom determines the acquisition of the language or not. According to Gardner quoted by Galiano (2008) "Positive attitudes and motivation are related to success in learning second languages". For this reason, it is important that the educator provides a classroom environment in which the content and the tasks are relevant and meaningful for the students.

Another element to take into account is how the instructor plans his online class. According to him, he uses the "Marco Estructural" of the program which establishes the competences students are supposed to develop during each week. He tries to use lots of videos and games for students to enjoy the virtual classroom. Although the instructor included different activities; these were not organized following the task-based cycle. For example, during week four; the competence students have to develop is: "describing likes and dislikes." However, in the activities developed in the platform, there was not clear schema activation, pre-tasks, tasks or post tasks. Students were given examples of the language at the beginning, but the pre-task was

limited to two links in which students could see two videos: one with an explanation of how to express likes and dislikes with translation to Spanish, and then one with a person explaining different expressions for describing preferences. After the two videos, there was another link to YouTube in which students were asked to listen to a song called “I like chicken”. Finally, for homework students had to download one worksheet in order to complete it, and present it to the instructor.

As it can be seen, students were partially exposed to comprehensible input, and did not carry out controlled practices for pre-tasks. Also, there was no visible speaking outcome. They were not asked to upload a video or create an audio using the tools in the platform.

Regarding instructions, these were not clear for students. The facilitator asked them to carry out different activities that were not even available in the platform. For example, on week eight, students had to participate in a forum, but this one was not open. In terms of the general layout, the platform is full of text which might distract students from the main activities of the weeks.

The screenshot shows a virtual classroom interface. On the left, there are two labels: "Instructions" and "Activities of the week.", each with a blue bracket pointing to its respective section in the main content area. The main content area is a white box with a blue border. At the top, it says "Hello everyone!". Below that, there is a paragraph of text: "This is going to be a week to review. 😊 We are going to talk about food. So, we are going to do different activities. Are you ready? Vacations are coming so we will be in contact again after them." This is followed by a numbered list of activities: 1. Motivational Activity, 2. Review vocabulary, 3. Practice on line, and 6. Portfolio Activity #3. Below the list, there is a yellow highlighted box that says "You have time to present these activities from June 27th to July 10th". Underneath that, there is a red oval containing the text "Interactive Forum: This week talk about". Below the oval, there is a question: "Do you like to cook? Do you like to try new kinds of food?" followed by a bulleted list of three questions: "What's your favorite meal?", "Are there any foods that you like now that you didn't like when you were a child?", and "What's your idea of a perfect romantic dinner?". Below the list, there is a red text line: "Please, if you have any question contact me. Tel 24355000 ext 1024 Marco Araya". At the bottom of the main content area, there is a list of activities with icons: "Introduction- Foods in English", "Review vocabulary", "Let's learn how to use 'a', 'an' y 'the'", "Singular and plurals", and "a nice game to practice vocabulary".

Figure 2. Screenshot of the platform, week eight.

As it is shown in the picture, students are not given clear instructions about what they have to do or present as a final product. There are some activities that are included in the instructions, but they are not available for the students. There is not also a space for them to upload a practice or a video.

In terms of the tools applied, Moodle platform provides instructors with a variety of tools such as forums, chats, journals, devices for recording audio, files in which you can embed external tools, and the like. However, the instructor has just used forums, links, and files during the last eleven weeks. Most links are directed to online games and videos. Although, the material presented on the links does not follow the task-based cycle, students mentioned they enjoyed those sites because it is a fun and enjoyable way to learn English. They also mentioned that from their perspective, the tutor provides a variety of tasks. Nevertheless, these cannot be considered tasks since students do not produce a real outcome, they are not contextualized, and the input given presents the language in isolation.

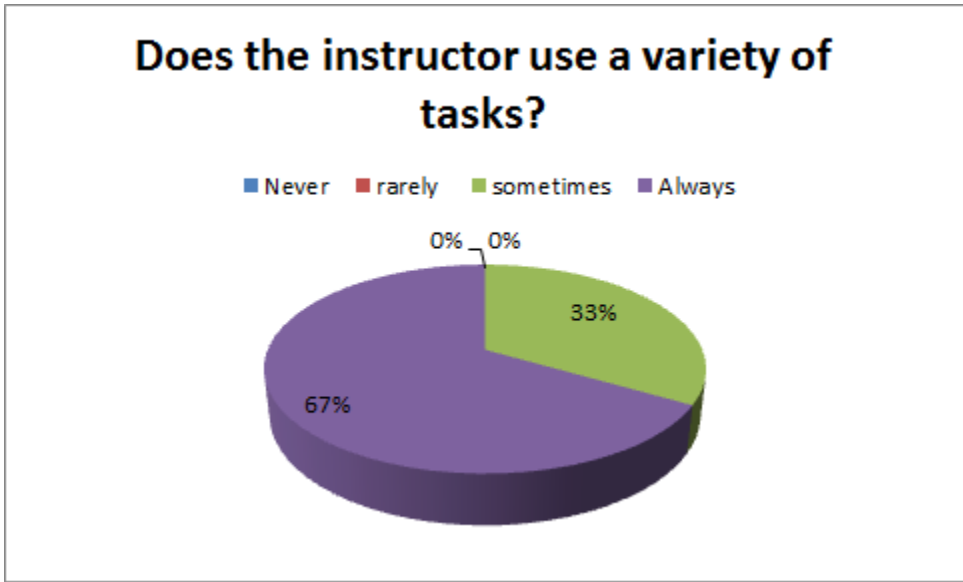


Figure 3. The variety of tasks used by instructors.

Another point learners mentioned was that videos and games are the most useful tools because they are interesting and fun. They also said that those links allowed them to improve their listening skills.

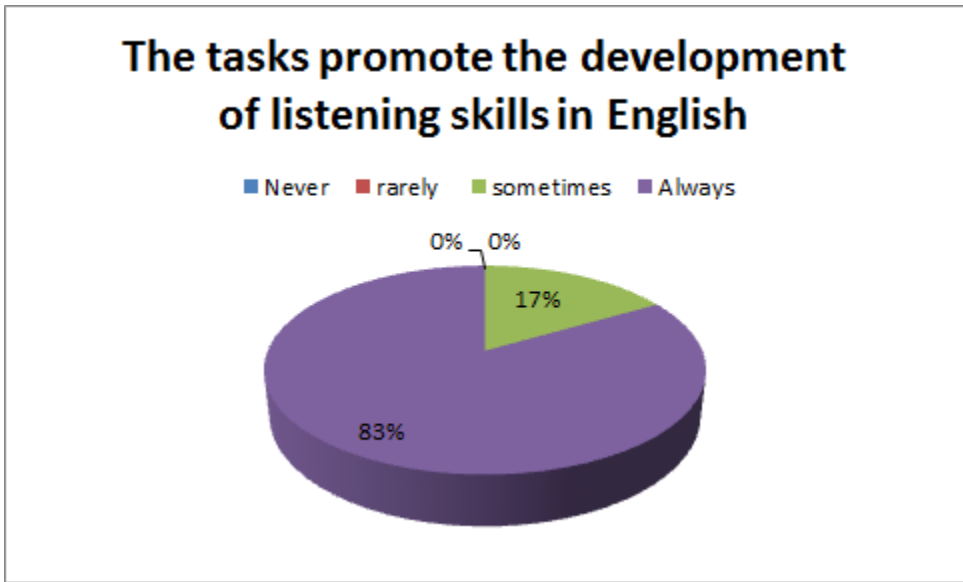


Figure 4. Tasks that promote the development of listening skills.

Although the activities promote their listening skills, the tasks proposed do not integrate the four language skills since most of them are audios and videos from YouTube in which students are asked to watch a video related to a specific topic. Other sites exposed students to vocabulary that is not contextualized or linked to each other. Saville (2002) states that “Language input to the learner is absolutely necessary for either L1 or L2 learning to take place” (p.20). Therefore, the instructor provides input, but this input does not give them the opportunity to learn the language as a whole. Moreover, learners need to be exposed to comprehensible input, so they can produce in the target language. Regarding this theory, Krashen’s main idea was that in order to acquire a language students should be exposed to $i+1$ in which they improve what they already know and go beyond that. However, during most online sessions students were only exposed to videos from YouTube, and online exercises. Therefore, learners were not receiving enough input to produce by themselves. This is another reason why they might use only isolated sentences when they participate in the forums because as Brown (1994) mentions “Speech will “emerge” once the acquirer has built up enough comprehensible input ($i+1$)” (p. 280). Therefore, if students are not exposed to it, they might not be able to acquire and produce the language effectively and beyond isolated words or phrases.

Regarding interaction, most activities were carried out individually. Interaction among students is necessary during the learning process, so they can improve their communicative and social skills. Since learners are acquiring a language, they need constant interaction with their peers; in this way they can help each other, get involved in the tasks, focus not only in the language itself but on what they are able to do with it. Interaction is needed so that students are able to connect input with their learner capacities and then produce an effective output (Ziglar, 2008). In the platform, students participated in forums, but they were not encouraged to ask

questions to each other. During the second and sixth week, there were two forums. In the first one, seven students participated, in the second one only three. During the two forums, although in the guidelines they were instructed to ask questions to their peers, they did not do it. Learners only participated one time during the week, the facilitator did not interact with them either. Therefore, in the platform there is no evidence of students interacting among themselves or with the instructor. There were not also collaborative tasks such as creating wikis or blogs in which students can construct meaning through team work. Nevertheless, students mentioned that outside the platform, they usually talk to the instructor asking for clarification or going to on site classes to practice with him.

Finally, in the platform the instructor did not provide feedback to students in any aspect. Harmer (2001) points out that “The way in which we respond to students when they speak in a fluency activity will have a significant bearing not only on how well they perform at the time but also on how they behave in fluency activities in the future” (p.107). This means that feedback should be given after each task, and the facilitator must really check if the learners understood or not. However, the students mentioned, the instructor monitors frequently, but mostly through phone calls or on site sessions.

In terms of the role of the instructor during the process, there are certain aspects that are relevant for the study. The facilitator mentioned he received training on how to use the platform, but he did not receive training on how to integrate task-based strategies with the technological tools. He recognized he uses lots of videos because students like them. In the platform, it is evident that there is an overuse of links and not authentic or adapted material. The task-based cycle is not completely implemented, and the strategies used are limited to the content of the websites presented during each week.

Carrying out this research, gave the researcher some insights regarding the teaching language process, especially related to the importance of developing more active tasks that really promote production, bringing authentic material to the class, asking students to interact more with their partners, and giving feedback after and during each task.

In sum, teaching a foreign language is a challenge. This is the reason why through observations and interviews, researchers are able to see their own weaknesses and strengths regarding language teaching. Moreover, they can improve their teaching practice by looking for more effective, meaningful and authentic teaching strategies.

Recommendations

Online language learning environments are a new alternative for language instruction. Although there are some instructors who claim that an online class cannot replicate what teachers do in onsite classes, there are others who believe that the quality of the class depends on the instructor even if it is an online class. In the university where this course is implemented, there has been a constant debate regarding the implementation of virtual classes or using the platform as a virtual component to onsite classes. The problem is not what to do, but how to do it. As Uschi (2002) mentions “Research based on constructivist learning approaches strongly suggests that the Internet and the web have the potential to add something even to the best classroom teaching” (p.3). Hence, it is not if the class is onsite or online, it is how the instructor teaches the class. In this sense, Nunan cited in Brown (1994, p. 78) states that in the classroom, there should be an emphasis on learning to communicate focusing not on the language, but on the learning process itself.

In regards to applying task-based instruction in virtual learning environments, there should be an emphasis on the development of different tasks which promote visible students' outcome. Task-based instruction is different from the traditional approaches since it emphasizes participants' interaction, critical thinking and motivation. In this sense, students have an active participation in the different tasks. They need to interact, produce, and monitor their competence development. In the case of the facilitators or instructors, they help learners to discover ways of learning, organizing and recalling information, and learning from errors. Task-Based is useful for learners since instructors can provide real-life tasks based on comprehensible input, and involving students in interactive and meaningful contexts.

After conducting this research, these are some recommendations regarding the application of Task-Based Approach in an online learning environment:

- The educator's responsibility is to recognize the importance of improving, systemizing, and restating their practicum by identifying their learners' needs and capabilities. By doing this, instructors can design meaningful tasks for students to improve their communicative competence in the target language.
- Instructors should look for new and innovative teaching strategies according to the context and student's skills.
- Translating to Spanish should be used in extreme cases because students should not depend on the mother tongue in order to learn the foreign language. There are some tasks that are translated to Spanish; also some of the external tools provided students with vocabulary that is translated to Spanish.

- Workshops and constant training should be offered to professors for them to know more about how to implement the Task-Based Approach in the virtual classroom. Also, on how to use external tools rather than relying on files or links.
- To encourage a comfortable environment in the platform so that foreign language learners can express their ideas without feeling anxious or afraid of using the language.
- To promote the use of real-life situations where students can express themselves effectively.
- To motivate learners and provide feedback regularly in the platform.
- Each skill should not be taught in isolation. Therefore, each task ought to have a listening or speaking component or listening and reading, and so forth. The idea is to design tasks which will allow students to improve their language as a whole.
- The layout of the platform should be attractive and organized. The overuse of images or text might distract students from the activities.
- Constant monitoring of students participation and performance is relevant. Online instructors need to provide regular feedback to the learners.
- The platform should be used as a regular onsite classroom. Evaluation activities, feedback, tasks, and the like have to be visible in the platform.
- Instructions should be clear, especially if students have to carry out the tasks by themselves within the platform or any external tool.

Providing effective instruction to learners is a challenge. If instructors choose appropriate and suitable strategies, approaches, and materials for students, they will have a greater chance of success during the language learning process. Therefore, understanding and recognizing how

language learners process information as well as their goals for learning a foreign language is relevant for designing task-based lesson plans that will promote the real acquisition of the target language. Instructors need to take into account the multiple dimensions, potential strengths, background knowledge and experiences their students have had. In sum, by using materials and developing tasks that model real-life situations, proper instructional planning, and exposing students to motivating and meaningful tasks will allow them to become successful and fluent language learners.

Appendix 1

Universidad Técnica Nacional

Programa Institucional de Idiomas para el Trabajo

Observation Instrument

Teacher's name _____ Date: _____

Observation Criteria

The following observation criteria is intended for analyzing the teaching and evaluation strategies implemented in the virtual English course PIT 201 at Universidad Técnica Nacional.

| | Yes | No | Not Observed | Comments* |
|---|-----|----|--------------|-----------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The instructor uses different teaching strategies that promote the development of communicative skills. | | | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The activities integrate the four language skills. | | | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The activities are contextualized based on real-life situations. | | | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Activities are appropriate to the level and based on “Marco Estructural”. | | | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is a variety of tools used in the platform. | | | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sessions follow the Task-Based approach design (pre-task, task and post-task). | | | | |

| | | | | |
|--|--|--|--|--|
| | | | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learners are given feedback regularly. | | | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Classes promote students' interaction and communication in the target language. | | | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The instructor encourages students to participate and express themselves actively. It is a student-centered class. | | | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The layout of the platform is attractive and facilitates learning. | | | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The instructor creates effective learning environments by establishing clear rules of organization of the activities and appropriate student-instructor relationships. | | | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The evaluation applied follows what is stated in the program. | | | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students are given opportunities to | | | | |

| | | | | |
|--|--|--|--|--|
| practice and improve their speaking skills. | | | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The instructor monitors students' participation and performance during the week. | | | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instructions are clear. | | | | |

Additional Observations

Appendix 2

Universidad Técnica Nacional

Programa de Institucional de Idiomas para el Trabajo

Interview

Objective: The objective of this interview is to gather information related to task-based teaching strategies implemented in the virtual English courses at Universidad Técnica Nacional. The information gathered is anonymous, and it will be used for educational purposes. This interview is directed to tutors who belong to Programa Institucional de Idiomas para el Trabajo (PIT).

Background Information

1. Tell us about yourself. Your experience as an online tutor, your background knowledge related to teaching through platforms.
2. Did you receive any previous training on task-based instruction and virtual courses before the implementation of the courses?

Teaching Strategies

3. How do you design the tasks in the platform? In other words, how do you plan your online sessions?
4. How do you integrate task-based instructions into the design of those tasks?
5. How do you integrate tools into the development and implementation of students' tasks?
6. What strategies do you use the most in the platform? Which ones have been more successful and effective?
7. How do you assess students' tasks?
8. What strategies have you implemented to motivate students during the development of the tasks?
9. Do you think task-based is an appropriate approach for online courses?

Opinion

10. What is your opinion about implementing virtual English course in the university?

11. What are some recommendations for future tutors?

12. Any additional comment you would like to add related to this issue.

Universidad Técnica Nacional

Programa de Institucional de Idiomas para el Trabajo

Interview

Objective: The objective of this interview is to gather information related to task-based teaching strategies implemented in the virtual English courses at Universidad Tecnica Nacional. The information gathered is anonymous and it will be used for educational purposes. This interview is directed to virtual students enrolled in PIT-201 English course in Sede Central, Universidad Técnica Nacional.

Background Information

1. Tell us about yourself. Your experience as an online student.

Teaching Strategies

2. What kind of activities do you do in the platform?

3. What is your opinion about them?

4. What do you think about the materials used during the week? Are they easy to understand?

5. Does the tutor provide a variety of tasks?

Always Sometimes Often Never

6. What do you think about the tasks you carry out in the platform?

7. What are some tools instructors use in the classroom? Which ones do you consider more useful? Explain why.

8. Has the instructor generated a suitable and trustful learning environment?

Always Sometimes Often Never

9. Do you think the tasks carried out in the platform promote the development of communicative skills in English?

Always Sometimes Often Never

10. Are the tasks developed in a logical order?

Always Sometimes Often Never

11. Do you want to add any comment related to your experience in this course?

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