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ABSTRACT

Research on the use of task-based language teaching (TBLT) with digital technologies has increased over the last few years but few studies have focused specifically on its use with blended learning involving international undergraduate learners studying in a UK higher education context. This paper explores the role of a task-based approach with international students learning business communication in English with a focus on the use of two collaborative digital technologies to aid blended learning: the video conferencing software Adobe Connect and the virtual world of Second Life. The study was guided by two research questions: What are the strengths and challenges presented by each application in terms of aiding authentic task completion? How can the applications be used to support task-based learning in a blended format? A year-long study with students at a UK university utilised semi-structured interviews, observations and in-world ethnography. The research highlights the importance of a number of design principles necessary for effective task-based learning in a blended approach and calls for more research on the type of support required by international undergraduates to aid them fulfil their potential in foreign language environments.

Keywords: Adobe Connect, Blended Language Learning, Collaboration, English as a Second Language (ESL) Language Learning, Second Life, Task-Based Language Teaching

INTRODUCTION

International students are a key part of UK higher education institutions (HEIs) and account for an increasing percentage of total revenues across the sector as a whole (Barron, Gourlay & Gannon-Leary, 2010). Given this importance guaranteeing that international students fulfil their potential is a major concern of all HEIs (Morrison, Merrick, Higgs & Le Métais, 2005). The most common challenges faced by international students concern their English language skills, their ability to deal with higher order critical thinking skills and their willingness to participate in new social and academic discourse communities (Kingston & Forland,
2008). As a result of many of these challenges, students may experience heightened learner anxiety in face-to-face learning environments such as lectures or seminars, particularly when confronted by oral communication tasks in a foreign language (Yeh & Inose, 2003). They may also be disengaged if the pedagogical approach is more ‘form’ rather than ‘meaning’ focused (Carless, 2012). Through advances in digital technologies, research suggests that applications offering video conferencing and virtual worlds can provide flexible and interactive forms of course delivery that allow learners to engage with meaningful tasks in authentic environments (Hew & Cheung, 2012). Questions remain, however, about how these technologies can be used effectively with second language learners from diverse cultures in blended modes of delivery.

This article reports on a study with a group of final year international undergraduates studying business communication in English at a UK HEI in which both academic content and English communication skills were central parts of the syllabus. A task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach was used as part of a blended mode of delivery to promote both authentic and flexible learning. The research is significant in that it a) addresses the role of blended TBLT with undergraduate international students attending a UK university for a period of one year, and b) compares the use of two applications—Adobe Connect (AC) and Second Life (SL)—with the same learners. The research was concerned with the following research questions: What are the strengths and challenges presented by each application in terms of aiding authentic task completion? How can the applications be used to support task-based learning in a blended format? Due to length limitations the paper will focus on the technologies involved in the task-based blended learning context and a later paper will examine the language learning potential in more detail focusing on learner transcripts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Task-Based Language Teaching with Technology

Task-based approaches to language learning emerged in the late 1970s through initial research by Prabu (1987) to develop authentic problem-based activities. Unlike earlier approaches that stressed the importance of linguistic mastery, task-based approaches engage learners in communicative interaction, emphasise the importance of authentic language and developing cognitive processing—a combination of factors which may lead learners to ‘focus on form’ as a result of meaning-based activities rather than prior selection (Long, 1991). Central to this is ‘negotiation of meaning,’ the attempt to produce language for a particular real-world purpose as the result of a goal-oriented process (Pica, 1994). Various claims have been made resulting from task-based research, including its ability to improve learner accuracy and complexity, as well as how task planning can enhance learner fluency (Robinson, 2001).

As a highly structured approach to language learning and teaching that is integrated into the design of a syllabus or course of study (Doughty & Long, 2003), a ‘task’ does not merely refer to a piece of work assigned by an instructor. ‘Task’ refers to an activity that learners may find themselves doing in the real world, such as writing a CV and a job application, giving a business presentation or buying a ticket to go to the theatre (Nunan, 2004). Willis (1996, 2008) provides examples of six major task types for language learners: listing and/or brainstorming; ordering and sorting; matching; comparing and/or finding similarities/differences; problem-solving; and sharing personal experiences and story-telling.

In a TBL approach, learners deal first with a series of tasks that are sequenced according to their complexity rather than linguistic
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