A Practical Guide to Integrating Technology into Task-Based Language Teaching

Marta González-Lloret

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Reviewed by

Ed Dixon

This book is an invaluable guide for teachers interested in applying the principles of task-based language teaching (TBLT) to the design, implementation, and evaluation of technology-mediated TBLT. Each of the book’s four chapters delivers a comprehensive overview of topics related to TBLT, namely, (1) the application of TBLT theory, (2) conducting a needs analysis, (3) creating task sequences, and (4) assessment. Each chapter includes examples of technology-mediated TBLT projects, abstracts, summaries, reflective questions, activities, and recommendations for additional readings. The book concludes with a four-page reference of research from the field of TBLT and technology-supported TBLT that the author cites and investigates in her book.

Chapter 1, “What is Technology-Mediated TBLT” creates a theoretical framework in which to analyze technology’s function and supportive role in TBLT. This chapter will interest both the novice and expert designer of
technology-mediated TBLT projects. It begins by synthesizing the research of several scholars, who view task as (1) a goal-oriented activity (Willis, 1996), (2) a cognitive process (Ellis, 2003), and (3) one that involves students interacting with each other in the target language (Nunan, 2004). In the first section of this chapter, the author introduces two models of TBLT. She characterizes the Willis model as student-centered and focused on collaborative work. Using this model, teachers provide instructions for a task, and highlight vocabulary important for its completion. While collaborating with each other, students create reports on the outcomes of their group work for review by the rest of the class. The Long model identifies tasks according to a needs analysis, classifies them into real-life task types, and sequences them to form a syllabus or series of activities that students will need to do in order to, e.g., make a reservation in a restaurant. While learners are performing the task in pairs or groups, teachers monitor their progress, promote purposeful communication, and provide feedback. Despite diverse opinions of the definition of a task, González-Lloret discerns several commonalities in the research: tasks should be essentially communicative, collaborative, meaningful, and designed to promote language acquisition in an authentic context.

In Part 2 of Chapter 1, González-Lloret applies the different views of task as guidelines for incorporating technology in TBLT language learning. She posits that technology should promote a focus on meaningful communication, generate collaboration, and draw upon authentic language usage in a set of real-world tasks. Furthermore, instructors should devise practical tasks with technology that will provide students with the pragmatic skills to pursue their interest in the L2 culture beyond the classroom (Chapelle, 2014). As an example, González-Lloret describes how students can use their smart phones to ask and give each other directions to a site on an interactive street map in the target culture. At the conclusion of this chapter, she lists and discusses other technologies capable of advancing TBLT principles such as email, chats, blogs, wikis, virtual environments, and multiplayer online games. The author highlights Second Life, one of the largest virtual worlds on the Internet, as an example of a medium for promoting the students’ communicative skills in an intercultural context. In Second Life, teachers can devise tasks for learners to connect with speakers of the target language from around the world for the purpose of exchanging, comparing, and reporting their ideas on topics relevant to their interests. In this chapter, González-Lloret advances the readers’ awareness of technology as a vehicle for meaningful communication rather than for only drilling and testing discrete grammatical forms in online quizzes.

With an emphasis on student-centered learning in TBLT, González-Lloret stresses in Chapter 2 the importance of conducting a needs analysis (NA). On the one hand, a methodological and empirical analysis will reveal to
teachers and curriculum designers what students want to learn. On the other hand, it will give teachers the opportunity to identify, classify, and prepare language tasks necessary for students to achieve their targeted goals. In addition to underscoring the importance of identifying what is relevant to students, González-Lloret also emphasizes the importance of a NA for determining the students’ computer skills, access to technology, and digital literacies. Since many TBLT tasks can only be mediated through technology, such as in the case of searching the Internet for resources on academic and scholarly topics, it is important to recognize the students’ strengths and weaknesses in conducting, e.g., Internet research.

González-Lloret’s special emphasis on a NA for technology-mediated TBLT is particularly well timed in today’s growing worldwide educational learning environment. With the influx of online courses and the rise of massive open online courses (MOOCS) for an international audience, it has become increasingly important for course designers and instructors to understand both the demographic backgrounds of their participants as well as their different technological settings. Knowing the diverse global concerns of their students as well as the technology that is available to them will help language educators maintain the relevancy of course topics and assure the successful completion of tasks that are entirely dependent upon technology. This chapter provides models for a NA consisting of interviews and online questionnaires with Likert scales, multiple choice, and open-ended questions.

In Chapter 3, González-Lloret continues her earlier discussion of TBLT theory and its practical application to technology by underscoring an essential principle in TBLT, namely, that TBLT involves “learning by doing” in a sequence of tasks that are realistic, authentic, and relevant. This sequence of tasks requires certain pedagogical choices and considerations for their effective completion. Following the suggestions of Chapelle (1998) and Doughty and Long (2003), González-Lloret explains that tasks should (1) provide rich input that makes the task real and authentic, (2) focus on form that attends to grammatical errors as they occur incidentally in meaningful communication, (3) give corrective feedback, (4) encourage collaborative learning, and (5) promote language output. In addition to presenting the steps to create a task-based unit, González-Lloret illustrates the process through a hypothetical technology-mediated model, and gives examples of existing technology-mediated, task-based materials and task types from courses in three different languages.

Chapter 4 illustrates the major aspects of performance-based assessment and proposes technologies for its implementation. González-Lloret states that the primary reason for assessment in TBLT is to furnish formative feedback that will keep students motivated and improving their performance until they
complete the task. She suggests the use of descriptors in the form of scales, checklists, or grids that not only evaluate what students can do with the language, but also how well they do it. Beyond demonstrating the students' language skills, an assessment should also reveal the students’ abilities to activate their sociolinguistic and pragmatic knowledge in performing a task. In the appendix, she provides two models with descriptors and detailed criteria for an assessment-based test. Among the technologies that González-Lloret recommends for assessing both the students’ receptive and productive skills are computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies. With the texting chat application WhatsApp, teachers can assess beginner-level students’ ability to negotiate and arrange a time, date, and place for a study meeting. More advanced learners can participate in Internet forums such as Google Groups or Fanfiction.net that provide opportunities for students to contribute as individuals and also collaborate with others on the development of essay topics in a public arena. Teachers can assess students’ writing progress as they revise and edit their posts and get feedback from peers.

This book explores technology’s potential to generate authentic language learning both inside and outside the classroom and online. It is a synthesis of theory and empirical research with relevant examples and useful recommendations. The book delivers its title’s promise to be a practical guide for integrating technology into task-based language learning. It encourages teachers to evaluate what they are currently doing in class with, e.g., textbook activities and to transform them into technology-mediated tasks that are goal oriented, focused on meaningful communication, collaborative, and with a real purpose outside the classroom. One of several best examples from the book is the transformation of “making a hotel reservation,” a common topic in an elementary language level course, into a sequence of technology-mediated tasks that prepare students for a real-world activity. This task requires each student to first research the Internet for information about a hotel's location, price range, hotel amenities, room availability, and patron reviews and ratings. Students could then confer with each other in pairs to agree on a hotel, whereupon they prepare a final report explaining the reasons for their choice in a presentation to the rest of the class. This example demonstrates how students go beyond memorizing vocabulary and learning structures to a higher level of language usage; with this task students connect their language skills to their everyday cognitive skills involving, e.g., describing, choosing, comparing, critiquing, and formulating. Finally, this book provides a context for evaluating the level of authentic learning that takes place in online courses, including MOOCs. It is a blueprint for teachers and course designers interested in developing topics, materials, and activities that are relevant to their students’ needs and learning. This book stimulates our creativity in imagining the possibilities
with TBLT for improving language learning in both hybrid and new online learning environments.

**References**


**About the Reviewer**

Ed Dixon Ph.D. is Director for Technology of Penn Language Center (PLC) and former president of the Northeast Association for Language Learning and Technology (NEALLT). He has over 25 years of teaching experience in the field of German language education at colleges and universities including Swarthmore, Villanova, George Washington University, and The University of Pennsylvania. He has also taught seminar courses in Penn’s Critical Writing Program and in the Graduate School of Education. At Penn, Ed provides professional development opportunities for faculty through technology-focused workshops, performs classroom observations in PLC language courses, and advises PLC faculty on pedagogical techniques and strategies for improving classroom instruction. His research focuses on the affordances and challenges of different instructional approaches for teaching language and culture in both online and hybrid courses. In 2010, Ed taught the first fully online German language course for credit from the University of Pennsylvania and designed in 2014 the first language-learning MOOC for German on the Coursera platform.
Learner Autonomy and Web 2.0 explores tensions between ‘classical’ definitions of learner autonomy and the learning dynamics observed in online contexts. Autonomy is viewed as emerging and developing in a complex relationship with L2 proficiency and other competencies. A wide diversity of environments is featured, ranging from adaptive learning systems, through mobile apps, to social networking sites and – almost inevitably – MOOCs. Paradoxically, autonomy appears to flourish in some tightly restrictive contexts, while users of avowedly open platforms are seen to experience difficulty in learning to self-regulate.

David Little and Steve Thorne set the stage with a discussion exploring the evolution of language learner autonomy, from its origins in the era of self-access resource centers to its more recent instantiations in online (and offline) learning communities. Other contributors explore how autonomy can be exercised within adaptive learning systems, how adult learners in a teletandem exchange envisage metacognitive competences, how mobile apps support the emergence of autonomy among primary level language learners, and how collaborative language learners, using social media, demonstrate learner autonomy with an empathetic dimension. Finally, two chapters chart the challenges faced by autonomous learners in unsupported environments, whether on MOOC platforms, or using informal means.

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With the expansion of online language learning opportunities, language teachers and learners are presented with an increasingly diverse range of tools to facilitate language learning in various contexts. However, CALL researchers and practitioners often have limited knowledge about the effectiveness of online language learning on proficiency gains, primarily due to a lack of empirical studies. Despite the challenges in assessing language learning online, the editors of this volume believe the range of online language learning opportunities has brought new tools and methods to both strengthen assessment and inform pedagogical decisions in online language teaching. Technologies offer various ways to complement achievement and proficiency measures of language learning outcomes while allowing the assessment to be incorporated for the purpose of more effective learning (e.g., adaptive learning) and teaching (e.g., technology mediated dynamic assessment and teacher intervention). More effectively, and such developments can motivate researchers and practitioners to re-conceptualize the role of assessment in online language education.

Assessment Across Online Language Education examines these challenges that have emerged in online language teaching and learning, explores the new opportunities for language teachers and learners, and provides suggestions for future research on assessment and learning in online language education.

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