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A Book Review

by

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Book:

***Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching with Technology* Edited by Michael Thomas and Hayo Reinders**

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Thomas, M., & Reinders, H. (Eds.). (2010). *Task-based language learning and teaching with technology*. A&C Black.

Review:

The transformation from traditional face-to-face education into digital education has brought along new concepts related to online learning. As a result, new research areas have emerged. TBLT in the context of digital environments is one of those research areas which needs in-depth exploration. This particular work serves the need since it is a collection of studies from various areas along with TBLT such as intelligent CALL (iCALL), activity theory (AT), task design, computer-mediated communication (CMC), multimodality and virtual worlds.

The book, which is organized into two parts, is an attempt to form a bridge between TBLT, CALL and SLA. Part I is entitled as ‘Research on Tasks in CALL’ and explores the theoretical questions about L2 task-based research and their impact on computer-mediated communication (Chapters 2–6). Part II, ‘Applying Technology-Mediated Tasks’, includes four empirical studies on virtual worlds, e-portfolios, synchronous and asynchronous communication with learners from a range of disciplines, proficiency levels and contexts. Thereby, it offers multiple perspectives with a critical eye on the limitations and strengths. The book takes its starting point from the work of Chapelle (2000, 2003) and aims to construct a dialogue between TBLT and CALL in order to examine how the use of digital tasks can advance task theory and research. To this end, the chapter starts with exploring the interface

between TBLT and CALL. Throughout the chapter, Thomas and Reinders, the editors, focus on the relationship between tasks and CALL. They take a critical stance towards the gap in the research of TBLT within CALL context. The transformation of the focus of CALL research from mid-1980s to present is explored from multiple dimensions in parallel with the progression from pen-and-pencil to virtual modes.

In Chapter 2, Müller-Hartmann and Schocker-v. Dittfurth discusses the definition of task from the perspective of AT. They relate the two pedagogical features of a task, namely agency and activity, to the AT. Furthermore, they explore the gradual shift from computer literacy to electronic literacy and lastly to multi-literacies. They claim that multi-literacy is the most comprehensive concept which integrates human activity with social, historical and economic dimensions. Therefore, through the network-based communication, learners get in touch with learners from different countries and they need to develop inter-cultural communicative competence. This necessity points to the significance of designing tasks that empower learners in the event of international and intercultural communications. The rest of the chapter discusses TBLT from Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and AT. Thereby, the importance of interaction is highlighted in task design. In addition to the interaction, other factors such as providing task support through establishing clear guidelines, setting an appropriate time limit and making technical contributions are mentioned.

The third chapter sheds light upon psycholinguistic and sociocultural perspectives on TBLT within network-based environments. The concepts of negotiation of meaning and mediation are reflected as a distinction between them. In terms of online task design, information about the research within two different perspectives is provided. One of these perspectives claims that task design in CMC and face-to-face classrooms does not differ in terms of their orientation while the other argues that conventional approach to task design fails to account for the impact of online media on language learning. The rest of the chapter deals with the strengths and weaknesses of CMC and provides an overview of nine studies about TBLT in synchronous CMC. The chapter concludes with the finding that existing research provides extensive evidence for negotiation of meaning but there is little evidence for the focus on form.

The topic of Chapter 4 is Intelligent CALL (iCALL) which is defined as a sub-field of CALL that applies technologies from Artificial Intelligence (AI) to CALL. As indicated in the beginning of the chapter, research on iCALL has published outside the mainstream journals on CALL because of its multidisciplinary nature. Therefore, the research about the relevance of iCALL to SLA and TBLT in particular is scarce. To overcome this limitation, Schulze includes the selected research on iCALL and SLA in addition to the ICALL projects between 1978 and 2005. First, he presents a detailed explanation regarding the relevance of iCALL to TBLT. The most relevant four research areas about language teaching within iCALL are explored one by one with examples. The scope of the examples is not limited to computers as tutors and previous research on grammar or spell checkers, corpus-enriched learner dictionaries are shared. The writer highlights the fact that the difficulties in the computational processing of human languages lead to the slow progress in the widespread use of iCALL

systems. However, he concludes the chapter with his positive views about the future of iCALL on account of the improved modern technology.

In Chapter 5, Stockwell informs the reader about the two types of CMC, synchronous (SCMC) and asynchronous CMC (ACMC) modes. He underlines that in SCMC, there is a higher possibility of learners' producing less complex and less accurate output while in ACMC learners have time to compose and edit their messages. After a brief discussion on the features of CMC, the writer goes on explaining the concept of multimodality whose popularity is on the increase. Research findings of a study about the features of language produced by learners in the case of SCMC and ACMC are discussed. At the end of the chapter, it is emphasized that different modes of CMC have different strengths on the part of the learners in terms of lexical density, syntactic complexity and accuracy. Therefore, it is important that teachers consider the capabilities of the mode and the learners for successful implementation of TBLT.

The next chapter, Chapter 6, deals with the issue of language complexity in SCMC and the features of task design that promote linguistic complexity in SCMC. In that scope, first the term of 'complexity' and the ways of measuring it is explained by comparing the frameworks developed in previous research. Then, the findings of an empirical study which was conducted in the United States with learners of Spanish are presented. Based on the findings, it is suggested that opinion-exchange tasks in SCMC environments yields to more learner output and, therefore, more linguistic complexity.

The focus of Chapter 7 is a task design model for Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) in the context of distance learning courses. The chapter starts with explaining the three levels of the model and compares the findings of two pilot projects conducted with the Open University. Based on the findings, it is highlighted that tutor support is an integral point for successful implementation of language learning within VLE. Besides, having precise instructions and linear navigation are crucial features of online task design.

Chapter 8 explores TBLT from the perspective of teacher education. In that scope, the role of using e-portfolios in developing student teachers' TBLT competences is examined. The chapter is quite comprehensive since it covers topics such as the use of e-portfolios for teacher education, reflective practice, TBLT competences and standards-based model of task-based teaching competences. Following the textual information and literature review of the topics, the chapter goes on with a qualitative research conducted with pre-service teachers in Germany. The aim of the research is to find out how student teachers develop TBLT competence by using e-portfolios. Reflection videos, teacher diaries and e-portfolios are utilized for data collection and the findings indicate that student teachers are lack of theoretical background for TBLT and they cannot apply their knowledge into classroom practices. Therefore, it is suggested that a guided-reflection process is needed to increase TBLT competency development.

After the presentation of theoretical information about iCALL in the fourth chapter, Chapter 9 informs readers about an iCALL prototype for language learning, *Edubba*. The chapter is

based on Ellis' (2003) 'task vs. exercise' distinction and Long's (1996) attention to language forms and content. Throughout the chapter, instructional design principles of Edubba, educational advantages of using natural language processing to support authentic tasks in TBLT and technologically mediated linguistic interaction tools are discussed.

Chapter 10 focuses on multimodal literacy and draws on insights from a large-scale project which was conducted with pre and in-service teachers from Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States and Poland in 2008. The project centered on raising the multimodal awareness of the participants through telecollaboration. In that scope, a wider understanding of what telecollaboration is, what it offers and what it covers are examined and insights are shared.

In the last chapter, Motteram and Thomas discusses the past, present and future of TBLT. They refer to the three criticisms about TBLT which are *(i)* organizing the instruction around tasks is too restrictive, *(ii)* TBLT has cultural relativity and *(iii)* it is far from being possible to develop communicative competence through TBLT. They claim that digital technologies have the capacity to resolve these criticisms and adopt an optimistic future for the prominence of TBLT. They conclude that TBLT and CALL have a lot in common and the book provides a baseline for the future research in these combined areas.

The increasing developments in digital technologies points out the need for pedagogical online task design for language teaching. Therefore, this book touches upon an important issue in the literature by combining task-based instruction and CALL. Besides, it informs readers about a variety of topics related to digital technologies in education such as ICALL, Activity Theory, CMC, multimodality and media literacy. On the other hand, one limitation of the book is that it revolves around the topic for too long before presenting the critical parts, which may result in some distraction on the part of the reader.

References

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