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TEACHING REPORTS

A Task-Based Approach to Tablets and Apps in the Foreign Language Classroom

— Celestine Caruso and Judith Hofmann

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Abstract

Digital media not only shape our society and culture, but they also strongly influence approaches to teaching and learning in educational settings. In this teaching report, we present some examples of how to embed tablets and apps productively into classroom settings. We argue that the (English as a) Foreign Language classroom can profit from tablets and so-called story-making apps if they are combined with project- and problem-based learning, and, more precisely, with task-based language teaching (TBLT). If (future) teachers know how to design app-based tasks that meet the criteria of TBLT, they will in turn know one way of engaging pupils in authentic interaction in the foreign language while at the same time developing media literacy. We backup our hypothesis with some examples of how such tasks were designed in “Digital Media in the EFL Classroom,” a recurring seminar for future teachers at Cologne University (Germany).

Keywords

Task-based language teaching, tasks, product orientation, digital media, EFL-classroom, tablets, apps, teachers in training

Introduction

Most teachers and pupils are more or less constantly in contact with digital media, such as smartphones, PCs, tablets, etc. In fact,

[o]ver the past several decades, our culture has undergone a period of profound and prolonged media change, not simply a shift in technical infrastructure for communication but shifts in the cultural logistics and social practices that shape the way in which we interact. (Clinton, Jenkins & McWilliams, 2013, p. 7)

Especially for young people, communicative applications such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat etc. play a major role in their social lives. Current studies reveal that 92% of young people between 12 and 19 years of age (in Germany) use their smartphone daily, and most of them use their smartphone for surfing the web (JIM study, 2016). It seems unquestionable that young people are spending a lot of time in front of screens and that digital media have a deep impact on our every-day and social life. They function primarily as set cultural spaces which adolescents mentally and actively deal with

during their every-day lives, and which serve as guidance for both their adaptation to and acquisition of the world, their personalities and their concepts of living (cf. Theunert & Schorb, 2010, p. 250).

Taking into consideration the high exposure of digital media in the lives of young learners during their leisure time, the question might arise whether the classroom should rather be one of the few places where adolescents detach from their media lives: “You can’t get much more conventional than the conventional wisdom that kids today would be better off spending more time reading books, and less time zoning out in front of their video games” (Johnson, 2005, p. 157). At the same time, we have to ask ourselves whether it makes sense to keep up “the technology-free zone characterizing many schools” (Clinton et al., 2013, p. 4). One can even argue that by not including media education in schools, not only are we keeping the learners from acquiring techniques and skills to critically and reflectively use digital media in their daily lives, we are even depriving those learners who do not have the access to informal learning and media exposure in their free time from “catch[ing] up with their more highly connected peers” (ibid.). Thus, in the controlled pedagogical setting of educational institutions, digital media should be explicitly dealt with, in order to form young people into competent and critical digital media users instead of mere consumers. Here, media educators Theunert and Schorb argue that digital media are cultural techniques whose communicative and productive potentials for the creation of authentic spaces can be used in educational contexts (cf. Theunert & Schorb, 2010). It is this authenticity of digital media that makes these forms a credible medium for pedagogical purposes.

Actually, in the past, a similar debate was led concerning the use of films (and basically every genre of popular culture) in the classroom. However, numerous scholars and studies have shown that there are different ways in which films can be productively embedded into the (foreign language) classroom in order to foster intercultural competence and language skills (cf. Freit-

ag-Hild, 2016; Hofmann, 2017; British Film Institute, 2000; Müller-Hartmann, 2008, to name but a few).

Consequently, digital media education should not be excluded from the classroom: It would mean ignoring a major part of young people’s everyday lives and not preparing them for a responsible and critical engagement in new cultural practices. In addition, as we are going to point out in this paper, it would also mean ignoring a meaningful and relevant way to teach English as a Foreign Language (EFL) with a project-based and problem-based approach.

Why Tablets and Apps in the Foreign Language Classroom?

In 1993, technology critic Neil Postman claimed that “fifty years after the printing press was invented, we did not have old Europe plus the printing press. We had a different Europe” (Postman, 1993, p. 18, quoted in Warschauer, 1998, p. 760). To this, Mark Warschauer responded some years later “that 50 years after the computer was invented, we do not have old language learning plus the computer, but a different language learning” (ibid.). However, not only did the diversity of technical devices and role of technology in our society alter language learning (if we believe Warschauer), but they also altered the ways we learn in general (cf. Dezuanni et al., 2015, p. 7).

This new or different (language-)learning in a world where digital media are shaping society, culture and, consequently, education, does not mean that all learning needs to be digital, that suddenly school books, worksheets, or even teachers are obsolete, but rather that these digital media open new ways of (language-) learning: “It would be tragic if we allowed new media literacy practices to totally displace traditional print literacy practices, but refusing to engage with new media out of a misplaced fear of change would be equally tragic” (Clinton et al., 2013, p. 11). However, before integrating digital media like tablets and apps into the classroom, the teacher should ask her/himself the following questions (cf. also Schmidt & Strasser, 2016, p. 3):

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A Task-Based Approach *continued*

- Where can I embed digital media, and (in our case) tablets and apps meaningfully in the classroom?
- Where do they provide a surplus value?
- Which competencies do they foster which cannot be addressed with other materials such as worksheets or school books?
- Which learning arrangements and environments need to be created for a meaningful integration of digital media?

The purpose of digital media cannot be to digitalize analog material – there is no educational surplus value in simply using an iPad instead of a worksheet, that is, for example, to do a ‘fill in the gaps’ exercise. The teacher should rather reflect upon the question of what the chosen media and their digital tools are able to contribute to the classroom, where they can, for example, foster language learning while contemporaneously involving and fostering media literacy. One way to address the questions mentioned above will be described in the next paragraphs.

Complex Tasks as a Means for Problem-based and Project-based Learning

At the center of problem-based and project based-learning is the idea that learners are supposed to engage in real-world problems in order to foster competencies they need in their everyday lives (cf. for example, Stoller’s characteristics of project-based learning, 2006). This is also one of the objectives of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in Germany. Furthermore, there is a strong emphasis on output and competencies that can be measured. The combination of bringing real-world problems into the classroom and output-orientation is not easy to achieve. Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is “an approach to language education in which students are given functional tasks that invite them to focus primarily on meaning exchange and to use language for real-world non-linguistic purposes” (Van den Branden, 2006, p. 1). We suggest that TBLT as an approach to language teaching has a lot of similarities to project-based learning, such as having a defined, communication-based process and a product,

integrating many different (language) skills, or engaging with real-world authentic language (cf. Ellis 2009, p. 9 f. and Stoller, 2006). At the same time, tasks include a problem-orientation, as some kind of ‘disturbance’ which stands in the beginning of the tasks and needs to be solved, and through which a wholesome and rich learning environment can be created. This learning environment can be used for integrating digital media in a relevant and meaningful way into TEFL, starting as early as in primary school.

As a consequence, we have to ask ourselves what tasks for working with digital media have to look like in order to fulfil the quality criteria of a rich learning environment. In the past decade, researchers have already identified the potentials of technology for TBLT in the (English as a) foreign language classroom (cf. e.g. Schrooten, 2006; González-Lloret, 2007; Al-Bulushi, 2010; Thomas & Reinders, 2010). González-Lloret and Ortega (2014) argue that the digital world itself created new tasks, which are more or less embedded into the daily lives of adolescents and adults and which, in the context of English Language Teaching, can be used as authentic material. By definition, (pedagogical) tasks

- “involve communicative language use in which the user’s attention is focused on meaning rather than linguistic structure” (Nunan, 1989, p. 10);
- are “goal-oriented communicative activit[ies] with a specific outcome, where the emphasis is on exchanging meaning, not producing specific language forms” (Willis, 1996, p. 36);
- are “activit[ies] in which a person engages in order to attain an objective, and which necessitates the use of language” (Van den Branden, 2006, p. 4).

If tasks meet the described criteria, they will be able to foster complex competencies (cf. Hallet, 2011) as they ideally involve all language skills (i.e., reading, writing, listening comprehension, and speaking). Only in tasks that are learner-centered, problem-based and product/outcome oriented do we see the opportunity of a meaningful integration of tablets and apps in the EFL classroom. This task-based approach to language learning

with digital media formed the foundation of a seminar for teachers in training from Cologne University.

The Seminar “Digital Media in the EFL Classroom”

Seminars of the so-called Competence Labs focus on the connection between theory and practice for university students who aim at becoming teachers (henceforth referred to as teachers in training). The Competence Labs are a part of the “Zukunftsstrategie Lehrer*innenbildung” (which translates to ‘future strategy for teacher education’), a project based at Cologne University, Germany, which is a part of the “Qualitätsoffensive Lehrerbildung” (‘teacher training quality campaign’), a joint initiative of the Federal Government and the Länder that aims to improve the quality of teacher training. The program is funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research.

In the Competence Lab seminar “Digital Media in the EFL Classroom,” teachers in training have the possibility to develop tasks with the help of tablets and apps and to teach these tasks to pupils from different levels, either primary or secondary school classes, depending on their teaching degree. The class, which usually takes place as a three-hour project, is videotaped, serving as material for the teachers in training to reflect on their own roles and performance as teachers.

The aim of the seminar, which is a recurring course in the BA-Module “Teaching English as a Foreign Language,” is to address media literacy and competencies in principles of foreign language teaching. These combined literacies are supposed to enable the teachers in training to create complex app-based tasks (as opposed to exercises, which are traditionally less communicative, more

form-oriented, and do not have an individual learner product as their objective) that focus more on meaning, i.e., communicative competence and spontaneous, creative speech production, rather than on (grammatical) form.

What makes this seminar special is the fact that by connecting TBLT, project-based, and problem-based learning, the seminar works on different levels: The seminar itself can be regarded as a project the teachers in training are working on, with a defined, but individual outcome – the tasks and lessons for the pupils. At the same time, the teachers in training create a similar project for the pupils – the latter are supposed to work on different tasks with the help of tablets and apps and create an individual outcome, for example, an animated version of their own short story.

Suitable Apps and Teaching Ideas

For their lesson planning, the teachers in training used the three apps *Explain Everything*, *Book Creator*, and *Puppet Pals* (all free of charge in basic/test versions; for a regular use in the classroom, however, it makes sense to pay for the full versions), for both primary school and secondary school levels. In Germany, English language education starts in primary school. There are, however, variations in the starting grade in the different federal states, and the intensity and quality of English in primary schools also varies. In secondary schools, English is typically the first foreign language the pupils have to learn institutionally. The teaching ideas we will present here can thus be transformed to other foreign language learning settings. Depending on the learner level or age, both the complexity of the tasks and accordingly the range of app tools and functions can be varied.



Figure 1: Exemplary model of the seminar process “Digital Media in the EFL Classroom”.

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A Task-Based Approach *continued*



Figure 2 Teachers in training instructing pupils how to use the app *Book Creator* for the task “My favourite hobby”. The pupils made e-books about hobbies with the help of pictures, self-made drawings, written sentences/chunks and voice recordings. (Photo: Celestine Caruso)

The app *Puppet Pals*, developed by Polished Play, is a simple, yet creative, tool with which users can create short animated theatre plays or stories with the help of different backgrounds, self-made or pre-chosen characters, and recorded voice-over commentary. One example from a secondary school unit on “California” was the task to create a dialogue between two celebrities who meet somewhere in Los Angeles. It was an open task, as the teachers in training did not tell the pupils what the characters had to talk about. The products the pupils created were, consequently, very different, and ranged from longer dialogues with even funny twists to shorter exchanges that stuck more closely to previously provided scaffolding word-chunks.

With *Book Creator*, an app developed by Red Jumper Limited, users can create e-books or comics with the help of different tools and elements, such as pictures, drawings, self-made photos, image processing, and voice recordings (among others). In a primary school unit on “This is me,” for instance, the pupils used the app to create a digital book about their hobbies. They used selfies, drawings, or pictures provided by the teachers in training to describe their favorite activities to their classmates. Again, the products were different: More advanced learners were able to describe the hobby, how often per week they practiced it and so on, while others just mentioned a few hobbies in a row, hence practicing new chunks they learned (e.g. “My favorite hobby is...”,

“I like dancing/singing/playing football” etc.), without adding more details. Similarly, as in one of the classes both first and fourth graders were taught together, the first graders’ products consisted mainly of recorded word chunks combined with pictures that represented their favorite hobby, whereas the fourth graders, who were more advanced in the acquisition of written language, additionally produced written sentences describing their favorite activity.

Explain Everything, developed by Explain Everything sp. z.o.o., is a complex and versatile app and whiteboard tool that can be used to create short video clips explaining or visualizing specific subjects, topics, theorems, or phenomena by using drawings, images, image processing, and voice recording. When basic functions are utilized, *Explain Everything* enables similar products as *Book Creator* or *Puppet Pals*. However, the integrated video-processing tools enable a far more complex use. Pupils from primary school (fourth grade), for example, created a short presentation-video about their typical school day with the app by integrating simple images and voice recording. On the other hand, in a secondary school unit about global warming, pupils used the more complex functions of the app to create short videos about the causes and effects of the greenhouse-effect.

What is common in all three apps is the fact that the pictures, backgrounds, or images can be either pre-chosen by the teacher and stored or chosen by the pupils, who can browse through the internet (this can also be used as a teaching moment about copyrights and the dangers of plagiarism) or take pictures themselves (e.g. selfies, objects, freeze frames of scenes) with the integrated tablet-camera. The created products can be exported as project or video file and saved on the tablet or uploaded, shared, and sent via e-mail.

The three-hour teaching unit centered on a specific, curriculum-based topic for which the teachers in training had developed one task for each of the three different apps. After a short introduction to the basic functions of the apps, the pupils worked cooperatively in pairs or

groups of three and produced individual and creative learning outcomes, such as an interactive newspaper article, a promotion video about Sequoia National Park, or a short animated scene from Oscar Wilde’s *The Canterville Ghost*. Due to the fact that they worked in pairs or groups of three, the pupils engaged in collaborative language output through negotiation of the content as well as in the creation of the final products themselves. Finally, at the end of the unit, the pupils’ products were presented to the whole class (if the pupils agreed to do so).

Discussion

In our experience, already very young learners from first grade often brought some basic media competencies or at least experience with digital media, such as tablets or apps, into the classroom, which resulted in a seemingly easy and intuitive handling of the tablets. Nevertheless, instruction about functionality and the technical use of both tablets and the individual apps (e.g. how to save projects so that they can be viewed by and discussed with the whole class) are indispensable for successfully working on the tasks.

One common concern among the teachers in training while planning the teaching units was that they feared the pupils would be distracted by the tablets too much to actually work with them. This potential problem, however, could be solved rather easily by using the limited options mode, which restricts the use of the iPad to certain pre-chosen apps or disables certain functions. Also, it sometimes helps to provide a previously chosen range of images, characters, backgrounds, etc. for the pupils, in order to still offer them a choice for their individual ideas while reducing the time spent surfing the web and looking for suitable pictures (and, thus, reducing the risk of the pupils choosing inappropriate or copyrighted material).

Ideally, the task focused on a creative and authentic language production and outcome (i.e., the product that the pupils created with the app). The use of tablets and apps in the EFL classroom can, however, involve processes of language learning and creativity, only if the

conditions of a cooperative and open task are met (cf. Biebighäuser, Zibelius & Schmidt, 2012; González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014; Dausend & Nickel, 2017). We did have the problem that some teachers in training were not able to differentiate between open, product-oriented tasks and mere exercises and they thus created grammar units in which the pupils had only to fill in gaps. Such units, of course, are neither problem-based nor project-based or task-based, and leave no room for individual task-solutions and creative language use. Subsequently, it is vital to prepare the teachers in training well, to be a facilitator in teaching, and to help them with their expertise in teaching and learning methods (cf. Schmidt & Strasser, 2016, p. 5).

The quality criteria of tasks are well-theorized in TBLT literature (cf. for example Nunan, 2006, Ellis, 2009, Biebighäuser et al., 2012, González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014), and how these criteria are applicable for digitally mediated tasks has also already been discussed (cf. Biebighäuser et al., 2012, Dausend & Nickel, 2017). There is, however, usually a difference between the task that the teacher (in training) planned (i.e., task as workplan) and the task that is actually put into action (i.e., task in process or task in action, cf. van den Branden et al., 2007). Pupils influence the task in action, as they are actors in the classroom with their own ideas, beliefs, and perceptions that shape the interpretation of a task. At the same time, teachers (in training) influence the task in action, as they have to adapt it to current circumstances in the classroom and often have to improvise to meet the challenges of everyday life in schools: “[U]ntil the task is turned into action, it cannot be fully evaluated for its usefulness or effectiveness” (Cameron, 2001, p. 35).

Thus, in order to find out how digitally mediated tasks should be designed, we want to look at the quality criteria of the planned tasks as well as at those of the task in action (cf. also Samuda & Bygate, 2008, p. 65). In our seminar, we are going to analyze the tasks the teachers in training planned at three points in time. The task analysis is based on an analysis of math tasks by Blömeke, et al. (2006):

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A Task-Based Approach *continued*

- **Task analysis 1 (task as workplan)**
 - Objective potential and identification of task criteria
 - Material: worksheets; scaffolded, differentiated, or additional material developed by the teachers in training
- **Task analysis 2 (task as workplan)**
 - Intended potential of task criteria
 - Material: Questionnaire (pre) for teachers in training (who developed the material) and teachers (who usually teach the class).
- **Task analysis 3 (task in process / task in action)**
 - Actually realized task criteria in the classroom
 - Material: Questionnaire (post) for teachers in training, pupils' task outcomes, video recordings of the lesson.

This planned qualitative analysis of the tasks developed in the presented seminar aims at finding out which of the intended criteria of the planned tasks (task analysis 1 and 2: objective potential and intended potential) are actually realized in the classroom and which aspects of the analyzed materials (task analysis 3) were responsible for the success and/or failure (i.e., if expectations/goals were met) of the tasks. As the material is composed of various tasks from the past university terms and the ones to follow, the analysis will further address the question whether there are common denominators for the success and/or failure of the task which can be ascribed to the digital components of the task. With this evaluation, we hope to find out which criteria digitally mediated tasks should have in order to fulfill the intended aims. We will therefore try to develop a recommendation for designing digitally mediated tasks that work independently from quickly developing software and hardware, hence addressing a fused media/language teaching literacy.

We believe that if these criteria of Task-based Language Teaching are fulfilled, the use of apps in the EFL-classroom can foster complex competencies (cf. Hallet, 2011) that involve the interaction of ideally all

language skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking, and mediation), while at the same time improving media literacy. Due to their versatility, these app-based tasks can easily be employed from primary school to secondary school levels if they are adjusted to the pupils' needs and language levels. While working on their tasks, pupils can resort to their individual language skills and 'solve' the tasks accordingly. They can opt for a rather complex language product or a more basic version, depending on their language competencies. Hence, open, app-based tasks could be suitable for an inclusive classroom with diverse learner levels and competencies (cf. also Dausend & Nickel, 2017). The created products, i.e., the learning outcomes, do not only reflect the language level of the learners, but they are also unique creations. As authors of an easily shared product that can also be taken home, the pupils are taken as seriously in their roles as foreign language users as they are as active participants in the contemporary media discourse.

Furthermore, the pupils' products, as for example the videos, e-books, or interviews they created, can be presented to their fellow pupils (and teachers) at the end of class (which usually takes place via projector and sound) and do not (necessarily) involve an active presentation from the pupils. This possibility of presenting via digital tools is especially important for those pupils who are shy or hesitant in performing in front of the whole class, even if they are proud of their task outcome.

Conclusion

In our paper, we argued that it is vital to provide teachers in training as well as pupils with media competence, which cannot be taught in one isolated subject but should rather be regarded as an interdisciplinary aim of each subject. One possibility of integrating digital media and, more precisely, tablets and apps into the English as a Foreign Language classroom is through the principle of task-based language teaching. In particular, our presented examples of so-called story-making apps provide a suitable basis for authentic, problem- and project-based tasks that are focused on communicative aspects of lan-

guage. We argue that it is not (only or primarily) technical know-how that teachers need in the classroom, but an understanding that especially problem-based, open tasks help the learners produce creative outcomes. Thus, it is more of a conceptual understanding of which criteria tasks should fulfill. This understanding applies to almost every digital medium and is not restricted to the EFL classroom. And since digital media and technology are "ever-changing, not always predictable, and can take on many forms" (Hamilton et al., 2016, p. 433), this understanding is especially important. Considering the fact that inclusion becomes a more and more important aspect not only in German schools, but also in schools everywhere, working with tablets and apps has the advantage of individual approaches to the solution(s) of the tasks. According to definitions by Ellis (2009), Willis & Willis (2007) or Müller-Hartmann & Schocker-von Ditfurth (2011), Müller-Hartmann et al. (2013) and Dausend & Nickel (2017) in the German context, tasks should serve as stimuli for self-determined negotiations of meaning. Instead of focusing on specific linguistic forms, the pupils should choose from their individual language resources, which help them solve the task. It is this consideration of the learner's individuality that enables a differentiation of tasks in a heterogeneous classroom (cf. Dausend, 2014: 164f, Dausend & Nickel, 2017: p. 184).

In our context, we argue that digitally mediated tasks especially appeal to a heterogeneous group of learners, not only because their openness ideally triggers creative negotiations of possible solutions (which, as a 'by-product', involve language output), but because the task outcome can be produced with multiple tools and involves various channels of language perception and production. The apps can be used to scaffold complex materials or tasks by being multisensory themselves (work with texts, sounds, images, videos etc.), embedding additional (explanatory) material. Furthermore, both hardware and software can be modified so that they fit the (special) needs of the users, by, for example,

being able to read text aloud, magnifying objects, or enlarging the font.

We should, however, keep in mind that there still are many infrastructural problems to be solved and challenges to be overcome: Do tablets add to the financial problem of our educational system? Are schools able to provide a safe and stable WiFi network? Can a bias towards a provider of hardware be created by using a certain brand of tablets? Where can learning outcomes, videos, pictures, and materials be safely stored? How can privacy be maintained? How are risks of cyber-bullying minimized? What about copyright issues? And how can the clash of the curriculum demands, personal attitudes of the teachers towards digital media, and the resources of teaching teachers how to design digitally mediated tasks be addressed?

These concerns need to be taken seriously and solutions are not easy to find. Yet, it is a central task of schools and the educational system to provide rich learning environments of high quality that enable effective learning processes (cf. Schmidt & Strasser, 2016, p. 5). Consequently, the aim of using digital media in the (EFL) classroom cannot and will never be to completely substitute established methods of (language) teaching (cf. *ibid.*). Instead, we argue that we need to identify the most meaningful areas where the use of digital media actually provides a surplus value for teaching and learning. Digital media are always a means to an end, a catalyst for learning processes, and should not be used for their own sake (cf. *ibid.*).

Ideally, when planning teaching units, the starting point will be the teaching aims, and from there, we look at what kind of methods and media we can use to achieve these aims – and tasks for working with apps will naturally be among the pool of media and methods to choose from. Right now, however, we are still in the process not only of creating this pool of choices, but also of actually creating an awareness of the fact that digital media might be a part of the pool.

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A Task-Based Approach *continued*

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