

## Examining the Intersection between Task-Based Learning and Technology

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Less than two decades ago most of the activities in Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) were created with a “one-size-fits-all” understanding of how computers could enhance language learning. Across the board, the sole rationale for using technology, mostly computer-based, was that it was useful and motivating for learners. The obvious lack of a solid research base for such practice gradually led both CALL researchers to approach the use of technology in language teaching and learning more empirically. Only recently has the field of CALL begun to undergo self-evaluation (González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014), and researchers are now claiming that in order for the field to progress, it is necessary to look to SLA principles that make language teaching effective (Chapelle, 1998; Levy, 1999).

Several SLA scholars have recognized the potential of task-based language teaching (TBLT), and its associate task-based language learning (e.g., Long, 2009; Robinson, 2001; & Skehan, 1998) as a framework within which technology-mediated activities for language learning can be designed and organized (Chapelle, 2003; Doughty & Long, 2003). Notably, two task-related issues have received considerable attention by CALL researchers. The first of these is related to the various roles that tasks play in synchronous and asynchronous computer-mediated interactions aimed at facilitating language learning (e.g., Collentine, 2009, 2011; Kitade, 2008; Lamy, 2006; Yilmaz & Granena, 2010). The latter is related to the importance of task design in successful telecollaborations primarily in the service of intercultural communication and learning (e.g., Dooley, 2011; O’Dowd & Ware, 2009).

Notwithstanding this gradual and delicate synergy between the fields of TBLT and CALL, especially with respect to computer-mediated interaction, there remains the crucial but under-researched question of how to integrate new technological tools<sup>1</sup> and language learning tasks into a mutually effective whole with methods empirically validated by task-based research. Researchers have argued that language learning tasks mediated by new technologies can bring about profound, beneficial effects, such as encouraging learners to take risks and be creative while using language to make meaning; minimizing their fear of failure, embarrassment, or losing face; and most importantly, enabling language learners to meet other speakers of the language distantly, potentially leading to “transformative exposure to authentic language environments and cultural enactments, along with tremendous additional sources of input” (González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014, p. 4). However, in order for new technologies to be integrated into TBLT and for pedagogic tasks to benefit from the revolutionary nature of new technologies, there needs to be a comprehensive consideration of the tenets of TBLT and its application for technology-mediated language teaching and learning. Several benefits of CMC have been categorically reported in literature. These benefits include but are not limited to fostering negotiation of meaning, provision of linguistic modification and corrective feedback (Blake, 2000; Pallietieri, 2000), enhanced perceptual salience of forms, provision of processing and planning time, and an enduring visual trace (Lin, Huang, & Liou, 2013). These empirically

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<sup>1</sup> For a description of technological tools see Lew (2011).

established benefits should be considered holistically for integrating TBLT in CALL, particularly in computer-mediated communication (CMC).

The most important (re)consideration is in regard to a TBLT-informed definition of tasks in CALL. Over the years, CALL researchers have explored tasks with diverse understandings of what a task entails. This inconsistent conceptualization of a “task” not only hinders the generalization of research findings and replication, but also calls into question the internal validity and reliability of such empirical studies. Within the realm of CALL, Gónzalez-Lloret & Ortega (2014) identify a continuum of task definitions that range from the most general definition of a task as an “event that has coherence and unity, with a clear beginning and an end, in which learners take an active role” (Cameron, 1997, p. 346), to a popular definition of a task as a “goal-oriented communicative activity with a specific outcome, where the emphasis is on exchanging meaning, not producing specific language forms” (Willis, 1996, p. 36), to a more holistic, albeit general, definition of a task as “an activity in which a person engages in order to attain an objective, and which necessitates the use of language” (Van den Branden, 2006, p. 4).

By the same token, there has been some steady progress in integrating tasks in CMC. In that, two recurrent features common to virtually all discussions of tasks in the literature on L2 pedagogy, namely, goals and activity put forward by Pica, Kanagy, and Falodun (1993) has been widely used in task-based CMC research. Building upon Pica et al’s (1993) proposal, five key definitional features of a task in the context of technology and task integration are identified by Gónzalez-Lloret & Ortega (2014): (1) primary focus on meaning, (2) goal orientation, (3) learner-centeredness, (4) holism, and (5) reflective learning. Similarly, Doughty and Long (2003) arguing for an interdependence between technology and TBLT, stated that where technology provides a natural and authentic venue for the realization of the methodological principles of TBLT, the latter provides a rationale and pedagogical framework for the selection and use of technological tools. In other words, TBLT provides a viable approach to guide the selection and design of technology-mediated and enhanced language learning resources (Chapelle, 2003; Skehan, 2003).

Lastly, research in digital literacy is another line of literature that also urges a closer look into the interaction between and integration of technology and TBLT. This research branch primarily argues that the use of technology in language teaching promotes the development of digital literacies, which is recognized as crucial to language learning in the 21st century (Murray, 2005; Warschauer, 2006). Additionally, learning language via technology activates and demands different cognitive, attitudinal, social, and behavioral mechanisms from learning a language via face-to-face interaction (Chun, 2008). To conclude, examining the intersection of TBLT and technology can not only inform the use of technology for second language instruction, but also enhance and even drive further development of TBLT.

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