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Immersion Learning Activities: Developing Communicative Tasks in the Community

Abstract

This paper examines some out-of-class Portuguese language teaching activities for foreign students learning Portuguese at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Lisbon and their results in the learners' output. Even in contexts of immersion, students tend to focus only on class activities and not on community activities that involve face-to-face contact with native speakers. To change this situation, we have created a new subject, built on task-based language teaching, called Immersion Activities for the Portuguese Foreign Language Annual Course. We present the preliminary results of a study carried out with eighty students and twelve teachers, whose objective is to verify up to what extent this subject translates into a more effective learning of the language and if students' perceptions, at the end of the semester, regarding the learning outcomes, coincide or not with those of the teachers. From the results, it is possible to observe that the students' and teachers' opinions converge in the same sense: immersion activities provide a better development of students' communicative competence in Portuguese.

Keywords: immersion learning environment, out-of-class activities, task-based language teaching, Portuguese Foreign Language

Introduction

The goal of language teaching was always to prepare students for out-of-class uses of language, but the focus in language teaching is usually on classroom-based language learning. However, recent studies emphasize the importance of language learning outside the classroom, in different contexts, such as at home and in the community (e.g., Guo, 2011; Hyland, 2004; Pearson, 2004; Richards, 2015). It is important to consider the context in

which the language is used (Willis & Willis, 2007), and that students should be exposed to the characteristics of spontaneous speech since they have to be prepared for the real world: people who speak quickly, use abbreviations, vague language, that is, aspects that are often not addressed to in classroom situations.

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) provides language learning in real contexts of communication (Nunan, 2004). Thus, students understand that language varies according to the social context, purposes, and circumstances in which it is used. This approach proposes the use of tasks as the main component of language teaching as they create better situations to activate students' acquisition processes to promote the learning of an L2. Richards and Rogers (2001, p. 228) also suggest this since "tasks are believed to foster processes of negotiation, modification, rephrasing, and experimentation that are at the heart of second language learning."

On the one hand, the TBLT seeks to provide students with language learning from real contexts; the tasks have a clear pedagogical relationship with the communicative needs of the real world (Long & Crookes, 1992). Therefore, it is important to consider the social context in which the language is used and to make students aware of this social dimension. At the same time, it is also important to raise students' awareness of how language is used in these contexts. On the other hand, the TBLT leads students to work together to complete a task and gives them the opportunity to interact. It is thought that such interaction facilitates language acquisition as students have to strive to talk clearly and to make themselves understood (Larsen-Freeman, 1986).

Based on these assumptions, and to promote foreign students' contact with native speakers, we have created a subject, called Immersion Activities, for the Portuguese Foreign Language Annual Course. The tasks that students perform in this new subject take into account the social environment in which the language is used as they are placed in direct contact with native speakers, in the community. Learning is done through action. It is suggested that students acquire a communicative competence, which integrates different competences as language is conceived in terms of performance and appropriate behaviors, in the context of an interaction between individuals with a social purpose.

In this sense, we present the partial results of a study carried out with four A1 and four A2 level classes, in a total of eighty students and twelve teachers, in which a TBLT approach was adopted and out-of-class activities were performed as a complement to the usual classroom activities. At the end of the semester, we consider fundamental to verify in what way the students' beliefs coincide with those of the teachers, regarding the learning outcomes.

Therefore, students and teachers answered a questionnaire, whose results allowed us to perceive that their opinions are similar: this subject helps students to develop communicative competence in Portuguese.

Immersion Learning Activities (Out-of-class Learning)

We can define the immersion teaching mode as the delivery of a second language curriculum in an immersed foreign language learning environment to learners who have different mother tongues. In this mode, learners are completely immersed in the target language environment and they are stimulated to use it exclusively during the learning process and the social time. In this context of immersion, learners contact with the language in two ways: an informal one (they learn some structures and lexicon without formal teaching, only from the exposure to the language), and another more formal in-classroom situation way (learners are focused on the functioning of the target language, such as on syntax rules, for instance).

Using Portuguese for social interaction in immersion learning activities provides many opportunities for learners to maintain and extend their proficiency in Portuguese. The objectives of these out-of-class activities, guided by a teacher, may be acquiring specific knowledge, developing language skills or consolidating and systematizing previous learned knowledge in the classroom. Learners need to develop the ability to acquire information that is available in the two contexts: in the out and in-classroom ones (Field, 2007). Therefore, to enhance students learning, teachers should motivate them to devote more of their time outside the classroom to language learning purposeful activities.

The immersion learning activities give students the possibility to work with the target language in different contexts of use, in the community, interacting with native speakers to solve different tasks. There is evidence that exposure to authentic language and opportunities to use the target language in real situations of communication are fundamental to language learning that forms part of an immersion language learning experience (in-country where the language is spoken). As Hyland (2004: 180) says, “language learning is not limited to the classroom, but can take place at any time and in any place, including the home and the community.”

Out-of-class learning has been defined as any kind of learning that takes place outside the classroom and involves self-instruction (where learners deliberately plan to improve the target language and search for resources to help them do this), naturalistic learning (where

students learn mainly unintentionally through communication and interaction with the target language group) or self-directed naturalistic learning (where learners create or seek out a language learning situation, but may not focus directly on learning the language while they are in that situation) (Benson, 2001, p. 62).

Cortina-Pérez and Solano-Tenorio (2013, p. 168), distinguish two main modalities of out-of-class language learning: oriented (where the teacher provides the learners with opportunities to improve their communicative skills out of the classroom) and autonomous (where the learner himself decides which activities to be involved with to improve his communicative skills in the target language).

For this study, we have considered a definition that includes all the activities students perform out of the classroom with the goal of improving their language skills, including those which are prepared with the teacher and guided by him. Every functional out-of-class activities and exposure to the target language are decisive for developing fluency in language skills (Bialystok, 1981).

We are convinced that guided out-of-class activities help learners to:

- develop general linguistic skills;
- develop specifically speaking and writing skills;
- improve their cultural competence;
- challenge learners to interact more with the native speakers in their daily life.

Previous Research on Out-of-class Language Learning

Until 2000, only a few studies of out-of-class learning activities have been carried out. Bialystok (1978) was one of the first researchers to underline the importance of out-of-class strategies in language learning. She concluded that the exposure of the learners to the target language in out-of-class communicative situations help them develop all their language skills. Pickard (1996) interviewed a group of German students learning English in Germany about the out-of-class learning strategies that they used. He found that the students were most frequently involved in leisure activities connected to receptive skills, like watching TV, reading newspaper, etc., mainly because they were interested in them and they were easy to access than in activities involving productive skills. Hyland (2004) conducted a study with students in Hong Kong, analyzing their out-of-class English language learning activities. She found out that many students devoted considerable time studying and practicing English outside the classroom, but were more involved in receptive activities than productive ones. More recently, Cortina-Pérez and Solano-Tenorio (2013) carried out a study with a group of

native-Spanish students from Colombia to observe the effect of out-of-class language learning in communicative competence in English within a special English Foreign Language program. It showed that the participants in the program improved their communicative competence, mainly fluency.

Other studies have been undertaken with second language learners studying in the target language environment, such as the ones conducted by Suh, Wasanasomsithi, Short, and Majid (1999) and Brooks (1992), which investigated their out-of-class learning strategies, and identified watching television, going to the cinema, listening to music and inter-acting with native speakers as their major out-of-class activities. In the same learning context, Schmidt and Frota (1986) carried out a journal of Schmidt's learning of Portuguese which showed how he used the social environment to practice what he had learnt in class. Another example is the diary study kept by Campbell (1996), where she registered her attempts to learn Spanish and made the point that socializing with the teachers was crucial in her language development.

Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT)

Students learn in different ways: by watching and listening; by reflecting and acting; by reasoning logically and intuitively; by learning by heart and by visualizing. As a result, teaching methodologies also vary.

The TBLT has been developed through a better understanding of how languages are learned. This is an approach based on a series of ideas coming from the philosophy of education, theories of second or foreign language acquisition, empirical studies on effective educational strategies, and requirements from language learning process in a contemporary society.

This TBLT engages students in learning the language they use to perform tasks, to get information, to reflect and give their opinion. It proposes the use of tasks as the main component of language courses, because they present better conditions for activating acquisition processes and promoting language learning. Another reason is that the task "fournit un contexte, une raison "sociale" pour acquérir une langue" (van Thienen, 2009, p. 60).

Thus, a task can be characterized as a learning activity (or set of activities), whose goal is that students express meanings in a given situational context, which implies that they must learn, manipulate, produce or interact with the target language. It is the task that advances the student's system by activating the acquisition processes (Long & Crookes, 1993).

There are several types of tasks, but the purpose of each one of them is to solve a communicative situation through a spontaneous exchange of meanings, which has a relation with real life and the students' experience, arousing their interest and their involvement in learning (Willis, 1996; Bygate, Skehan, & Swain, 2001; Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004). The Council of Europe (2001, p. 218), in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, specifies this contextualization of tasks, this real communication situation that works as a motivating factor:

Communicative pedagogic tasks (as opposed to exercises focusing specifically on decontextualised practice of forms) aim to actively involve learners in meaningful communication, are relevant (here and now in the formal learning context), are challenging but feasible (with task manipulation where appropriate), and have identifiable (and possibly less immediately evident) outcomes. Such tasks may involve 'metacommunicative' (sub)tasks, i.e. communication around task implementation and the language used in carrying out the task.

In performing a task, students focus on meaning; its communication is motivated by a purpose, which must approximate the real use of the language (Pinto, 2011). "By engaging in meaningful activities, such as problem-solving, discussions, or narratives, the learner's interlanguage system is stretched and encouraged to develop" (Foster, 1999, p. 69). During the task, students engage in a communicative activity that closely reflects the language used outside the classroom or, as in the case of this study, that use the language in real contexts of communication. In this sense, the task implies an activity in which the student is involved in order to be able to fulfill a non-linguistic objective but for which he needs linguistic resources.

Therefore, the TBLT offers some alternatives for teachers. According to Skehan (1994), there are three main learning objectives for this approach: fluency (accuracy and correction in target language production), complexity (range of available and reproduced structures) and fluidity (capacity of production). Teachers must therefore use tasks that enable students to enrich their interlanguage in a natural and balanced way.

However, since the eighties, when TBLT attracted increasing attention from researchers and teacher educators, this approach has been subjected to criticism by some authors, defenders of the structural syllabus and traditional approaches, such as Bruton (2002a, 2002b), Seedhouse (1999, 2005), Sheen (1994), Swan (2005) and Widdowson (2003). The critics argue against the definition of task considering that "the criteria that are proposed as defining features of tasks are... so loosely formulated... that they do not distinguish tasks

from other more traditional classroom activities” (Widdowson, 2003, p. 126) or that it is impossible to predict the ‘activity’ that results from the performance of a ‘task’ and, therefore, tasks cannot serve as units for planning a language course (Seedhouse, 2005). However, the criteria defined by Ellis (2009, p. 223) for a language-teaching activity to be a ‘task’ are very clear and contradict the position of Widdowson:

1. The primary focus should be on ‘meaning’ (by which is meant that learners should be mainly concerned with processing the semantic and pragmatic meaning of utterances).
2. There should be some kind of ‘gap’ (i.e. a need to convey information, to express an opinion or to infer meaning).
3. Learners should largely have to rely on their own resources (linguistic and non-linguistic) in order to complete the activity.
4. There is a clearly defined outcome other than the use of language (i.e. the language serves as the means for achieving the outcome, not as an end in its own right).

So, the main goal of a task is to achieve a communicative outcome, but the goal of an exercise is to display correct use of a target feature (Ellis, 2014). In reply to the critic of Seedhouse, Ellis (2014, p. 107) argues that “[i]f the aim is to create contexts for natural language and incidental acquisition, then, arguably, prediction is not necessary.” The prediction only matters if the teacher’s intension is to use tasks to teach a structural syllabus.

Widdowson also criticizes the idea of the authenticity of the tasks, arguing that TBLT overemphasizes authentic language use, because “the classroom contexts within which language has usually to be learnt are totally different from those within which the language is used” (Widdowson, 2003, p. 112). However, we agree with Long (2016, p. 6), when he says that “work on approximations to real world tasks can be very realistic in genuine task-based LT classrooms or other instructional environments.” In fact, tasks have a clear pedagogical relationship with the communicative needs of the real world.

Another criticism against TLBT is about the grammar teaching. Sheen (2003) and Swan (2005) argued that in task-based language teaching there is ‘no grammar syllabus.’ In fact, what happens is just the opposite. As Ellis (2014, p. 109) claimed, “[a]ttention to grammar can be achieved in all the phases of task-based lesson.” In this approach, “linguistic items are dealt with, and dealt with in a more scientifically defensible manner than by the traditional synthetic syllabus” (Long, 2016, p. 17). One of the methodological principles of TBLT is the focus on form, in which, according to Long (1991), communication remains the central goal of the instruction and the main difference is the attempt to solve problems that

arise in the interaction, focusing the attention briefly on linguistic aspects. Focusing on form allows students to make a pause in the focus on the meaning to pay attention to certain grammatical forms that usually pose a problem for them. Focus on form (that includes notions such as consciousness-raising, form-focused instruction, or form-focused intervention) can also incorporate modified conversational interactions to make the message understandable by drawing students' attention to the relationships of form, meaning and function of the L2 (Pica, 2002).

In sum, despite all the criticism against TBLT, this approach does worry about the development of the students' communicative competence and about the focus on linguistic competence contextualized in the communicative purposes of the structure in question, which is suggested by the focus on form. TBLT enables students to share information in the target language with other colleagues, to interact by recreating real situations. Thus, the association of this approach with out-of-class activities can promote an enhancement of students' language skills.

The Study

Methodology

The present study intends to investigate the effect of the out-of-class activities, developed in the context of the curriculum subject Immersion Activities, on the students' language learning in a Portuguese language environment. The study considered the following research questions:

- (1) What perceptions did students and teachers have about using and practicing Portuguese outside the classroom, within the community, with native speakers?
- (2) Did these perceptions affect the performing of the out-of-class activities?
- (3) What is the effect of participating in out-of-class learning activities on Portuguese learners' communicative competence?
- (4) In what sense can the Immersion Activities favor the teaching and learning in the articulation between language and culture?

During the semester, students participated in out-of-class activities (32 hours/semester – 2 hours per week), supervised and guided by a teacher. In this curriculum subject students performed activities such as: visiting traditional markets (interaction with sellers), visiting museums (interaction with guides; contact with different aspects of Portuguese culture), in town peddy-papers with specific goals, going to the shopping center (interaction with sellers in the different sectors of trade—clothing, bookstores, etc.), interacting with other students at

the university (doing surveys about students' routines, for instance), and going to a tourist office (asking for places, directions, public transports, etc.). The main goal of each activity was always to develop receptive and productive language skills as well as acquire cultural knowledge—contents they had previously learnt in class. Every activity has a tab with all the information about it, as in the example shown in Figure 1.

“Figure 1 near here”

In order for a communicative task to succeed, it is necessary to select, balance, activate, and coordinate the appropriate components of all skills needed for planning, execution, control/evaluation and remediation of the task in order to successfully carry out the communicative purposes (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 159). In this sense, every activity is previously prepared in the classroom. Teachers here have a crucial role too. The way they act is determinant for students' motivation, interest, and implication in the activity. Therefore, teachers should maximize learning opportunities and provide the maximum opportunities for students' participation, as well as foster cooperation among them (Richards and Rodgers, 2001; Brown, 2000). However, there are still other factors to take into account, such as language learning directed to its uses in social context, control of learning, interaction, promotion of communicative activities, student autonomy, the integration of new skills and knowledge (Wajnryb, 1992), and well-defined objectives (Scrivener, 2005) of the activity being prepared.

At the end of the semester, we applied a survey to all students ($N = 80$) who participated in the study (A1 and A2 levels) and their teachers ($N = 12$). A convenience sampling was adopted in this study. The survey consisted of 20 sentences to be classified in a Likert scale and it investigated several different domains including information on the students' perceptions regarding the learning outcomes, attitude during the tasks (collaboration, interaction, etc.), use of languages (mother tongue, Portuguese, other foreign languages) and perceptions regarding task-based learning in out-of-class activities. This methodology allowed us to obtain data from students' performance during these out-of-class activities, to compare them with teachers' perceptions, and, consequently, to do a reflection on the effectiveness of these activities.

Findings and Discussion

Students' and teachers' perceptions regarding the learning outcomes. First, we aim to find out the students' and teachers' perceptions about the effectiveness of using out-of-class activities, involving interaction and negotiation of meaning with native speakers, in the improvement of their communicative competence.

“Figure 2 near here”

As we can see in Figure 2, students and teachers agree and strongly agree that the out-of-class activities and the consequent direct contact with native speakers globally help students improve their communicative competence. This is because students interact by seeking mutual understanding, making questions of clarification or confirmation of what the native speaker said, or even verifying their own understanding. Nevertheless, teachers are more confident in this improvement than students are, since 20% are undecided and 8% disagree. We think that this difference in results lies in the fact that students are not used to these more naturalistic ways of learning, which involves face-to-face contacts (see Wu Man-fat, 2012), and, therefore, they see the work developed in the classroom as more effective for language learning.

However, during the out-of-class activities, students contact with different situations of communication developed their ability to learn the Portuguese language in these varied contexts. In this point, we fully agree with Cortina-Pérez and Solano-Tenorio (2013), considering that students' communicative competence would develop more deeply if they had more opportunities for interaction in a variety of out-of-classroom contexts, thus having more opportunities for natural exposure to the target language (Ellis, 1994).

“Figure 3 near here”

Figure 3 shows us that students' and teachers' perceptions are once more in the same line, but, again, teachers are more aware of students' abilities to learn the language in specific contexts of communication. These interaction activities expose students to different input provided by native speakers and their colleagues, as well as foster output production during the interactive act. We agree therefore with Swain (2000) when she states that input and output together play a significant role in the L2 acquisition process. We verified that among the roles provided by the interaction, one is used to give students the input while the other fosters the use and practice of the L2 through the production of output. That's why students

develop their ability to effectively learn the uses of language in different situations of communication for the L2 is introduced in a holistic way with the purpose of communicating meaning constantly. Studies show us (see Luan & Guo, 2011) that through the immersion learning context, the students' language ability, especially their ability to use the language, can be greatly improved.

Linked to the previous question, we wanted to know how students and teachers perceive the ability of the formers to use the language in these different contexts, applying all the linguistic knowledge learnt in-class.

“Figure 4 near here”

In this case, there's proximity in the answers given by students and teachers, as we can see in Figure 4. Most of them consider that, during the out-of-class activities, students use the specific structures and lexicon for each situation that they acquired in the classroom. These results show us that the guided out-of-class activities are more effective in the language learning than the self-instruction outside the classroom, as shown by Benson's study (2001), where learners report a sense of discontinuity between what is learning within the classroom and the experience of expanding it outside. In fact, “what they are doing in these activities is activating and applying what they know already” (Field, 2007, p. 34).

In the same sense, data show that teachers and students believe that these activities help students to improve their levels of correction and fluency. The percentage of answers is very similar to those of the previous question (see Figure 5), which confirm that the participants in the study are aware of the positive learning outcomes that they achieve by participating in the out-of-class activities. This leads us precisely to the study presented by Knight (2007), in which the author demonstrates a relationship between using the language out-of-class and learner proficiency in the L2, which confirms the influence of out-of-class activities in the student's language proficiency.

“Figure 5 near here”

Tasks that students perform consider the social environment in which the language is used and its culture as they are placed in direct contact with native speakers and are guided in the discovery of Portuguese culture. Learning is done through action, through the use of language

in real contexts of communicative interaction and through the exploration of diverse cultural aspects.

“Figure 6 near here”

The data show that, in this particular aspect, the majority of teachers and students “strongly agree” and “agree” that the out-of-class activities allow students to develop their sociocultural knowledge too (see Figure 6). We consider that these activities lead students to understand that the language is used with a social purpose, in which language and culture are inseparable. Therefore, we think it is essential to focus on alternative methodologies to traditional teaching that take into account the social and cultural context in which the language is spoken. Many studies carried out cover the teaching of language-culture and intercultural issues as an important perspective in the teaching of foreign languages (Kramersch, 1993, 1998; Moran, 2001; McConachy, 2017).

One of the goals of the activities is to get the students to know more about the world they come from and the world and the culture of the target language, developing their intercultural awareness. It is not only a matter of guaranteeing students the ability to master the language, but rather to help them form their linguistic and cultural identity, based on the principle of otherness; to develop their capacities through these diverse experiences, using other language and knowing another culture. As culture is a complex concept, several approaches are being used to seek to better integrate this topic in the classes of Portuguese as a foreign language, trying to value all the cultures present in class and compare them with the Portuguese. The students’ and teachers’ perceptions in this matter are pretty much the same as is the percentage obtained in the two groups (see Figure 7). So, we can deduce that these activities also promote the development of students’ intercultural awareness.

“Figure 7 near here”

Currently, language teaching should generally enable students to intervene in both linguistic and intercultural terms so that they become social agents in continuous interaction with their colleagues and all the community.

Students’ and teachers’ perceptions regarding students’ attitudes during the tasks. The perceptions change when participants are asked about the willingness and

spontaneity to communicate in Portuguese. Again, teachers think students become more spontaneous and willing since the majority strongly agree (46%) and agree (46%). However, students are more divided in the answers, as we can see in the Figure 8. As for most of the students, this kind of activities is new, so they do not feel so comfortable speaking in a public context with native speakers. This can be due to individual and social factors (Hyland, 2004) as well to the exposure to different methodologies of teaching and learning. So, teachers in this case have a crucial role in helping them, they “should further foster the positive beliefs such as a high level of motivation and implementation of popular activities” (Wu Man-fat, 2012, p. 47). Furthermore, immersing students in the target language helps them use it more independently and more spontaneously.

“Figure 8 near here”

Related to this topic, but with different results, is the question about the interaction with native speakers while doing the tasks. These activities promote the interaction of students with native speakers, giving them the opportunity to learn Portuguese through a social use of the language, since this approach provides students with the necessary skills to perform tasks in a real context of communication. Even students, who do not feel comfortable to interact with strangers in public, seem to strive for it (see Figure 9).

“Figure 9 near here”

In this case, the majority of students and teachers consider that students do make an effort to interact with native speakers during the accomplishment of the tasks. As the activities are followed by teachers, students feel more guided by them during the tasks and the interaction is mainly controlled. It is in spontaneous situations of communication that they reveal greater difficulties. Some previous studies reveal that students prefer receptive activities than productive ones (Yap, 1998; Littlewood & Liu, 1996). However, in these particular out-of-class activities, as they have to interact with native speakers to accomplish the tasks, they strive for it, even they need the teacher support.

With this type of activity, we also want to help students feel more comfortable when they communicate in Portuguese with native speakers, which is not always evident, and to improve their ability to communicate effectively, in or out of the classroom.

Students’ and teachers’ perceptions regarding the use of languages. As there are many students of the same country attending the language courses, we consider it important to understand up to what extent they use other languages other than Portuguese, including their mother tongue, in the performing of tasks, as this may affect the desired development of their competence in Portuguese.

“Figure 10 near here”

“Figure 11 near here”

The results show us that students and teachers have different perceptions regarding the use of other languages during the tasks (see Figure 10 and Figure 11). Teachers consider that students often use their mother tongue to interact with colleagues from the same country or with the same mother tongue and also use another foreign language to talk with other colleagues. One of the reasons could be related to the origin of the majority of our students: 60% are Chinese. Their interaction in the mother tongue is a reality. However, students in their responses seem not to agree with the teachers’ position—only 7% strongly agree and 38% agree. And for the first time, there is a high percentage of students that strongly disagree with the question. Students do not have the perception that they often use their mother tongue, or they hardly assume it, as they know that the language they should be using during the activities is Portuguese. Another possibility is advanced by Hyland (2004). She suggests that it would be embarrassing for Chinese students to talk to each other in other language than Chinese.

We have similar results with the use of other foreign languages; however, in this case, students are more aware of using it than the mother tongue. Probably, they see the other foreign language, mainly English, as a language they often use to communicate with teachers and colleagues when there are gaps in Portuguese that need to be filled. In these situations, English establishes bridges with Portuguese.

“Figure 12 near here”

Comparing the use of other languages and of Portuguese during the tasks, data confirm the students’ perceptions regarding the use of the latter as the main language during the tasks (see Figure 12). There is a significant difference between teachers and students if we see the first category, “strongly agree,” that registers a gap of 23% between the two groups. Even the majority of teachers who “strongly agree” and “agree” in this question are not as

peremptory in their evaluation as students are. We can infer from the data that, according to both groups, Portuguese is in fact the main language that students use with their colleagues during the tasks, not excluding, however, other languages that can help support the communication between them.

Students' and teachers' perceptions regarding task-based learning in out-of-class activities. Group tasks involve a constant share of ideas and knowledge to be satisfactorily completed. That is why one of the questions of the survey was about the students' collaboration during the tasks. We wanted to know if the students collaborated with the other members of the group in the performing of the tasks, that is, if in addition to the sharing of ideas and knowledge they had effectively collaborated in the resolution of the different stages that led to the accomplishment of the objectives of each task.

Figure 13 allows us to verify that students collaborated with their colleagues during the activities, as they and their teachers mostly “strongly agree” and “agree” in this question. As we can observe from the data, this kind of learning was very enjoyable to the students, since it enabled them to interact with their colleagues in order to collaborate in different learning situations, in the construction of their knowledge. Students, as a team, working in a collaborative system, will improve their communicative competence and will be able to reproduce this knowledge later in other real situations of communication (Long, 2016).

“Figure 13 near here”

One of the characteristics of this type of tasks is to involve students more actively in their accomplishment. Therefore, we want to see if they actually had a dynamic participation and felt motivated during their performances. Analyzing Figure 14, we can observe that teachers and students have different perceptions. Teachers are more convinced of the dynamism and motivations of their students, as all of them respond “strongly agree” (23%) and “agree” (77%).

“Figure 14 near here”

Motivation is intrinsic to the student, but sometimes it must be triggered by the teacher, through interesting, stimulating strategies and, above all, it has to be compatible with the students' culture. Factors such as inhibition, self-esteem, accepting risks, tolerance of

differences, are some of the characteristics that teachers must consider in order to help students overcome problems that are an impediment to their language learning in a different context. However, most students (36% responded “strongly agree” and 44% – “agree”) felt motivated and dynamic in the accomplishment of the tasks. The diversity of the tasks that the students had to perform was also a motivating element, because it broke some of the monotony and repetition of the activities to which they were exposed in the classroom. Any student needs to be motivated to learn, because monotony eventually leads to dissatisfaction, and so change and diversity is necessary. Effectively, task-based language learning allows students to become more motivated, more active, and more responsible for building their knowledge, contrary to the passive tendency to which they are usually submitted in some classroom contexts. As Nunan (2004, p. 15) says:

[B]y using “task” as a basic unit of learning, and by incorporating a focus on strategies, we open to the students the possibility of planning and monitoring their own learning, and begin to break down some of the traditional hierarchies.

The development of communicative competence is related to the ability of students to be able to interpret and use a greater number of linguistic resources, either in written or oral form, in an appropriate way in diverse situations of interaction, being them formal or informal. For a better use of the language, students should be able to reflect on aspects of the language in real situations of communication, namely using knowledge acquired through practice and linguistic analysis to expand their capacity for reflection and increase their ability to use the language in its different possibilities of use.

“Figure 15 near here”

In this sense, we would like to understand if students, with the out-of-class activities, would be more aware of their language knowledge and their learning evolution, and what the perspective of their teachers might be, too. The data show (see Figure 15) that in this particular case the majority of the students think they can evaluate the development of their language learning better, with 43% of them ticking “strongly agree” and 31% “agree.” Teachers are not so optimistic, as 23% are “undecided” and 8% “disagree.” However, we found a majority (53%) agreeing with the question and 15% strongly agreeing, which reveals in

some way that they also believe that these activities help students be more aware of the evolution of their language learning.

Therefore, we believe that these activities more focused on students make them more active and more aware of their own learning, which will be even more significant if the activities are related directly to their experiences, interests, and needs. We consider that learning a foreign language must be adapted to different contexts, to the potentialities and the communicative needs of the students, allowing them to consciously interact in the construction of their knowledge, inside and outside of the classroom, in a collaborative way, which will foster their autonomy and spirit of reflection (Woodward, 2001).

Conclusions

The results suggest that teachers and students agree that task-based learning offers the ideal conditions for the development of interaction and cooperative learning in out-of-class activities even though the students' linguistic competence is not high (A1 and A2 levels). Students feel motivated to participate and interact, and they do not feel uncomfortable during the accomplishment of the tasks.

The results show that the participation of the students is in fact stimulated and that they feel more motivated and interested in using Portuguese during the tasks. With out-of-class activities Portuguese is learnt in a variety of contexts and the meanings attached to the use of Portuguese outside the classroom vary within these contexts. The present study demonstrates that these activities encourage students to expand their language experience to the outside of the classroom. An out-of-class activity can increase students' exposure to Portuguese in existing and familiar contexts.

Their conscious attention to Portuguese use in the real world can also increase students' language ability and knowledge about Portuguese culture and society. It is worthwhile for educators in similar PFL environments to implement these purposeful out-of-class activities as a means of promoting Portuguese language awareness and enhancing the learning of Portuguese in their local contexts. It is also important to note that this part of the research evaluates the perceptions of teachers and students regarding task-based learning in out-of-class activities, and in some way the students' performance. However, further investigation would be necessary to provide "evidence of the language outcomes and of the subject matter achievements" (Zydatib, 2012, p. 28).

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