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STUDENTS' ETHICS IN TASK-BASED LEARNING DURING GROUP WORK[1]

Abstract: The importance of knowing a foreign language in the 21st century entails global and cultural approach, i.e. it implicates the importance of developing, spreading and balancing Foreign Language Teaching (FLT) in the global aspect. As such, this paper investigates two major areas of learning: 1) Task-Based Language Learning (TBLL) and 2) group work activities and students' ethics when conducting activities. The analysis of the collected data made it possible to identify the factors promoting or hindering English Language Learning (ELL) achievements via TBL; to understand the role of collaborative work; to analyze EL problem areas; and to propose practical suggestions in order to improve the quality of Foreign Language Teaching (FLT) and the 21st century general education. This paper is significant as it leads to the recommendation that Foreign Language Teaching and Foreign Language Learning processes need to emphasize TBLL, group work activities, problem solving skills, and the ability to apply global cultural knowledge in dealing with the 21st real-life issues.

Keywords: Foreign language teaching, Task-Based Language Learning, students' ethics in group work.

INTRODUCTION

The new era of FLT is full of notions that sometimes may be confusing. Notions, such as *approach* and/or *method*, *exercise* and/or *task* and/or *activity*, *mistake* and/or *error*, *use* and/or *usage* are some of them. When discussing *task* and/or *exercise*, Ellis (2014: 107) proposed these definitions: "an 'exercise' in-

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volves text-manipulation of some kind (e.g. filling in gaps in sentences; performing a scripted dialogue; substituting words in a model sentence/dialogue). In contrast, a 'task' involves text-creation (i.e. learners have to use whatever means they have to process input or to create their own utterances in order to achieve the outcome of the task)."

Willis (1996), Ellis (2003), Lee (2000) consider the 'task' as an activity for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome, as an interactive classroom activity, or as an activity that is primarily focused on meaning. In addition to the task definition, Willis & Willis (2007: 1) have pointed out that a Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is "the most effective way to teach a language [is] by engaging learners in real language use in the classroom" (which is conducted by TBLT), while Nunan (2004) says that TBLL deals with language learning in a natural way, in pairs or group work, in which the students are allowed to share ideas, i.e. TBLT includes students to work together in order to accomplish a task.

Indeed, TBLT is also tightly related to FL teachers. Scrivener (2011: 393) claims that "teachers are learners who learn about language, methodology, peoples' lives", that is, if people learn a foreign language they learn about a foreign language, a foreign culture and this includes universal societal values, which also includes respect towards diversity. Based on Scrivener's claim about foreign culture, this paper analyses two international FL teachers' standpoints, TBLT and group work activities at the Faculadade de Letras, University of Porto (FLUP). This could also contribute to harmonizing *glocal* (GLObal and loCAL) teaching/learning standards, helping teachers and learners to make fully informed teaching/learning choices. The 21st century students seek to gain more knowledge about 'glocal' societal values, they are also eager to understand (and to apply) the 21st century learning skills with confidence. The aim of this paper is to examine the level of students' ethics when dealing with task-based activities, when there are more interactions in class, with more individual learner-focused activities or when collaborating with others. Knowingly, as in Ellis (2003), TBLT's aim is to focus on students' interest, and getting the meaning across. As it is primarily concerned with meaning, it also suggests that TBLT activities can help students use the language even outside the class, become more confident in language usage in terms of the standards of the 21st century society. All these can be successfully conducted if appropriate activities are involved, which may include creativity, i.e. creative tasks, problem solving, classifying (as ordering, for example), then comparing and discussing.

Hence, this paper stresses that group work activities and TBLL are based on cognitive constructivism. According to Piaget (1971), cognitive constructivism is meaningful learning that requires learners to construct knowledge, not to receive it. When dealing with Foreign Language Learning (FLL), it is known that

it is the product of an (easy) integration of what is already known and simple new thing, which usually starts with visuals and listening, followed by a complex integration of the new vocabulary. It is certainly followed by new FL knowledge and other more complex learning skills such as reading, writing, communicating, debating, and/or arguing. This also involves higher level of thinking – critical thinking, cooperation, collaboration, as well as creativity and the use of a richer FL grammar repertoire. In addition to FLL, Task-Based Learning (TBL), group work and collaboration depend on a higher level of students' intellectual control among which collaboration is the most well established predictor in receptive and productive skill. These are also supported by Ellis (2014) who identifies four characteristics of the task.

1. The primary focus is on message.
2. There is some kind of gap.
3. Learners need to use their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources.
4. There is an outcome other than the display of language.

These four characteristics are in line with Ellis's (2003: 16) claim that "a task is intended to result in language use that bears a resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world". Based on this, TBL and working in groups means the ability to learn more Foreign Language (FL) information in every aspect: new vocabulary, new culture, new places, while simultaneously collaborating, processing new ideas with friends, and sharing ideas in a well-established classroom atmosphere. From linguistic and pedagogical points of view, this paper deals with the most active students in conducting the group work activity, or with the ethical issues when conducting a group work in TBLT. Various studies – Nunan (2004), Ellis (2003), and Willis (1996) – support the view that group work capacities tapped by TBL are important in explaining FLL. Still, the role of group work has been investigated in the TBL domain, but it is less clear in the ethical domain. It is obvious that there is a link between Task-Based Learning (TBL), group work in FLL and the ethical issues that contribute to FLL and students' cultural development. Moreover, it is clear that 'better' student's contribution is of importance on one hand, but if a 'weaker' student, on the other hand, does not do the work since the 'better one' is the 'doer' in the group, further steps need to be taken. Furthermore, it is difficult to 'weight' ethics in FLL, in group work, and it is difficult to 'weight' students' responsibilities within the task. Therefore, this paper deals with students' participation in ELL, with the focus on students' ethics while conducting a task, and their competencies in ELL, in both fluency and accuracy domain.

In order to examine the relation between group work activities, TBLT and ethics, as well as students' FLL capacities, the study emphasises these issues: 1) To what extent do group work activities help 'quiet'/'weaker' students

to become 'noisier'/'better' (with more confidence)? Are group activities direct predictors of FL/English speaking?; 2) How much does students' ethics in FLL influence students' self-expression?

METHOD

A total of nine General English classes were observed in November 2016, at the University of Porto, in Portugal. An average of twenty-five percent of the students in each class were non-Portuguese students, i.e. they were mobility students (e.g. Japan, Russia, Bulgaria, Poland, Ukraine, Mozambique, South Africa, Honduras, Peru, Brazil, Germany, Morocco, Vietnam, Taiwan, etc.). The research included classes of different knowledge levels, taught by different teachers, B1, B2 and C1 level. The average number of students in each class was fifty in whole class, while 25 students were present in tutorial classes. The teaching/learning material included books, handouts, copies, Power Point presentations, listening activities, writing, debates, namely different teaching/learning material intended for practicing all the skills needed for the FLL.[2]

Findings

The average number of students in whole classes was 43, while there were 25 students in tutorial class. There were 3 whole classes observed, which resulted in 26 group work observations and 30 groups in tutorial classes. In a nutshell, there were 56 groups (five students in each group) observed.

It is evidenced that the performance of group work activities and TBL keep FLL active and accessible to each student (Nunan 2004; Ellis 2003; Willis 1996). Still, it cannot be discussed about FLL via TBL and group work in a dichotomous style (black or white, present or absent), as there is always something in-between: the shifts from individual work to pair work, or group work, for example. Concerning working in groups, the observations show that TBLL is somehow 'blur'. The tasks were always (somehow) controlled by someone who was more active, more confident in FL speaking, i.e. by someone who was more executive within the group. On the other hand, the 'quiet' students' work, their success in language learning, was not so easy to distinguish in case they

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[2]While the paper had the same broad objectives about TBL and group work activities, both researchers developed their own specific classroom observation system. This specific design was important, since the research aimed to observe FL classes from different points of view, and remark whether they differ markedly. These observations were considered to be meaningful, as they took into account cultural differences between the two researchers, and the host institution FLUP. The observations were filled in by the researchers themselves, so as to build up a more complete/detailed picture of the students learning environment. Since the two researches and different cultural background, the point was to give them space to conduct observation according to their own research plans and points of view.

were not asked. However, mutual respect of uniqueness and diversity of students learning styles was evidenced in every class, i.e. in every group. The respect towards mobility students (who seemed more quiet, suggesting that they were used to have different learning styles comparing to the host students), was clearly above all. Language barriers for some (mobility) students showed to be the main obstacle in group work in FLT classes, although the teachers tried to provide fair grouping, all-inclusive environment, and promote equal sharing of classwork.[3]

The observations show that students can be divided in two groups, as Ehrman and Oxford (1989) point out: judging and perceiving students (in our case when working in groups). Moreover, they claim that open learners (perceiving) sometimes do better than closure-oriented (judging) learners in developing fluency, which is also the case with the observations: nine observations show that the quiet students (judging ones), if asked to respond, their language accuracy and fluency *did* differ from the perceiving students. This difference was detected in the range of vocabulary, the use of wrong lexemes, grammar structures, sometimes even basic grammar mistakes such as omitting 's' in the third person singular in present simple tense, etc.

Listening activities – The 'quiet' students did not perform better in these activities. They were found to possess a poorer vocabulary which was an indicator that those students would try to get the meaning from the better ones. They were more anxious in class and less fluent in speaking activities.

The observations are also in line with Willis (1996), when discussing conditions about learning a FL: exposure to the target language, opportunities to use the language to do things, and motivation to use the language. Based on these conditions it could be discussed as follows.

1) **Exposure to the target language** – all observations evidence the introduction of topics and English language usage in non-threatening learning atmosphere, and in a very friendly approach. The teachers always gave the students a reason to communicate. Although sometimes it seemed that it was not a real communication, the observations showed that still it was language practice in the classroom.

2) **Opportunities to use the language to do things** – in group work activities (usually five in each group), the students could collaborate with each other. The teachers tried to make sure that their classes were inclusive, although it did not mean that it was always easy: Three observations show that when working in groups, some students were too quiet. In these cases, the 'doer', the most active student, tried to finish the whole task alone.

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[3]If the students (mobility students from Brazil) had FL difficulties, the other more active students would explain things in Portuguese. This also reveals that their first language was often evident in FL group work activities.

3) **Motivation to use the language** – The teachers provided the students with more challenges in FLL. Plan B was always in the teachers' pockets (if needed, especially for fast finishers). Teachers walked around in class and monitored. They were supervisors, checked what the students were doing. It was an informal assessing while monitoring, and the teachers could get the idea what was going on in the class. Praising the students and the group was always evident, which also lead to students' motivation to further learning.

The observations also verify that enthusiasm was present in both parties: teachers and students. The part of the enthusiasm that teachers possessed included the enthusiasm of a) teaching – being a professional person in his/her field, i.e. in FLT – always knowing *when* to help, *what* and *how* to do it; and b) learning, as he/she always took the role of the learner; he/she was always an active learner alongside the students. In this way he/she was able to identify each student's difficulties and reasons for those difficulties, as well as to understand the extension of each student's learning.

Writing – Observations also assessed students' critical thinking while writing. In one of the activities, the teacher asked the students to write down eight sentences in the past tense and present perfect. Only one should be untrue. The students were instructed to think about their life experiences before writing. On average, it took 6 minutes to finish the whole sentences, while all the participants finished their writings within 10 minutes. It started as a 'solo' activity, followed by pair work (when students had to check each other's writing as a speaking activity, in pair work). Then in groups of five, they had to read their sentences to the group and check if they could find the student's untrue sentence. It was followed by speaking activity *Find the untrue sentence and explain why you think it is untrue*, which reflected the total number of 80% correct answers.

In these activities, the more active students seemed to be prepared to help the 'quiet' ones in all possible ways: by helping them in writing, explaining them with more simple vocabulary, or sometimes even with drawing, or by using the Internet (in some cases).

Body language, gestures in group work activities – The observations also included non-verbal ELL ability within the groups, and they comprised hand movement for explanations, and eye contact. These body elements have a strong impact in learning a FL. As the students were usually seated in groups of five (usually), in order to share new ideas and come up with a conclusion, i.e. to decrease FLL difficulties. All observations reflected students' non-verbal, body language FLL ability. Verbal and non-verbal communication were interchangeably integrated within every group.

The observations show that there was a considerable variation of FLL within each group. Most of the groups had a rich repertoire of English vocabulary, and they were very active students not in their groups only, but in the whole class

as well; however, few groups showed poor English usage, very passive interaction of the students, especially when they were asked to fill in exercises concerning grammar parts. In these cases, the better students tried to explain English to the quiet ones. From the linguistic point of view, the paper is in line with Nunan (2004), who agrees that language learning is not just grammar rules. The findings prove that students could achieve language improvement, although the focus was not on grammar parts. TBLL and group work activities helped the students to rely on meaning and form. The latter was less evident, as the students were more focused on language usage/communication. The observations show that group work activities and reading, listening and speaking skills may influence the extension of FL vocabulary. As the students work in a very friendly learning environment, the students (spontaneously) require verbatim oral FL usage of words, chunks, patterns as in the 'better/more active' students' usage. Thus, teachers' practices and perceptions are significant in terms of creating positive language learning atmosphere in order to use their potential to influence the effectiveness of their students' foreign language learning process (Ćirković Miladinović 2019). Positive atmoshere will enable better learning outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Different learning tasks have been shown to have different effects as better predictors of the FLL when working in groups. Still, there is a 'harmony' between the students in the group in communication/collaboration/oral practice for each activity. What was the students' behavior in classes when working in groups, and how did they react: did they try to take over the learning factor when conducting an activity? Were they somehow badly influenced and they just 'followed the flow' of ignoring learning ethics?

If we analyze the first question posed that deals with the extend of group work activities that help the 'quiet/weaker' students to become 'noisier/better', and if group activities are direct predictors of FL/English speaking, it can be concluded that 'quiet' students may have the deficit of speaking activities (mainly), and reading activities in group work activities, as they mainly focus on writing: fill in the gaps, answer the questions, etc. Based on this we may conclude that not all group work activities (and tasks) help the students to have the same capacity of FL comprehension. However, group work activities in FLL tasks are predictors and good initiators and for further FL comprehension, i.e. FL/English speaking.

Concerning the second question that deals with students' ethics in FLL and its influence on students' self-expression, it is best described with the following acronym.

– **E** – **e**ngage and **e**ncourage students in self-learning through TBL

– **T** – **t**iming – the students are free to discuss at a given time within the group in TBL

– **H** – **h**elp the students to recall what they already know via TBL

– **I** – **i**nstructions are of primary importance with regard to FLL process

– **C** – **c**ontribute to students' **c**onfidence

– **S** – **s**elf-expression through TBL

Group work activities have proven to be helpful activities as the students do not feel overloaded. The students' participation in FLL is better if the teachers' instructions are clear, i.e. if the students understand what to do and what are they learning, although this learning may become more difficult if more input is given to them. Of course, as Piaget (1971) mentions, cognitive constructivism, and TBLT support further learning without pressure within the group and within the time. Our position as teachers is that current (and future) education, as revolutionary teaching-learning, requires well-paced, yet complex input that is consistent with current societal needs, mutual respect and politeness, not dominating teachers' and learners' position, that is the 'zipping' position, that gives the students' opportunities to think and conduct well, not to 'crush' the students learning.

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ПРИСУТНОСТ СТУДЕНТСКЕ ЕТИКЕ У ТОКУ УЧЕЊА НА ПРЕТХОДНО ЗАДАТОМ ЗАДАТКУ

Резиме: Важност познавања страног језика у 21. веку подразумева глобални културолошки приступ, тј. знање страног језика је повезано са развојем, ширењем наставе страног језика на глобалном плану. Из тог разлога, овај рад истражује две веће области учења: 1) Task-Based Language Learning (TBLL) – учење засновано на претходно задатом задатку и 2) групне активности и присутност етике код студената током ових активности. Сврха истраживања је била да укаже који фактори утичу позитивно а који негативно на постигнућа у оквиру активности код претходно задатих задатака у процесу учења енглеског језика као страног. Други циљ истраживања је био да се објасне проблеми у току колаборативног учења, да се анализирају проблеми учења енглеског језика и да се дају сугестије како би се откривени проблеми превазишли на пољу наставе страног језика. У раду се такође дају назнаке како да се настава страног језика обогати културолошким садржајима и тиме унапреди схватање друштвено-глобалних проблема 21. века.

Кључне речи: настава страног језика, учење засновано на претходно задатом задатку, етика студентског рада на универзитетском нивоу.