Completing tasks for online forums: a look through the students’ eyes

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Abstract
The use of ICT for language teaching has been growing over the past few years. This paper reports on some impacts of implementing a model for a b-learning ESP course in the academic year 2005/2006. This model promotes student collaboration based on asynchronous, text-based communication through online forums (Kuteeva, 2005). Drawing on the results of the survey conducted among third-year students of ‘Inglês Técnico’ at ISCAL, this paper analyses students’ perceptions of the benefits and shortcomings of completing tasks for online forums. The results of the survey are compared to the expected outcomes of the above-mentioned model. Overall, the students’ perceptions largely correspond to the expectations of the model designer. In addition, these tasks help students to become more active participants in the creation of the course syllabus and the construction of disciplinary knowledge.

Key words: tasks, online forums, peer collaboration

Background and objectives of the study
In Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) learners are supposed to develop their language competence and skills for using the target language effectively situations that they are likely to meet in real life (Richard & Rodgers, 2001: 204-43). One of the crucial elements in CLT is the task principle, due to various features of the task (see Ellis, 2003: 13). The fact that task-based learning is incidental rather than intentional can be beneficial for students with low language learning aptitude and self-esteem. This is the case with highly heterogeneous students of ‘Inglês Técnico’ at ISCAL, where a great number of students lack a good command of English as well as effective language learning strategies. In this situation it is not advisable to completely forsake the more traditional approach to language teaching because many students appreciate classes based on presentation, practice and drills. Besides, it has been argued that focus on meaning alone is not sufficient to achieve an acceptable level of accuracy (Skehan, 1996; Campillo, 2006). Therefore, an alternative to task-based teaching is task-supported teaching, in which tasks do not replace traditional activities but serve as a complement to provide opportunities to simulate real-life communication. An efficient way to reconcile the two strands of the ESP is as follows: content-based instruction with elements of grammar tuition should be carried out in class, whereas task-based teaching should take place with the support of an e-learning platform (Kuteeva, 2005: 383).

This paper aims to report on some impacts of implementing a model for a b-learning ESP course in the academic year 2005/2006. This model essentially promotes student collaboration through asynchronous, text-based communication using online forums. Drawing on the results of the survey conducted among third-year students of ‘Inglês Técnico’ at ISCAL, the paper analyses students’ perceptions of the benefits and shortcomings of completing tasks for online forums. Thus, this study attempts to answer the main question: do students’ perceptions of completing tasks for online forums correspond to the expectations of the model designer?
Model for online task design

Online forums were chosen as the main support for communication outside the classroom for two major reasons: 1) they can be accessed by any number of users, at any place and any time, and 2) they provide a permanent record of all contributions. The flexibility offered by e-resources is relevant for heterogeneous groups, allowing each individual student or group to work at their own pace (Hurd, 2005:14; Schneider, 2004:2). In the context of tasks for asynchronous, text-based communication through online forums, another two major benefits are empowerment and collaboration (Pincas, 2000). Collaborative learning relies on the socially structured exchange of information between learners. Each learner is responsible for their own learning and is motivated to increase the learning of others (Richard and Rodgers, 2001: 192-201). As far as collaboration in second language is concerned, McGroarty emphasizes some advantages for ESL students: increased frequency and variety of language practice, cognitive development, language as well as concept learning (McGroarty, 1989 cited in Richard & Rodgers, 2001: 195).

For the purpose of this study, it is essential to draw a distinction between collaborative and cooperative work (Pincas, 1997: 4). The figure below sums up the fundamental differences:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collaborative</th>
<th>Cooperative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• individual</td>
<td>• group-oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• flexibility as regards time</td>
<td>• can be time-consuming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(no arrangements with</td>
<td>(if group meetings are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other people involved)</td>
<td>involved)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• easier for the teacher /</td>
<td>• more difficult for the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the learner to manage</td>
<td>teacher / the learner to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>manage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• requires teamwork skills</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Collaborative versus Cooperative

Both collaborative and cooperative learning can bring good results in the context of the blended delivery mode, i.e. combining face-to-face and online learning. Depending on the type of tasks, students may work either individually or in pairs or in groups. The content to be learnt was broken into small, specific units and a different task assigned to each group as follows:
During the academic year 2005/2006, students completed most of their tasks in groups of three, i.e. doing cooperative work at the preparation stage. Then, each group posted their contribution to the appropriate forum, defined by the kind of task and the class they belonged to. Thus, the first stage of completing the tasks involved cooperative work, followed by online collaboration in which students read and replied to postings by their classmates. The tasks were designed to cover the following topics: ‘Researching accounting terms and acronyms’, which focused on producing a short, comprehensible text about a given topic; ‘Introducing companies’, whose objective was to write a short description of the company run by students in the Business Simulation Project, another third-year module; ‘Running a business: sharing experience’, which implied writing about a specific accounting procedure / practice adopted by the above-mentioned company; ‘Analysing sales’, related to trends analysis and graph description; and, finally, ‘Exploring the business environment’, an internal WebQuest (see Note 1) based on the research conducted in the previous forums and resulting in an oral presentation of a project prepared on the basis of one of the real-world scenarios (more details and examples of these tasks are provided in Kuteeva, 2005). The figure below shows how these tasks can be classified into two major types and how they aim to develop knowledge at different cognitive levels as defined by Bloom (1956).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Group of three</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>d</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>e</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>j</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>etc</td>
<td>etc</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Task distribution within each class.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pedagogical tasks</th>
<th>Real-world tasks (Nunan, 1989)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>improving language macro-skills (esp. reading and writing)</td>
<td>applying the knowledge acquired on the course at higher cognitive levels:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Application</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension</td>
<td>Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Synthesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evaluation (Bloom, 1956)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3. Types of online tasks
The completion of the tasks was meant to achieve a number of outcomes, as shown below:

- extending the learning time and consequently the input of the target language;
- improving language macro-skills;
- improving cognitive skills;
- introducing and fostering peer collaboration and teamwork;
- increasing IT literacy and developing online skills;
- raising cultural awareness in the business context.

The ensuing sections will show whether the students viewed their experience along the same lines.

Methodology

Participants

The study was carried out among four classes of third-year students of English for Business and Accounting (Inglês Técnico) at ISCAL, a compulsory annual subject. A number of students (62) volunteered to take part in the study, being aware that their participation would have no impact on their final mark. The only characteristic that all these participants shared was their Portuguese nationality. Their level of English ranged from elementary to upper-intermediate, which is highly representative of the mixture of students on the course. Practically all participants reported that they own a PC (98%) and have an internet connection at home (79%).

The vast majority of the participants (80%) belonged to the same age group (18-24 years old), the remaining 20% aged between 25 and 34. Nearly three quarters (74%) were full-time students, whereas 26% had a job. As far as gender is concerned, females represented 73% and males 27%. This profile is typical of ISCAL students studying in the day-time regime, which makes the data obtained fairly representative.

Data collection

The study is based on the results of a survey conducted among the above mentioned participants. The data obtained through the survey are supported by observation throughout the academic year and oral feedback provided by students. The anonymous questionnaire used for this purpose focused on two major areas – task management and group management – and included several question types: multiple choice, Likert scales, fill-in-the blank, list and a space for comments. Multiple choice questions concerned factual information; Likert scales were used for evaluating the content of websites in English; fill-in-the blank questions asked to provide examples. The list type of question was selected for finding out students’ opinions in an unbiased way, i.e. without prompting any specific answer. This type of questions was expected to render more objective information that could be codified and subjected to quantitative analysis. For this latter reason, the list of items was limited to three. Thus, students were asked to provide information concerning these major issues: 1) three things that they found easy about completing online tasks, 2) three things that they found difficult, and 3) three positive points about their experience of completing online tasks. These lists indeed proved to be particularly useful for raising data for the ensuing analysis. After the information provided by the questionnaire had been analysed and processed, the results
were presented to the above-mentioned four classes (approximately 20 people each), to which the 62 study participants belonged. This was done in order to confirm the validity of the results. All classes agreed that the results reflected their experiences and opinions. The following section presents the results of the survey, focussing, above all, on the analysis of the list questions.

Results

As mentioned above, the tasks were carried out in groups of three. Group work has been subject to criticism for being too time-consuming and difficult to control. Therefore the study tried to find out the approximate number of hours taken by each group to complete each online task. As shown in Figure 4, 40% of students reported to have spent only 1-2 hours, the remaining part ranging from 2 to 5 or more hours. It seems that this variation depends on the group spirit and on the degree of motivation, organization, collaboration and support within each group. Thus, just over one half of the participants (53%) reported to have had a plan for completing the task, whereas the remaining 47% did not follow any plan. Likewise, 45% claimed to have completed the whole task together with the group, while the other 55% assigned specific roles to different group members. Thus, group management appears to have a significant impact upon the work pace.

![Figure 4. The number of hours taken to complete an online task.](image)

The most interesting results concern the list type of questions mentioned in the previous section. On the one hand, those study participants who answered these three questions provided valuable and relevant information. On the other hand, this type of question is more difficult to answer, so the percentage of students who skipped them was substantial, as shown in Table 1. Some participants only listed 1 or 2 items, which brings to light some interesting observations. Thus, as proportions in Table 1 show, the number of students who listed three easy and three positive points (32% and 52% respectively) was by far higher than those who listed three difficult points (15%). This means that overall students did not encounter many obstacles in completing tasks for online forums and found many positive aspects in completing the tasks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question /Answer</th>
<th>What did you find easy?</th>
<th>What did you find difficult?</th>
<th>What did you find positive?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 item</td>
<td>5 students (8%)</td>
<td>23 (36%)</td>
<td>3 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 items</td>
<td>22 students (36%)</td>
<td>14 (23%)</td>
<td>15 (12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 items</td>
<td>20 students (32%)</td>
<td>9 (15%)</td>
<td>32 (52%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>15 students (24%)</td>
<td>16 (26%)</td>
<td>12 (19%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1. Number of items provided by students in answer to the list questions.

Figures 5, 6 and 7 provide details about various aspects of the students’ experience. As shown in Figure 5, the easiest points in completing the tasks were related to the use of the e-learning platform and the task design (‘accessible topics’, ‘clear tasks’). On the other hand, a smaller number of students also defined as ‘easy’ aspects such as ‘writing in English / translating into English’ (7%) and ‘group work’ (4%), which also figure among major difficulties with 22% and 13% respectively (Figure 6). Another difficulty, ‘using specialized vocabulary’ (19%), is normal in the context of novice ESP learners. However, problems encountered by students in writing comments about their peers’ work (14%) are not merely language-related. Rather, this difficulty demonstrates a lack of capacity for critical analysis and evaluation. Thus, some students are not accustomed to negotiating in a collaborative learning process and miss a “definite solution” to problems, as evidenced by their reference to the lack of ‘key’ to the tasks (6%). Besides, Figure 6 also shows that not all students found it easy to use the platform, particularly where ‘formatting’ (6%) and ‘posting’ (6%) were concerned.

![Figure 5. What students found easy about completing tasks.](image)

![Figure 6. What students found difficult about completing tasks.](image)
However, the difficulties encountered in completing the tasks for online forums were not perceived by students as negative. As shown in Figure 7, with the exception of ‘learning about accounting’ (22%) (i.e. concept learning mentioned by McGroarty, 1989), the other three major aspects – ‘learning new vocabulary’, ‘group work’ and ‘developing writing’ – coincide with major difficulties reported by students. Interestingly, ‘group work’ represents the same proportion of 13% as a difficulty and as a positive point. In a way, this fact confirms the controversial nature of cooperative work demonstrated in Figure 1. Some groups encountered problems like the time involved in meetings and teamwork, possibly with clashes of personalities or other personal factors. However, the collaborative element between these small groups was also present, as they could read and comment on the tasks completed by their classmates. That is why, ‘access to others’ work’ is another noteworthy item, although it only represents 7%. It shows that students became aware of the benefits of online collaborative learning. For example, Figure 8 illustrates the structure of one of the forums, where each posting received at least one reply, and the number of times each message was seen ranges from 55 to 100.
Various positive points were grouped as ‘other’ because they were less significant in quantitative terms but they are no less interesting for that. The list below includes some of these items followed by comments related to the model design as described in Section ‘Model for online task design’:

- ‘different levels of learning’ (improving cognitive skills);
- ‘learning without thinking about it’, ‘dynamic and easy learning’ (incidental learning);
- ‘interaction: classmates, subject, teacher, new technologies’ (increased frequency and variety of language practice (McGroarty, 1989)));
- ‘preparing for tests’ (permanent record, possibility of recycling);
- ‘having enough time to complete tasks’ (time flexibility);
- ‘developing topics in more detail’ (extending the learning time and the input of the target language);
- ‘writing in English on the computer’ (increasing IT literacy);
- ‘learning others’ opinions about the task’ (peer collaboration);
- ‘learning general culture’ (raising cultural awareness).

Thus, in spite of the above mentioned difficulties, the students’ perceptions of the benefits of completing tasks for online forums largely correspond to the underlying principles of the model design.

**Concluding Remarks**

This paper has argued in favour of a task-supported approach to teaching ‘Inglês Técnico’ at ISCAL. It has shown that introducing tasks for online forums has proved
beneficial at various levels, namely, developing linguistic competence, augmenting
cognitive development, encouraging collaborative construction of knowledge,
developing transferable skills such as group work and computer literacy. In this context,
tasks have been considered as essential units – building blocks – in a collaborative
construction of knowledge, which was made possible thanks to the introduction of an
online element in the course. It has been shown that collaborative and cooperative tasks
are largely seen by students as beneficial to their learning process. The major difficulties
encountered by students in the process of completing the tasks included language
related problems (inability to understand, or being threatened by, authentic texts),
sufficient use of basic ICT technology (spelling and grammar check, Internet search)
and a certain lack of cognitive skills such as analysis and evaluation (difficulty in
writing comments about their peers’ work). Despite these problems, online and face-to-
face collaboration has enabled students to become active participants in the creation of
the course syllabus and the construction of the disciplinary knowledge.

Notes

(1) WebQuest was developed in 1995 at San Diego State University by Bernie Dodge with Tom March,
and is defined as ‘an inquiry-oriented activity in which most or all of the information used by learners is
drawn from the Web’ (http://webquest.sdsu.edu/). However, in the task designed by the author, instead of
using the Web as the main source of information, the search is deliberately limited to online forums of
‘Inglês Técnico’ at ISCAL. This helps to increase peer collaboration and revise the material learnt
throughout the year.

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