

11 Task-based projects for transition from university to placements abroad: development of academic, sociocultural, and employability skills for students of Spanish as a foreign language

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Abstract

This paper shows how Task-Based Learning (TBL) is used to equip second-year Spanish students at Cardiff University for their placements during their year abroad. We present a set of task-based projects embedded within the curriculum to enhance both (1) the competences students have to acquire throughout their degree, and (2) the skills to overcome the challenges involved in tasks of similar nature when studying or working abroad. These activities (including translations, presentations, essay writing and the production of a vlog) put all the knowledge acquired into practice in real-life situations. The impact of these tasks on the learning process, academic, sociocultural, and employability skills, and the students' perceptions of the transition to placements abroad have been assessed through a survey. The sequences designed, the results and feedback collected are presented as evidence in favour of TBL as a suitable approach to qualify Higher Education (HE) students as proficient users of the target language during their time abroad.

Keywords: task-based learning, higher education, placements abroad, transition.

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1. Introduction

The year abroad can be the most life-changing experience for HE language students during their learning journey. However, it should not be taken for granted that students will automatically benefit from studying or working abroad; hence the importance of preparing them fully for this mobility period, as the better prepared they are before their placement, the more beneficial this experience will be (Byram & Dervin, 2008). The aim of this chapter is to present a proposal on how to apply the TBL theoretical framework (Ellis, 2003; Long, 1985, 2014) to second-year Spanish students embarking on study and work placements for a single semester or the whole academic year in 2019-2020. The project focuses on the academic, sociocultural, and employability skills they need to develop to fulfil the learning outcomes of their language course, as well as to overcome the challenges of the year abroad (DeKeyser, 2010; Gutiérrez, Durán, & Beltrán, 2015). This project was developed within the Innovative Curriculum Programme promoted by Cardiff University. In order to maximise the student's experience, this initiative took as a starting point the need to align pre-departure language module objectives to the learning objectives applicable to a period of residence in the foreign country, in order to ensure the students' enhancement of the three main competences – academic, sociocultural, and employability – while abroad.

Section 2 presents the theoretical framework of TBL, the sequence of the preparatory activities, and the final tasks designed. Section 3 is dedicated to the discussion of the outcomes, via a survey created to measure the impact of the project on students' learning process and engagement in preparation for the year abroad.

2. Presentation of the project

2.1. Theoretical framework

The project consists of designing the syllabus of a language course for second-year Spanish students at Cardiff University, using an approach that features

prominently in the existing literature on foreign language teaching: TBL (Ellis, 2003; Long, 1985, 2014). According to this approach, learners are language users who achieve communicative goals related to real-world activities after a sequence involving cognitive and communicative processes. Thus, according to Ellis (2003) as:

“[a] workplan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed. To this end, it requires them to give primary attention to meaning and to make use of their own linguistic resources, although the design of the task may predispose them to choose particular forms” (p. 16).

Our main concern was to present a TBL approach-based syllabus which could contribute to the acquisition and the development of the skills students need for their year abroad within the context of a Spanish language course at HE level. We wanted to explore not only the final tasks that could contribute to this purpose, but also the adequate connection and coherence between the components of the course, the sequencing, the materials, and the strategies to assess student’s performance on the designed final tasks. The proposal was designed following Oxford’s (2006) task planning factors (see Table 1).

Table 1. Task planning of the sequence

Task planning factors	The context of the experience with second-year students from Cardiff University
(Final) Task type	Representative of students’ future academic and employability tasks
Importance (and stakes) of the task	Progressive tasks (from low to high difficulty) to provide students with formative feedback to prepare high-stakes assignments (final tasks)
Assessment	Both formative (grammar exercises, aural comprehensions, translations, grammar tests) and summative (portfolio of final tasks, aural comprehension, oral exam, written exam)
Timing	Structure of the course per week: 1h Grammar + 1h Conversation + 1h Translation

Input genre and modality	Representative of different genres and diversity of both written and audio-visual resources
Linguistic complexity	B2 to C1 level
Cognitive load / complexity	Complexity of the tasks regulated according to the cognitive load of the contents addressed. Highly complex tasks are accompanied by germane cognitive load to help students probe into contents
Interaction and output demands	High presence of interaction and output production as a subsequent activity to input flooding and processing tasks

Source: Created by the authors based on Oxford 2006 and the context of the experience with second-year students from Cardiff University.

2.2. Task-based activities

The proposed tasks required students to be active ‘language users’, employing the same type of communicative processes as those involved in real-world activities. Thus, adopting a TBL approach to teaching required assigning the learners communicative goals that were achieved after the completion of guided sequencing activities, involving both cognitive and communicative processes. The tasks presented to our students not only included pragmatic, phonetic, functional, and notional grammar and text, but also cultural and mediation cultural activities.

The designed syllabus included a series of tasks to be developed throughout the academic year. The proposed final tasks enabled students to put all the knowledge acquired into practice in real-life situations, these being as below.

- **Vlog.** Students were asked to create and submit a summative structured video production where they were given the choice to discuss stereotypes in the Spanish-speaking world or the presence of ‘machismo’ in the music industry. Audio-visual material analysis, class discussions, and video production workshops contributed to the preparation of the final task.
- **Translation brief-orientated tasks.** Students were requested to submit a series of formative and summative translation pieces throughout the

year. The selected translation documents involved mainly the use of movie trailers and TV series clips transcriptions. Each translation was accompanied by a brief containing guidelines and the purpose of the translation.

- **Essay writing activities.** Students were invited to write and reflect on different topics that were directly associated with their year abroad experience, such as working and studying abroad, the consequences of Brexit for language students, and the differences found amongst Spanish-speaking countries.
- **CV and motivation letter writing.** The purpose of these activities was to aid students in drafting their own CV and motivation letter in the target language, making them aware of the linguistic and cultural differences involved in the process. Class discussions, workshops, and target-specific activities played a critical role in the performance of this final task.
- **Oral presentation.** For this final task, students were asked to work in pairs to create a presentation in the target language on a current affairs topic of their choice, but necessarily related to their year abroad in a Spanish-speaking country.

These final tasks were linked to specific subtasks and activities that were developed during the corresponding language components of the module: conversation, grammar, and translation.

It is important to highlight that the selected subtasks and activities were designed to prepare students for the performance and presentation of the proposed final tasks, and that these were closely associated to the development of academic, sociocultural, and employability skills target that we set ourselves at the beginning of the project. In terms of the teaching sequencing, this was split by semesters, Semester 1 and Semester 2 activities. Although students developed

Table 2. Syllabus and description of guided sequencing activities

Teaching Sequence	Skills	Final tasks	Subtasks	Components	Specific activities	Assessment
1st Sem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic • Sociocultural • Professional 	VLOG <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stereotypes • ‘Machismo’ present in the music industry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Movie Analysis and class discussions • Music analysis and class discussions • Translation of movie trailers • Listening exercises 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conversation • Grammar • Translation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activities related to the movie Spanish Affair • Activities related to music analysis (Rosalia, Aitana & Ana Guerra) • Translation of movie trailer Off Course. • Listening exercises related to interviews to actors/ actresses and musicians 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessed Vlog
1st Sem 2nd Sem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic • Sociocultural • Professional 	Translation into Spanish	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Translation of movie trailers • Translation of TV Series trailers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Translation • Grammar • Conversation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Translation of Cable Girls trailer • Translation of TV series clip: Friends 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessed Translation • Written Exam • Formative Translation Submissions
1st Sem 2nd Sem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic • Sociocultural • Professional 	Essay writing in Spanish	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Class discussions • Essay writing activities • Translation activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grammar • Translation • Conversation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activities related to studying or working abroad: ERASMUS • Brexit • Differences between Spanish speaking countries • Studying languages in the UK 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessed Essay • Written Exam • Formative Essay Submissions
2nd Sem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic • Sociocultural • Professional 	CV/Motivation Letter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Class discussions • Workshops 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conversation • Grammar • Translation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of CV for YA placements • Creation of motivation letters for potential jobs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuous Assessment
2nd Sem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic • Sociocultural • Professional 	Presentations on any topic related to their YA receiving country	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Class discussions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conversation • Grammar • Translation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current topics in Spanish speaking countries (literature, music, society, etc) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oral presentation • Formative exercises: class discussions in conversation classes

these three main competences throughout the year, there was an emphasis on the development of academic skills during the first semester and employability skills in the second. In relation to assessment, all the tasks, subtasks, and specific activities were assessed either in a formative or summative manner, or were included as part of the continuous assessment of the module. [Table 2](#) provides a full description of the syllabus and guided sequencing activities.

3. Survey and discussion of outcomes

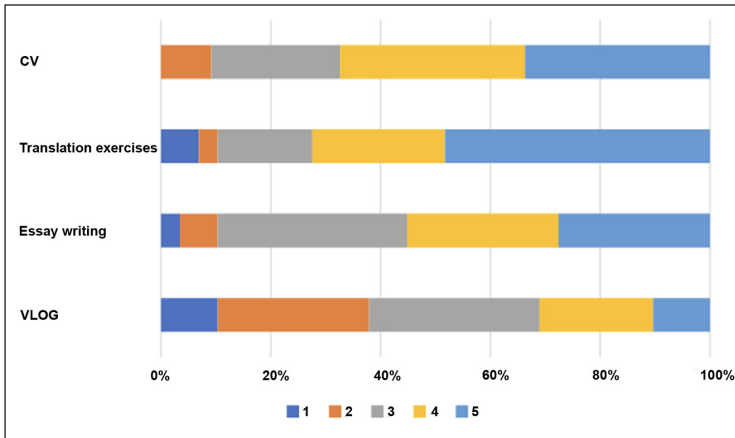
In order to measure the suitability of the tasks, all participants were asked to respond to an online survey (see [supplementary materials](#)). The survey had 21 questions and was circulated to students during the second half of their year abroad. There was an initial section for personal information, followed by two sections serving a dual purpose: firstly, to measure the impact the designed activities had on the learning process and engagement of our second-year students preparing for their year abroad; secondly, to assess the overall impression students had of this teaching and learning approach, and whether they considered the tasks as useful for and relevant to their experience abroad.

Bearing in mind these two goals, students were asked about the usefulness of the final tasks proposed by means of one to five rating scales questions (one being not useful and five being extremely useful). Each question was complemented with a multiple-choice question to assess the impact of the activities on students' sociocultural, academic, or employability skills. In all the questions about the tasks, there were also open-ended questions, allowing participants to enter additional comments about their experience.

A total of 30 students responded to the survey. Responses to the multiple-choice questions in the online survey were analysed quantitatively (a feature conveniently provided by the Google Forms tool). The comments on the open questions were analysed qualitatively.

As for the final tasks, participants were asked about how valuable the vlog, the essay writing in Spanish on cultural and current topics, and the CV and motivation letter exercises were in preparing them for their work placements (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Final tasks rated by participants (one being not useful and five being extremely useful)



With regard to the vlog, this activity was created to expose students to different registers of the target language, as well as to improve their command of non-academic registers. Some qualitative comments made by students confirm the appropriateness of this activity.

“For me, the best part about compiling the vlog was having to speak, as this is by far my weakest point, and I found that channelling my creativity allowed me to express myself in ways I never knew I could. [...] The vlog definitely prepared me for the year abroad by boosting my confidence [...]. It pushed me out of my comfort zone which you have to do continually whilst living abroad, and it is massively rewarding” (Cardiff University School of Modern Languages student, study placement).

However, according to the qualitative comments, while some participants appreciated the creative part of the assignment (recording and editing the video), as well as the need to freshen their vocabulary to address the very latest topics, others stated they felt it sometimes detracted from the objective of learning.

Regarding essay writing in Spanish on cultural current topics, a wide majority of students considered these were highly useful for their preparation for the year abroad. The target aim of this task was to enhance students' mastery of essay writing in the target language. This task stands out from the rest as it requires students' command of a genre whose linguistic and discursive characteristics are fundamental for a good performance on their year abroad study placements. At the same time, according to the survey, the topics addressed achieved the goal of preparing students to overcome the 'culture shock' and to have more in-depth knowledge about current affairs debates; 80% of the respondents praised the usefulness of this task, rating it between three and five in the scale, and suggested extending it further and on more in-depth topics to prepare for target university assignments.

Regarding the CV and motivation letter exercises in preparation for work placements, students who chose the work placement (20%) as their year abroad experience highly valued the usefulness of this task (82.8% of them gave it a five out of five in the rating scale). Students who decided to study at university during their year abroad (72%) considered the task as enriching, but not as much as the ones who used the CV and motivation letter in real life to apply for their work placements.

Finally, the feasibility of the task-based approach is confirmed by the high rating of translation into Spanish projects by students. These were valued as significant opportunities to enhance linguistic skills by means of straightforward applied and employability-orientated assignments, as well as to be exposed to a wide range of resources (films, TV series) from the target countries (89.7%).

As mentioned above, the syllabus and the content sequencing were designed according to the final communicative goals students were expected to achieve.

Students' insights reflect that tasks have been valued as wide ranging and representative of all social, academic, and work skills students were expected to acquire during the course. Participants of the survey highlighted the value of final tasks as training opportunities to undertake similar tasks in their work and study placements in the target country (75.9%).

The survey does also provide evidence of the suitability of the middle preparatory tasks, created as a scaffolding for students to achieve the final communicative goals. Among the most highly regarded activities, oral and aural practices linked to current affairs in the target countries stood out in the qualitative comments gathered.

“I felt that the topics we discussed in Year 2 featured across the news during my year abroad, and as a result a lot of the topics we discussed were part of daily conversations I had, so having a base understanding of these topics was invaluable” (Cardiff University School of Modern Languages student, work placement).

Students mentioned the progressive introduction of both linguistic input, by means of different teaching strategies and multimodal channels (Pérez-Nieto & Llop, *in press*), and cultural contents, by means of a wide range of topics and sources, as the reason for this positive reception. Specifically, the input presented was highly valued by students, who agreed teaching sequence contents were presented in a sequenced and coherent way according to the target final task. This statement proves the success of the project: the linguistic input turned out to be meaningful for students. Thus, it could be converted into enriching intake, which in turn resulted in improved output (VanPatten & Cadierno, 1993).

Finally, the relevance of the cultural content covered was rated as positive by almost 75% of the participants, as seen in the following statement by a student undertaking a work placement:

“I worked in a newspaper, so some current topics were useful as when I had to write articles on them I already had background knowledge” (Cardiff University School of Modern Languages student, work placement).

Both the qualitative and quantitative results commented on back our balanced approach aiming to attract both students’ generational and academic interests.

4. Conclusion

After having analysed the results of the survey and the feedback provided by the students involved in this project, we can conclude that there is strong evidence in favour of monitored TBL activities as a suitable approach to qualify HE students as proficient users of the target language. The resulting detailed description and analysis of the results not only constitute an informed contribution to the way the curriculum of pre-departure language modules can be designed and implemented, but they also confirm that the activities proposed aid students in preparing them fully for their year abroad experience.

We are aware that the current university climate and constraints due to the COVID19 pandemic require a redesigned approach to teaching and learning in HE. This also highlights the crucial need to adapt the proposed activities to the new COVID 19 scenario, following the university guidelines on developing a blended learning approach, combining face-to-face, synchronous, and asynchronous activities. Another aspect to consider at present is the impact that Brexit will have on mobility programmes for our language students in the near future and how we, as language teachers, can assist them in overcoming the new challenges that may arise.

As for the further development of this project, we aim to expand our research and concentrate on the reentry process of our students abroad. Studying this

process will provide us with a more holistic and integrated view of our language programmes, and will help us assess the best way to integrate the study abroad experience within the student's language journey.

5. Supplementary materials

<https://research-publishing.box.com/s/n6h8mjtwwfewx56rzb6xtykpy111oeqfk>

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