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A Student-Generated Multimedia Memory Book As A Task-Based TELL Activity

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Abstract

Take an old idea and make it new! Creating a memory book using a computer is an engaging and rewarding experience for ESL students. The necessary software tools come free with MS Office, and are surprisingly easy to use. See how Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (TELL) effectively assists task-based instruction.

One of the most important teaching elements in the communicative approach is to assure that the student's language learning takes place in an interactive manner while they are actively engaging in the task. Because computers have often been used as self-learning tools, we may believe there is a gap between communicative language learning and the use of technology. We may also sense that students feel their classroom time is being used for something they can do outside of class. When integrating computer use in our second language teaching, therefore, we must design an activity and a task in such a way that students work cooperatively and interactively to maximize their language practice. With that focus in mind, the idea of designing a task-based "ESL Memory Book" was born.

Project Background and Rationale

The integrated skills courses in the ESL program at Alliant International University are designed to enhance students' second language learning experience by focusing on their application of the learned skills. One integrated-skills course, English through Technology, uses technology to design and publish a memory book by taking the idea from the more "traditional" yearbooks. In the first iteration of this course, computer use was limited to typing documents and inserting pictures using clipart and the Internet images. Thus, the original memory book contained a mixture of neatly typed and designed pages accompanied by hand-written comments and hand-drawn pictures. We have termed this a "hybrid" memory book, as it uses both traditional and computer techniques (Figure 1). Recently, as students become more computer savvy, completely computer-based memory books have been created as the final project of the term (Figure 2). In our experience, we have found that technology complements this form of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) quite well.

The content of the memory book typically consists of several sections, such as students' biographies, fieldtrip reports, fun pictures, teacher interviews, and some of their academic work (e.g., quotes, poems, program news). Because students look forward to accomplishing the task in order to take the final product back home, and they enjoy being in complete control of the production including content

selection, they are highly motivated and engaged in the entire process of the task. They actively discuss ideas, state opinions, give advice and negotiate to reach consensus on the content, planning, design and presentation of the book. Students also learn academic skills such as how to note-taking, interview and computer skills. They utilize critical thinking, reflection and synthesizing in putting information together; and they practice all the language skills: oral skills, reading and writing, vocabulary and editing (Figure 3). Through collaboration and interaction in their team and in class, student language application is maximized in this student-centered project. Thus, the teacher's role is to navigate, guide and facilitate student learning.

TBLT and TELL

Although most teachers have an innate sense of what a "task" means in the classroom, SLA researchers are still trying to construct a common definition on which to base educational research and pedagogy. An overview of the literature reveals a variety of definitions with regard to the use of tasks in education, including but not limited to: TBI (Task-Based Instruction); TBL (Task-Based Learning); TBLT (Task-Based Language Teaching); and PBL (Project-Based Learning) (Ellis, 2003; Ivers & Barron, 2002; Skehan, 1998; Willis, 1996). Ellis (2003) provides a simple, clear overview of the various definitions of a task as found in the literature. There is little agreement among researchers which definition to use, and as the warm-up activity for the workshop showed, definitions of a task from teachers "in the field" mirror the wide diversity found in literature by researchers. A more exhaustive discussion of the theoretical background of TBLT and TELL is not in the scope of this paper; however, there are a set of factors which all of these definitions have in common. In general, a task must have: the primary focus on meaning; authentic situations and/or language interaction; learner responsibility for ultimate language use; a final outcome for the students; and an overall work plan for the teacher to help guide the entire process.

While technology has traditionally been thought of as a tool for individual language study, technology-enhanced language learning is increasingly being used as an instrument for collaborative, task-based group projects in the classroom. The chart in Figure 4 illustrates how TELL can assist TBLT in the communicative approach to language teaching. In fact, TELL is ideal for project-based learning as it is already guided by a project plan ("work plan"). With the Internet, computers can provide broad avenues for task outcomes. Inquiry-based projects often involve a multitude of language and cognitive skills when placed in an interactive setting; WebQuests are classic examples of TELL-supported tasks. We have found that our ESL Memory Book activity is a successful addition to the variety of technology-enhanced projects being made available to ESL instructors and learners.

The Workshop

We had four objectives that guided our planning for this workshop:

- Participants will be able to experience the process of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) firsthand;
- Participants will be able to see how technology-enhanced language learning (TELL) benefits TBLT in the classroom;
- Participants will be able to become more comfortable using MS Word for in-class activities;
- Participants will be able to see how a memory book activity is an engaging, meaning-focused task that can integrate all four language skills.

To achieve these objectives, we gave participants an overview of the memory book project and its background rationale, we provided two hands-on demonstrations of techniques in MS Word helpful for a memory-book activity, and we involved participants in a small interactive mini-lesson to model the task.

Hands On: Two Techniques

The second part of our workshop focused on two techniques to enhance the look of a multimedia MS Word document; namely, putting borders around pictures and placing a picture behind a piece of text.

We felt it was important for teachers to get an idea about what designs could be achieved using MS Word and to spend a few moments practicing them. These techniques in many ways mirror traditional scrapbook methods, and are a natural next step to create a colorful, engaging computer-based memory book. We discovered that teachers are interested in learning new ways to use this familiar classroom tool. With more time allotted for future workshops, further hands-on instruction can be provided to demonstrate other techniques such as placing graphic elements or icons, arrows, colored text, or WordArt. While knowledge of these is not essential to the implementation of this tool, it does build confidence and broaden the possibilities for the teacher when providing this resource in the classroom.

Modeling

The third part of our workshop revolved around a modeling event, where we facilitated participants in a short group activity that modeled the process of a memory book task. The final outcome of this mini-task was to produce a page in MS Word depicting a fictional trip to a famous place in San Diego. The task was guided by a work plan (created by us beforehand), and the process was facilitated through a series of guided worksheets and group discussion. Members were given the opportunity to use the MS Word techniques learned from the previous section. Once the group session started, we found teachers became quite enthusiastic about the process, and group discussions were lively. The guided worksheets were commented on as being very helpful. The monitoring of groups by the teacher/facilitator is of particular importance during an activity such as this to make sure groups stay on track and focused on their final outcome. Through this mini-lesson, participants became aware that technology can, indeed, be used for communicative activities in the classroom, and its implementation is not as difficult as they might have previously thought.

Conclusion

The beauty of this project is its compatibility and flexibility. Depending on the institutional setting, accessibility to technology, student population, class size, length of term, and students' computer

literacy, this activity can be scaled up to a completely computer-based task, as well as adapted into other computer enhanced tasks such as creating a web-site, an on-line book and digital videos. Or, it can be scaled down to having students design a holiday book, field trip report, journal, and autobiography using a “traditional” or “hybrid” process. Moreover, the technology tool used, MS Word, usually is included in basic computer systems on both the Macintosh and Windows platforms. The computer-based memory book is an easy, interactive, technology-enhanced group project that is adaptable, educative, and engaging for language learners.

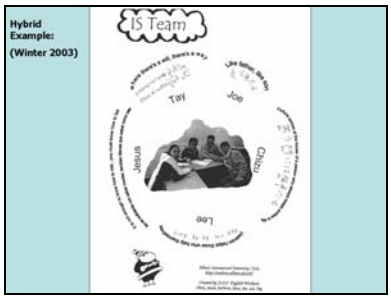

Figure 1: Hybrid Example

Figure 2: Computer-Based Example

Figure 3: Student Page

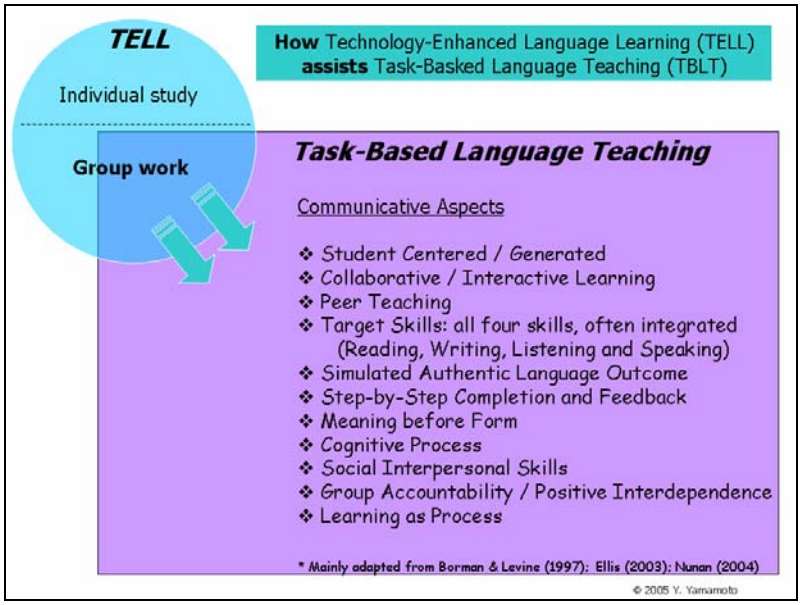

Figure 4: TELL and TBLT

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