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# Task-based language teaching:

## An analysis of learners' perception of technology-mediated tasks in EFL contexts

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## I. Abstract

This paper focuses on new trends for teaching English through a communicative approach. It mainly focuses on how to apply a Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) methodology to an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), especially blogs. This paper starts focusing on the main features of TBLT. Then, it explores how new technology and especially blogs can be embedded into this methodology. Special attention is paid to its potential in EFL contexts. This research paper concludes with a section of pedagogical implications in which a teaching proposal is designed taking into account the different features of TBLT as well as the different implications of blogs in a foreign language classroom. Some observations after the implementation of this proposal in a real classroom with a group of 17 Spanish students are made. Finally, the last section suggests a conclusion, together with limitations and ideas for further research.

**Keywords:** TBLT, task, blog, ICT, EFL, CLT.

## II. Introduction

The issue of teaching and learning foreign languages is not a new concern. Throughout history, many linguists have tried to find the most suitable method for teaching English following different linguistic paradigms and theories of language learning.

In the 1970's, there was a great shift in language teaching methods. It was at that time when Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emerged with the aim of developing learners' communicative competence (Ellis & Shintani, 2014). Nowadays, CLT has evolved and two strong versions of this approach exist: Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL).

According to Ellis & Shintani (2014), the aim of TBLT is «to develop learner's communicative competence by engaging students in meaning-focused communication through the performance of tasks» (p. 135). TBLT is a meaning-based approach in which participants are concerned with communication. Teachers must provide learners with opportunities to use and practice the language in the classroom. However, it is also essential to mention that TBLT does not just concern itself with acquiring fluency; it also focuses on the development of other skills such as linguistic or interactional competence.

In the 21st century, due to the globalization, many people need to learn foreign languages for different purposes. TBLT is considered an excellent approach for teaching languages according to students' communicative needs through the implementation of tasks in the language classroom (Long, 2015). Textbooks and mechanical activities seem a thing of the past. Students need authenticity and, as claimed by González-Lloret & Nielson (2015), old methodologies are not appropriate to meet the real-world needs of language learners. Moreover, nowadays, technology pervades every aspect of our lives; thus, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) also play an important role in the teaching of foreign languages because it provides easy ways to achieve authenticity and, as a result, to motivate students. Furthermore, Web 2.0 technologies create new environments in which students can be active learners and where they can deal with holistic tasks through technology-mediated transformation and creation processes (Gonzalez-Lloret & Ortega, 2014).

Due to the popularity of TBLT and new technologies in language teaching and learning, it is essential to explore learners' perceptions on the use and implementation of this methodology and ICT in their foreign language lessons.

### III. Objectives

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During the past few years, TBLT has been the focus of attention when dealing with foreign language teaching and learning. Many different studies have been conducted taking the use of this methodology into consideration (Jeon & Hahn, 2006; Zhang, 2007; Carless, 2009; Hadi, 2013).

It is claimed that the use of TBLT in foreign language education can be really beneficial for students. Research has been conducted on the implementation of TBLT in the language classroom in order to explore learners' perceptions and performance (McDonough & Chaikitmongkol, 2007; Carless, 2009; Meng & Cheng, 2010; Hadi, 2013). However, it seems that many of the previous studies were conducted in Asia. We cannot forget that culture and cultural norms play a role of paramount importance when dealing with the implementation of TBLT. Therefore, in order to contribute to this strand of research, this paper aims to shed light on the implementation of technology-mediated tasks in a European context.

## IV. TBLT

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### 4.1. Towards a definition of TBLT

TBLT is the second strong version of CLT and it is considered a contemporary view of language learning. According to Ellis & Shintani (2014), the aim of this approach is «to develop learner's communicative competence by engaging them in meaning-focused communication through the performance of tasks» (p. 135). Through this approach, learners are engaged in real language use in the classroom through the completion of tasks.

TBLT is considered a meaning-based approach in which participants are concerned with communication. According to Willis & Willis (2007), it is more effective to encourage learners to use the language as much as possible even though their production is not accurate. Teachers must provide learners with opportunities to use and practice the language in the classroom. However, it is also essential to mention that TBLT is not just concerned with acquiring fluency; it also focuses on the development of other skills such as linguistic or interactional competence (Ellis & Shintani, 2014). What is more, in TBLT lessons are seen as social events where students are active learners (Breen, 2001).

Tasks are at the core of any TBLT approach; therefore, it is essential to define them. Over the years, a large number of scholars have tried to offer a definition of tasks (e.g. Prabhu, 1987; Skehan, 1996; Willis, 1996; etc). Willis (1996) states that «a task is an activity where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose in order to achieve an outcome» (p. 23). This definition, however, does not establish the role of the teacher, which can be found in Prabhu's definition. According to Prabhu (1987), «a task is an activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process» (p. 24). Therefore, the role of teachers in any TBLT methodology is that of facilitators, while students' role is that of communicators.

Ellis (2003: 9) established criteria that any task should fulfil taking into account all the definitions of tasks published until that moment.

- It should focus on meaning;
- There should be a gap;
- Learners should use their own resources;
- There should be a clearly defined communicative outcome.

## 4.2. Task types

Different authors have provided different classifications of tasks. One of the most popular is Willis' (1996: 149-154), which is based on the kind of performance learners are required while fulfilling tasks:

- Listing;
- Ordering and sorting;
- Comparing;
- Problem-solving;
- Sharing personal experiences;
- Creative tasks.

A second classification was offered by Prabhu (1987). This author identifies three types of tasks depending on the gap they involve: information gap, opinion gap or reasoning gap. Information-gap tasks demand students to share information. These tasks can be one way or two way. In one-way tasks, one student has all the information while in two-way tasks each student has part of the information. In order to fulfil the task, students must exchange their information. Opinion-gap tasks require students to exchange opinions about different topics. And finally, in reasoning-gap tasks, students must infer new information from the information already presented. This kind of task invites the participants to use their ability to think and justify.

Further, tasks can be focused or unfocused. Focused tasks are designed to elicit specific linguistic features while communicating. On the contrary, in unfocused tasks, students will not focus on any specific linguistic feature; they will just use the language for general communication (Ellis & Shintani, 2014).

Lastly, it is essential to mention a distinction between input-based and output-based tasks. The former do not require production in the target language whereas the latter do (Ellis & Shintani, 2014).

## 4.3. TBLT in classroom settings

Another important step when dealing with TBLT is its implementation in the classroom. Different models have been proposed (e.g. Prabhu, 1987; Skehan, 1996; Willis, 1996; Lee, 2000); although these models have differences, they all have the three principal phases in common: a pre-task, a main-task and a post-task phase. Ellis (2003: 244) suggested different options in each phase as can be seen in figure 1:

<i>Phase</i>	<i>Options</i>	<i>Description</i>
Pre-task phase	1. Modelling performance of the task	Students listen or watch the task being performed by 'experts'.
	2. Pre-teaching language	The teacher presents language that will be useful for performing the task.
	3. Schema-developing	The teacher elicits and extends students' knowledge of the topic of the task.
	4. Strategic planning	The students are given time to prepare to perform the task before they actually perform it.
Main-task phase	1. Time pressure	Students are given only a limited amount of time to perform the task.
	2. Contextual support	Students are allowed to access the input data when they perform the task.
	3. Explicit instruction	The teacher takes time out from the performance of the task to explicitly teach a linguistic feature that is useful for performing the task.
	4. Surprise element	Additional information relevant to the task is provided after the students have started to perform the task.
Post-task phase	1. Repeat performance	Students are asked to repeat the task.
	2. Report	Students are asked to report the outcome of the task to the whole class.
	3. Language work	Students complete language exercises related to linguistic problems that they experienced when performing the task.

**Figure 1.** Implementation options in the different phases (Ellis 2003: 244)

#### 4.4. Technology-mediated TBLT

In the 21st century, new technologies are gaining ground in our lives. The Internet and digital devices surround us. In the field of education, the use of ICT in language learning and teaching has greatly increased in the last decade. Little by little, educators are embedding technological tools in their lessons, which increases learners' motivation (Trajtemberg & Yiakoumetti, 2014). It is essential to mention that the new generation of students, those who are currently in the classrooms, has grown up surrounded by technological gadgets and they do not conceive their lives without them. According to Gonzalez-Lloret & Ortega (2014), this generation of students is known as the Generation Z. They were born in the new century and they are considered digital natives.

This new generation of learners is bored of ordinary lessons, textbooks or drills. They want to include technological gadgets in the learning process. Some years ago, teachers and researchers started to incorporate these digital tools in their lessons but there is still a long way to go. Some teachers, due to their lack of digital knowledge or to the fact that using ICT is time-consuming, prefer to continue with anachronistic lessons. However, new generations of teachers, who are implementing these tools in their classrooms, can show its potential. Language educators are using blogs, virtual worlds such as second life, vokis or wikis among other Web 2.0 technologies.

Thanks to this technology, it is possible to design real tasks using a TBLT methodology in the classroom. Authenticity will be achieved



and students will feel a real need for using the target language. What is more, these tools offer the possibility of using authentic materials in an easy way which is essential within any TBLT programme (Winke, 2014).

Furthermore, Web 2.0 technologies create new environments in which students can be active learners and where they can deal with holistic tasks through technology-mediated transformation and creation processes (Gonzalez-Lloret & Ortega, 2014). That is why new technologies and TBLT can perfectly integrate each other in the learning process (Van den Branden et al., 2009).

According to Gonzalez-Lloret & Ortega (2014: 2-6), tasks must accomplish five features in the context of technology and task amalgamation:

- Tasks must contain a primary focus on meaning.
- Tasks must have a goal orientation, i.e. tasks must contain a communicative purpose as well as some final outcome.
- Tasks must be centered on the learner.
- Tasks must be holistic.
- Tasks must offer a reflective learning.

These features help teachers in the selection of the most appropriate technological tools to implement a TBLT methodology.

## V. Method

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This research project was developed in the year 2014 as part of my final undergraduate dissertation in the English Studies Degree. In order to explore learners' perceptions of Technology-mediated Tasks, a pedagogical proposal was designed. For this proposal, a task was created and posted in a blog for students to perform. As I did not have the appropriate tools to conduct a proper qualitative study, I observed how the participants coped with the different tasks. Further, before implementing this proposal, I designed two questionnaires for my students to fill in, which can be seen in the appendices. It is important to mention that the questionnaires were created in Spanish because I thought students would express their ideas and thoughts in their mother tongue better. These two questionnaires helped me to obtain more reliable and tangible results.

This teaching proposal was implemented in IES Politècnic which is a secondary school located in Castelló de la Plana. The study involved 17 students, whose ages ranged from 16 to 18 years old. There were 8 girls and 9 boys. All students were enrolled in an

optional subject called Practical English which is delivered in the first year of *Bachillerato*.

## VI. Pedagogical proposal



After having analysed the theoretical framework of TBLT and Technology-mediated TBLT, a pedagogical proposal has been designed with the aim of putting all this knowledge into practice with a group of real students.

The first thing needed to carry out this teaching proposal was to create a blog as the platform in which all the tasks were going to be presented. For this teaching proposal, the platform *blogger* was used to create and design the blog *Christmas celebrations around the world*<sup>1</sup>. This blog has been specifically designed and created for this study. After carrying out the pilot study, this blog has been modified to address some of the limitations that were observed.

It is essential to mention that a blog has been chosen because it is easy for students to use and it contributes to foster their motivation. A blog is the perfect tool to bring this proposal into life because it allows teachers the possibility to work with students both inside and outside the classroom.

The second important decision when designing this pedagogical proposal was to consider a task for students to perform. After considering different options, I decided that the task was going to consist in preparing a power point presentation in which they were going to explain the way they would like to implement the annual Christmas party of their secondary school. Dealing with Christmas, which is considered one of the most important celebrations in the Western world, would allow me to introduce the main traditions of Christmas in English speaking countries and, more importantly, it would help students learn and understand the English culture better. I felt it was essential to incorporate culture within this teaching proposal because language reflects culture. As stated by Kramsch (1991), «culture and language are inseparable and constitute a single universe or domain of experience» (p. 217). A language cannot be completely learnt by any user without a deep understanding of the cultural context where this language is used (Hinkel, 2004). Just mastering a set of grammar rules or vocabulary is not enough to be a competent speaker of any language.

After deciding the topic of the task, the next step was to divide this proposal into three different stages or phases following a TBLT methodology, i.e. a pre-task, a main-task and a post-task phase.

<sup>1</sup> <http://christmascelebrationsaroundtheworld.blogspot.com/es/>



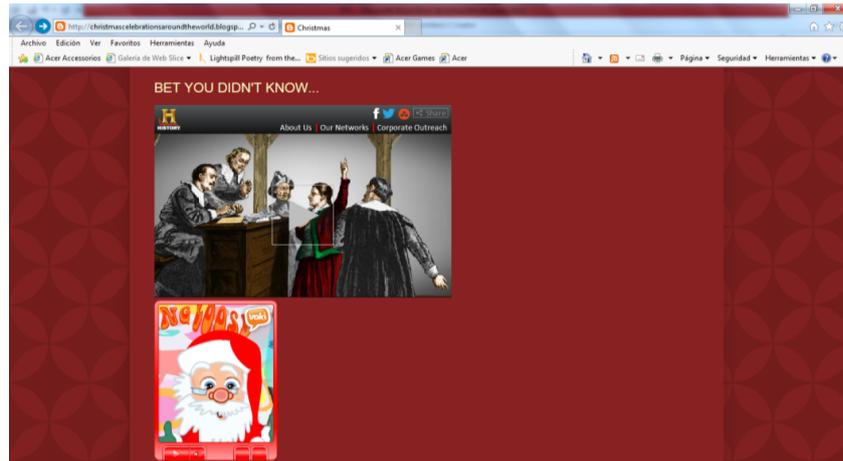


Figure 3. Pre-task with a video and a voki character

The pre-task is essential as it is the stage where the basis for developing the final task in an accurate way will be established.

### Main-task phase

At this stage, students have to organise a Christmas party. They will focus on the theme of the party, the invitations, the food and drinks, the music, the Christmas speech and the entertainment for the party. For doing that, within the main-task phase there are 7 tasks included.

In the first task (see figure4), students have to decide the theme for the party. Learners are given four different themes and they have to decide among one of these themes or if they prefer, they can propose a different one. This task is an opinion gap task in which students have to reach an agreement giving their opinions about the topic. It is also considered an unfocused task due to the fact that it elicits general samples of language and promotes general communication.

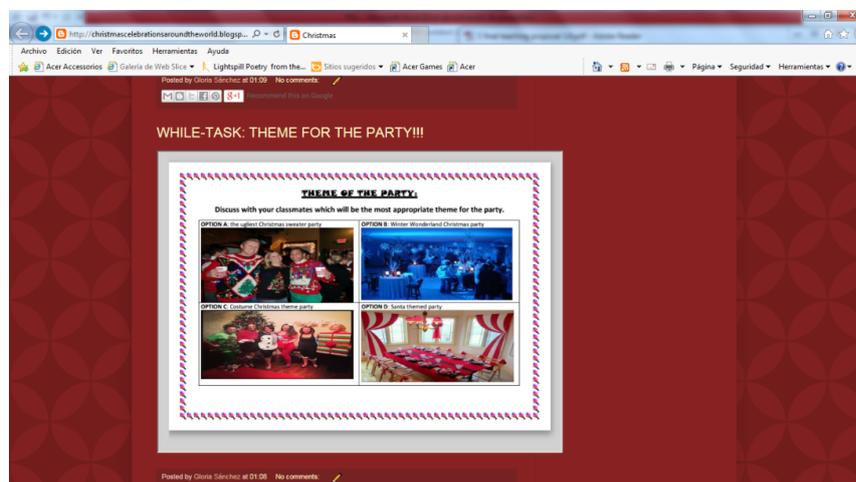


Figure 4. Choosing the theme of the party





The following task is a WebQuest (see figure 7) in which students have to decide about the music for the party. According to Dodge (1995), «a WebQuest is an inquiry-oriented activity in which some or all of the information that learners interact with comes from resources on the Internet, optionally supplemented with videoconferencing» (p. 10).

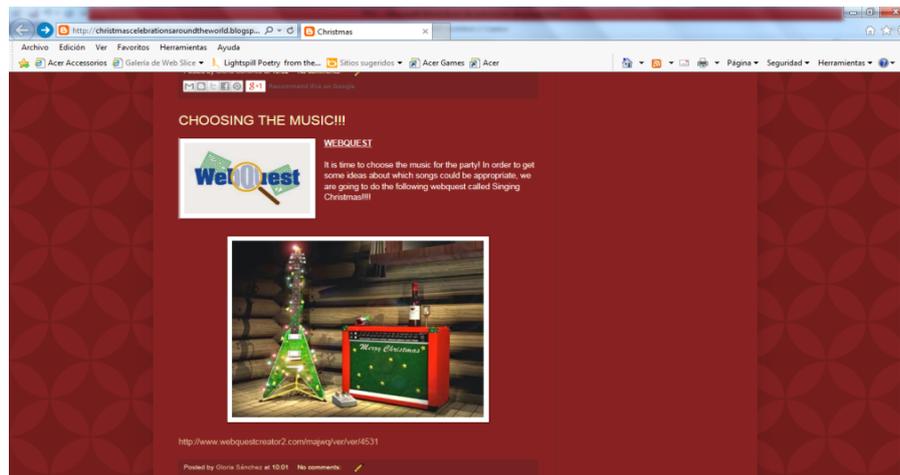


Figure 7. Choosing the music for the party

A WebQuest is considered an online task in which students have to follow different steps and perform different roles in order to get a final outcome. This WebQuest called «Singing Christmas»<sup>2</sup> (see figure 8) has been specifically created for this project. In this WebQuest, students have to prepare a power point presentation with information about the music for the party. Firstly, students are divided in groups of four to perform the task and they are provided with a list of four different songs. Each member of the group has to choose one song from the list provided and they have to look for an alternative song too. Secondly, the groups have to search the internet for different basic information about their songs (title and date of the song, singer/band, biography, style, official website, date of the song and message). Thirdly, students have to create a power point presentation explaining all the information found and their music choices for the party.

In this task, the main objective for students is to learn how to look for specific information, peer work, and to get familiar with power point presentations in order to learn how to create a better presentation for the final outcome of the teaching proposal. Students will work in a collaborative environment, which will enhance their implication and interaction with other classmates. As a result, the learning process will be more rewarding.

<sup>2</sup><http://www.webquestcreator2.com/majwq/ver/ver/4531>

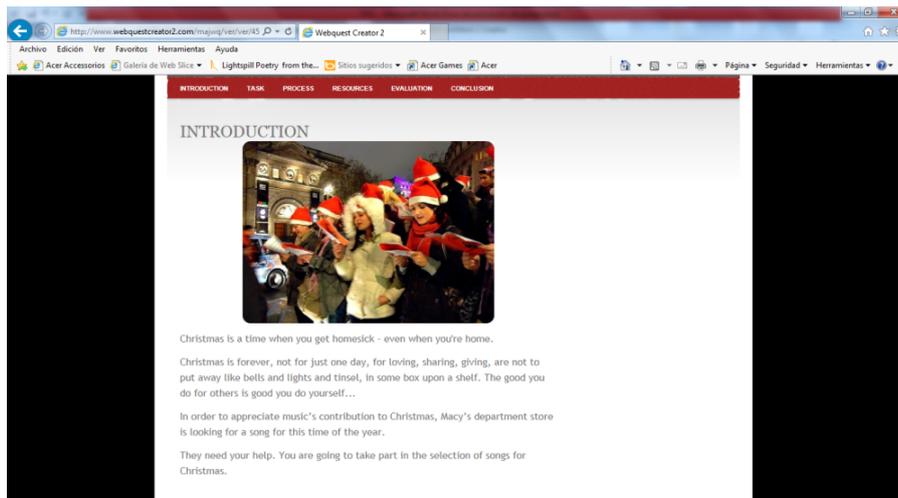


Figure 8. WebQuest: Singing Christmas

In the following task, students have to choose the food and drinks for the party (see figure 9). This is also an unfocused and opinion gap task. Here, students must reach an agreement about which food and drinks there will be in the party. They have four different options but they are also free to include other meals.

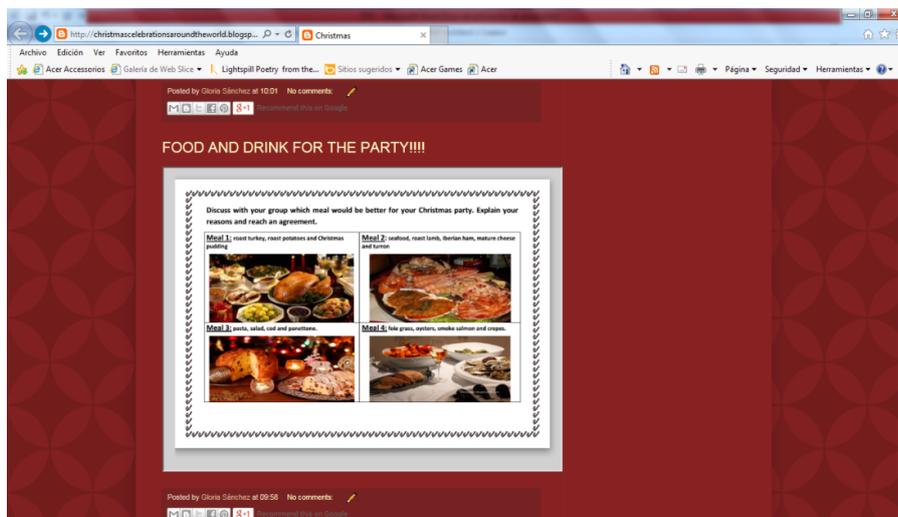


Figure 9. Food and drink for the party

In the section called entertainment for the party, there are two tasks. The purpose of this section is for students to become aware that they have to include some activities to entertain their guests in the party. The first task is a spot the differences task (see figure 10) which is considered a focused task. This task tries to reinforce the use of prepositions of place and expressions such as «there is» or «there are». It is considered a two-way task because each student has part of the information and they need to share their information to perform the task.

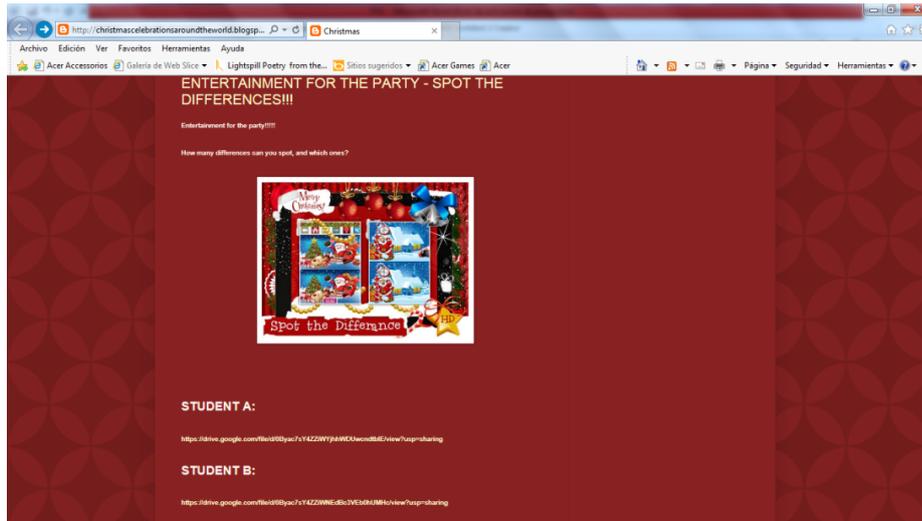


Figure 10. Entertainment for the party: Spot the differences

The last task within the main-task stage is the taboo game (see figure 11). Students must describe some terms related to Christmas without using the taboo words they have in the cards. This is an unfocused task because it elicits general samples of language and it is a one-way task because each student has all the information. This task tries to reinforce students' knowledge about Christmas vocabulary.

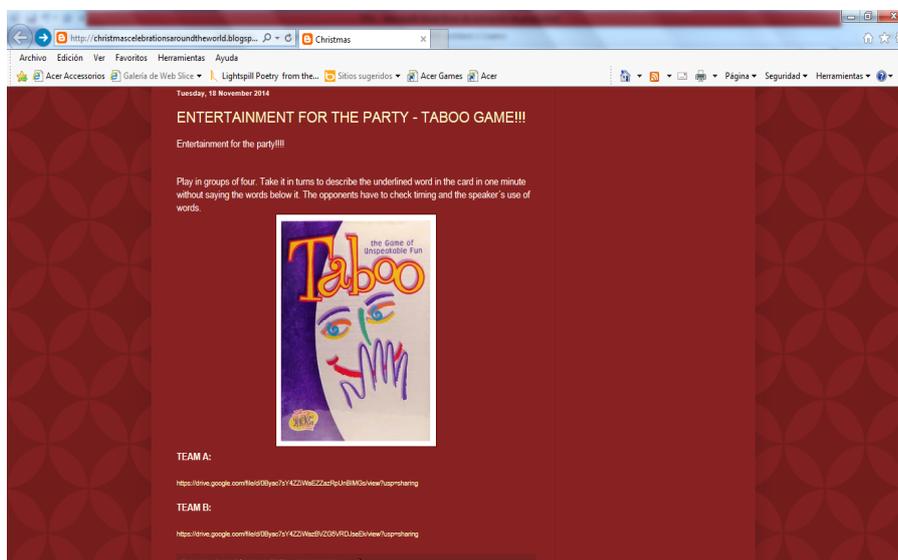


Figure 11. Entertainment for the party: Taboo

### Final task phase

After finishing all these tasks, students proceed to the final one (see figure 12). In the final task, they have to prepare a power point presentation explaining the way they would like to implement the party. They will have to include at least all the aspects they have

seen throughout the main-task stage but they are free to include as many aspects as desired.

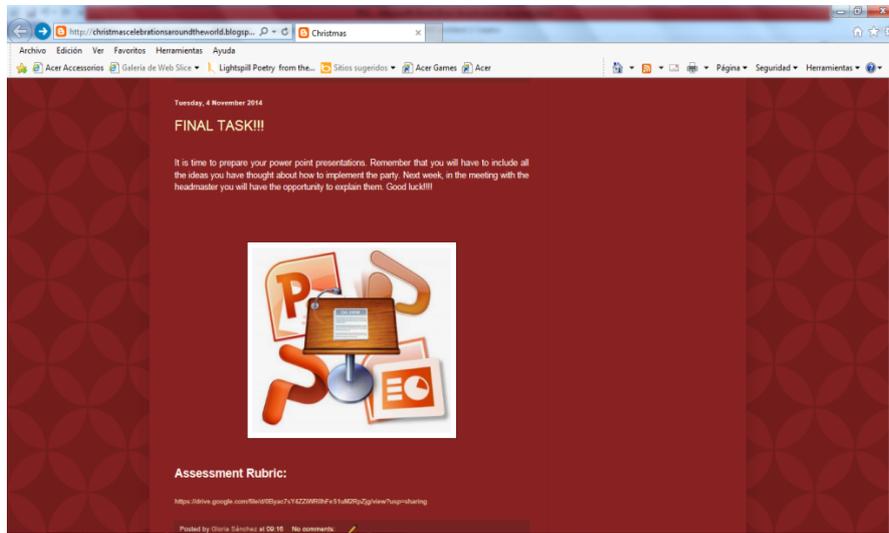


Figure 12. Final task: Power point presentations

This final presentation will be evaluated by both their teacher and their classmates following the rubric that can be seen in figure 13. Involving students in the assessment process makes them active participants and enriches the learning process. After the assessment, students will receive feedback from the teacher.

The image shows a screenshot of an Adobe Reader window displaying a document titled 'assessment%20rubric[1].pdf'. The document contains an 'Assessment Rubric' table with five columns: Exemplary, Accomplished, Developing, and Beginning. The table has five rows, each representing a different aspect of the presentation: Organization, Subject Knowledge, Graphics, Research, and Screen Design. The 'Oral Presentation' row is partially visible at the bottom.

	Exemplary	Accomplished	Developing	Beginning
Organization	Information presented in logical, interesting sequence	Information in logical sequence	Difficult to follow presentation--student jumps around	Cannot understand presentation--no sequence of information
Subject Knowledge	Demonstrates full knowledge by answering all class questions with explanations and elaborations	At ease with expected answers to questions that does not elaborate	Uncomfortable with information and is able to answer only rudimentary questions	Does not have a grasp of the information. Cannot answer questions about subject
Graphics	Explain and reinforce screen text and presentation	Relate to text and presentation	Occasionally uses graphics that rarely support text and presentation	Uses superfluous graphics or no graphics
Research	Uses a variety of sources in reaching accurate conclusions	Uses a variety of sources in reaching conclusions	Presents only evidence that supports a preconceived point of view	Does not justify conclusions with research evidence
Screen Design	Includes a variety of graphics, text, and animation that exhibits a sense of wholeness. Creative use of navigational tools and buttons	Includes a variety of graphics, text, and animation. Adequate navigational tools and buttons	Includes combinations of graphics and text, but buttons are difficult to navigate. Some buttons and navigational tools work	Either confusing or cluttered, barren or stark. Buttons or navigational tools are absent or confusing
Oral Presentation Eloquence/Eye Contact	Maintains eye contact and pronounces all terms precisely. All audience members can hear	Maintains eye contact most of the time and pronounces most words correctly. Most audience members can hear presentation	Occasionally uses eye contact, mostly reading presentation, and incorrectly pronounces terms. Audience members have difficulty hearing	Reads with no eye contact or cluttered, barren or stark. Buttons or navigational tools are absent or confusing. Speaks too quietly

Figure 13. Rubric assessment

## VII. Observation and results

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After explaining what they had to do, students were asked to work in pairs to perform the different tasks. There were a total of 7 pairs and a group of three students.

During the development of the project and tasks, participants tried to be as original as possible. In every task, they showed interest and they tried to go further than required. During the pre-task phase, students were surprised because of the new information they learnt about the traditions of Christmas in the UK. They reported that the tasks they had to accomplish were easy and their results were satisfactory.

In the main-task phase, each group tried to choose a different alternative for the theme, invitations, meals and music of their Christmas parties because they wanted to be innovative and original. Indeed, they were very imaginative. For example, there was a group that dealt with a white Christmas party and they only worked with white food and drinks. Furthermore, their guests had to wear white clothes and their decoration and invitations were also connected with that colour.

However, they also found some difficulties when dealing with specific vocabulary. They did not know many specific culinary terms and they were surprised by the fact that some Spanish terms such as *turrón* or *polvorones* were not translated into English. Another difficulty was the Christmas speech. At the beginning, they did not know what to write in their speeches, but after analysing different speeches, they accomplished this task perfectly.

For the final task, students prepared really original power point presentations, which were to the whole class. The rest of students had to evaluate their classmates using the rubric we have seen in figure 13.

Finally, after concluding with the presentations, students were asked to fill in a final questionnaire (see appendix B). The results showed that all the participants had enjoyed working with the blog and they were really motivated. All of them felt they had learnt English using communicative tasks and their degree of satisfaction was 8.3/10. Among the aspects they mentioned to have learnt: 33 % of the participants mentioned vocabulary, 24 % how to communicate with other people using English, 19 % English culture, 14 % how to organise a party in real life, 5 % to develop projects with classmates and 5 % to understand people more easily. These results can be seen in figure 14. I actually expected all the participants to mention that they have learnt to organise a Christmas party, but surprisingly only 14 % of them did.



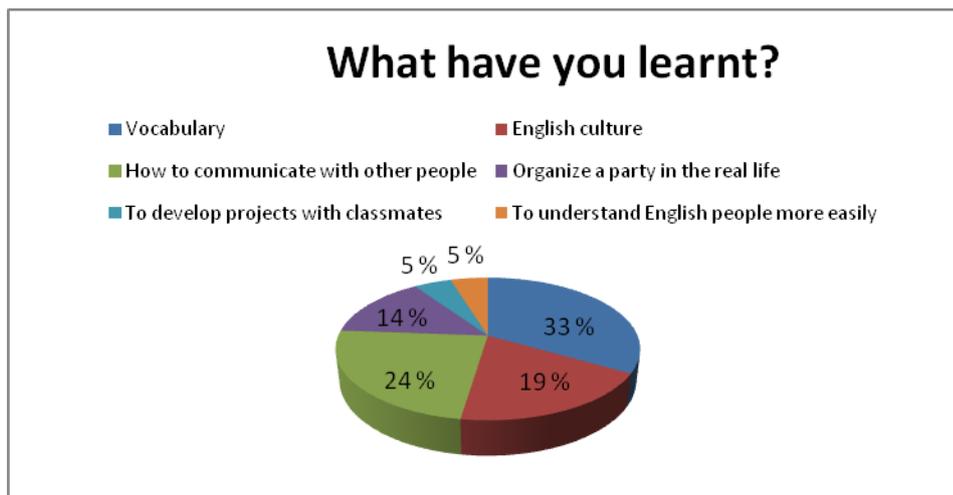


Figure 14. Conclusions from the final questionnaire

## VIII. Conclusions, limitations and further research

This paper has explored how new technology, especially blogs, can be embedded in TBLT instruction for successfully teaching and learning the English language in EFL contexts. When working with TBLT, tasks are essential, and it is through the internet and ICT that authenticity can be achieved. Feeling tasks as something real is what is going to make students feel a real need and involvement to use the English language.

Moreover, we have also seen that culture is an essential aspect to master any language; this is the reason why some aspects of the English culture have been incorporated in this proposal.

Results in the implementation of this teaching proposal have showed that the use of communicative tasks within blogs is really positive for students in secondary education. Students have reported their satisfaction with the project giving an average mark of 8.3 out of 10.

Some limitations are also to be considered. First of all, it is essential to mention that, due to contextual constrains and time limitations, it was impossible to conduct a proper qualitative study. That is why, I only observed students carrying out the different tasks and I took notes. However, I designed the two questionnaires that can be found in the appendices in order to get more tangible results. Second, I could not make any choice with regards to the participants of my study; as a consequence, I found different levels of grammar, vocabulary or fluency among them. This may explain why some tasks were extremely easy for some of the students while others found them hard. I also found different attitudes towards the English language. Therefore, predisposition was different among students. Third, it is essential to mention that, although students worked in the

language laboratory where there were a total of 25 computers, there were many technical problems with the computer equipment.

Finally, following the evolution and development of ICT, further research is needed to see the potential and affordances of other technological tools using a TBLT methodology. Further research should also take into account specific aspects of learners' communicative competence.



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## X. Appendices

### Appendix A: Questionnaire filled out by the participants before performing the tasks.

1. ¿Crees que a través de tareas comunicativas (role-plays, discussion activities, etc.) se puede aprender inglés?
2. ¿Alguna vez tus clases se han basado en tareas comunicativas?
3. ¿Consideras que en las clases de inglés has aprendido algo que pueda serte útil para la vida real? ¿El qué?
4. ¿Te gustaría usar nuevas tecnologías para aprender inglés?
5. ¿Qué herramientas informáticas te gustaría usar?
  - a. Blogs
  - b. WebQuests
  - c. Mundos virtuales
  - d. Otras – indicar
6. ¿Crees que los profesores deberían incluir aspectos de la cultura inglesa en las clases de inglés?(Por ejemplo las principales fiestas o celebraciones de estos países)

### Appendix B: Questionnaire filled out by the participants after performing the tasks.

1. ¿Te ha gustado la tarea? ¿Por qué?
2. ¿Has aprendido inglés? ¿Qué opinas de aprender inglés a través de tareas comunicativas?



3. ¿Cuál es tu grado de satisfacción del 1 al 10? Siendo 1 la opción menos satisfactoria y 10 la más satisfactoria.
4. ¿Consideras que has aprendido algo útil para la vida real? ¿El qué?
5. ¿Qué has aprendido en cada tarea?
6. ¿Qué destacarías de lo que has aprendido?
7. ¿Te ha gustado trabajar con nuevas tecnologías y especialmente con el blog? ¿Qué destacarías?
8. ¿Qué dificultades principales has encontrado?
9. ¿Te ha servido conocer más cosas de la cultura inglesa para mejorar tu competencia en inglés?

