

“Fasten your seat belts”: Investigating learners’ perceptions regarding the implementation of tasks in an English online course

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Abstract: Considering the growth of distance education, this qualitative study investigated learners’ perceptions of the implementation of traveling-themed tasks (ELLIS, 2003) in a virtual course of English as a foreign language. The course was offered to university staff members for a semester. Four participants took part in it. Instruments were a consent form, two questionnaires, and a Skype interview. Results suggest learners perceived the course as motivating, noticing their task engagement from the perspective of “l’education integrale” (LONG, 2015) and “learning by doing”. Furthermore, learning was related to cultural aspects, interesting sites, and learners’ connections with previous traveling experiences.

Keywords: Tasks. Virtual course. English as a foreign language. Perception.

Resumo: Considerando a expansão da educação a distância, este estudo investigou a percepção de aprendizes acerca da implementação de tarefas (ELLIS, 2003) sobre ‘viagem’ em um curso virtual de Inglês como língua estrangeira. O curso foi ofertado a servidores universitários por um semestre. Quatro alunos participaram respondendo a um termo de consentimento, dois questionários e uma entrevista por *Skype*. Os resultados sugerem que os participantes perceberam o curso como motivador, considerando seu engajamento dentro das perspectivas da “l’education integrale” (LONG, 2015) e “aprender fazendo”. Ademais, a aprendizagem teve relação com aspectos culturais, locais interessantes e com suas experiências como viajantes.

Palavras-chave: Tarefas pedagógicas. Curso virtual. Inglês como língua estrangeira. Percepção.

Resumen: En vista de la educación a distancia en expansión, este estudio investigó la percepción de aprendices acerca de la implementación de tareas (ELLIS, 2003) de ‘viaje’ en un curso virtual de inglés como lengua extranjera. El curso se ofreció a servidores universitarios por un semestre. Cuatro alumnos participaron respondiendo a un término de consentimiento, dos cuestionarios y una encuesta. Los resultados sugieren que el curso fue motivador y que las perspectivas de “l’education integrale” (LONG, 2015) y “aprender haciendo” fueron percibidas durante las tareas. Además, el aprendizaje surgió de aspectos culturales y de la relación con sus experiencias como viajeros.

Palabrasclave: Tareas pedagogicas. Curso virtual. Inglés como lengua extranjera. Percepción.



Introduction

Technology is embedded in contemporary life in all social domains. Access to different technological devices (or even the lack of it) has changed the way people communicate, interact, work, and also study. Such changes may have both a positive and a negative impact on our lives. On the one hand, one may argue that technology has created a “digital divide” that ends up promoting (further) exclusion of marginalized social groups. In Brazil, for instance, fifty percent of the houses do not have access to the Internet (GOMES, 2015¹). On the other hand, it is also possible to argue that access to Internet and other technologies – such as the cell phone – has grown exponentially in the last few years. Consequently, many people have accessed education through technology. With the spread of Internet connections in the country, people who do not reside in metropolitan areas – that is, where most public universities are traditionally located – have been able to be admitted to undergraduate programs in the distance learning mode. This has been possible through the Project “Universidade Aberta do Brasil²”, for instance, which was officially created in 2006³. More recently, several research institutions have also offered different massive open online courses (MOOC). In this sense, the possibility for learning is “one click” or even “one touch” away for at least a part of the population. One cannot forget, though, that technology is not only a medium for knowledge construction. The teaching and learning process cannot be simply transposed from the face-to-face mode to the distance and digital learning one, since this new way of learning needs to be grounded on pedagogical principles that are appropriate for this new context. At the same time, it is paramount to regard the ideological power of technology so as to promote ways in which it can be used to reduce – rather than reinforce – social inequality.

With the advent of technology, the need to study a foreign or second language has also increased. Furthermore, technology has been an important component in language teaching – in the face-to-face and, more obviously, in the distance learning

¹ <http://g1.globo.com/tecnologia/noticia/2015/09/pela-1-vez-acesso-internet-chega-50-das-casas-no-brasil-diz-pesquisa.html>.

² Open University of Brazil (our translation).

³<http://uab.capes.gov.br/index.php/sobre-a-uab/o-que-e>.

modes. González-Lloret and Ortega (2014, p. 3) highlight, however, that “no matter how exciting new technologies for language learning may seem”, their use “can become nothing more than entertainment unless their design, use, and evaluation are guided by viable educational and language developmental rationales”.

Bearing this in mind, this study sets out to investigate the use of tasks in a virtual course of English as a foreign language. More specifically, the objective is to unveil learner’s perception of the implementation of tasks in this specific course. Such interest is justified because “the questions of how to integrate new technologies and language tasks in an organic and mutually informative whole remains thus far largely under-researched” (GONZÁLEZ-LLORET; ORTEGA, 2014, p. 4). Before elaborating on the necessity of integrating task-based language teaching (TBLT) and technology, it is important to explain the rationale behind TBLT and provide a definition for tasks.

Why task-based language teaching (TBLT)?

Task-based language teaching is based on the concept of “learning by doing”. According to Long (2015), one of the philosophical underpinnings of such approach is *l’education integrale’* – that is, complete education –, in which it is believed that “people learn best through personal experience, through practical hands-on work with real-world tasks” (LONG, 2015, p. 67). In this sense, abstract concepts can be understood because they become meaningful once they are contextualized in activities from the real world. As Long explains, “new knowledge is better integrated into long-term memory and more easily retrieved for use if tied to real-world events and activities” (LONG, 2015, p. 69). For the author, other philosophical underpinnings of TBLT include: individual freedom, rationality, emancipation, learner-centeredness, egalitarian teacher-student relationship, participatory democracy, and mutual aid cooperation.

The need for TBLT is also – and actually more often – justified from a psycholinguistic perspective. For Ellis (2003), independently of whether language learning is seen from an information-processing or constructivist perspective, it is regarded “as a process that requires opportunities for learners to participate in

communication where making meaning is primary” (ELLIS, 2003, p. 319). Tasks, therefore, come in handy since they serve as tools “for engaging learners in meaning-making and thereby for creating the conditions for language acquisition” (ELLIS, 2003, p. 319). Besides having a primary focus on meaning, TBLT allows for a focus on form⁴ to take place, since “without attention to form learners’ interlanguages may stabilize and fossilization set in” (ELLIS, 2003, p. 319). From a psycholinguistic perspective, then, TBLT creates the possibility for the integration between form and meaning, a combination that has found strong positive empirical support.

Because task is the center of TBLT, it is important to explain what is meant by such construct. In the literature, definitions of what a task is are abundant. In general, a task is understood as “an activity that requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective” (BYGATE; SKEHAN; SWAIN, 2001, p. 11). As mentioned previously, tasks have two primordial characteristics: they provide an overriding focus on meaning and also allow for a focus on form to take place. For Ellis (2003), a task, besides having a primary focus on meaning: 1) is a work plan (that is, a plan made by the teacher); 2) involves real-world processes of language use; 3) can involve any of the four language skills; 4) engages learners’ cognitive processes; and 5) has a clearly defined communicative outcome.

In TBLT, the curriculum is organized around tasks and task-cycles. However, it is important to mention that TBLT can be operated in two different versions: a strong version – that is, when all the teaching and learning happens through tasks -, and a weak one, in which tasks support language teaching and learning but are not the only means of instruction. Besides, preparing students to do the tasks is part of framework for task analysis and implementation, and this is so to allow the teacher to cater for controlling task complexity, and also balancing the cognitive load the task itself may impose on learners⁵.

⁴ According to Long (1997), focus-on-form “refers to how attentional resources are allocated, and involves briefly drawing students’ attention to linguistic elements (words, collocations, grammatical structures, pragmatic patterns, and so on), in context, as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning, or communication, the temporary shifts in focal attention being triggered by students’ comprehension or production problems” (LONG, 1997, p. 5).

⁵ For more information about this discussion, see Skehan (2009).

The task-based approach and technology

Because digital technology has been an integral part of people's life nowadays, Web 2.0⁶ tools (e.g., blogs, wikis, social networking sites, video-sharing sites, among others) for teaching and learning have been considered as having a great positive impact in education due to the massive amount of educators and (language) learners who have started to experiment with them (WANG; VÁSQUEZ, 2012). By making use of such tools (forum, videoconferencing, among others), different language skills can be integrated and therefore learning opportunities may also be more authentic and student-centered, which may consequently trigger learners to increase their sense of commitment and develop autonomy (TUMOLO, 2006). In order to illustrate such possibilities, experiences of learning English as a foreign language (EFL) through online classes have been the topic of investigation in Salbego and Tumolo (2015). The study investigated the perceptions of seven learners and three teachers regarding the classes being held through a free videoconferencing platform – Skype™ – and results suggested that such a tool is seen with great “potential for language learning, with emphasis on the speaking and listening skills” (SALBEGO; TUMOLO, 2015, p. 36). Salbego and Tumolo's (2015) study can be seen as relevant not only due to the aspects raised in terms of possibilities for making use of digital resources for the benefit of foreign language learning, but also due to the fact that they reinforce the need to amplify discussions on the pedagogical aspects that involve language learning in distance environments.

Considering technology's mediating role in the language learning process, it has been the locus of fruitful research (e.g. THOMAS; REINDERS, 2010), especially after studies in the area of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) have commenced. It is a fact that the greatest majority of research to date aiming to integrate elements of tasks and digital technology has been produced abroad (APPEL; BORGES, 2011; GONZÁLEZ-LLORET, 2003; LYS, 2013; PAYNE; WHITNEY, 2002; YANGUAS, 2010; 2012; YUAN, 2014). Because of that, this piece of research proves relevant since it serves to

⁶ The definition of the term Web 2.0 is still a controversial one. Overall, it is seen as a new version of the existing Web technology, through which users may expand their creativity by collaborating with other users when sharing information (TREVISOL, 2019).

enrich knowledge regarding the Brazilian context, still under investigation, even though interest in research on such a topic has increased in Brazil in the current days (D'ELY; TAVARES, 2014).

As mentioned previously, the incorporation of technology in education is not a simple endeavor. González-Lloret and Ortega (2014), for instance, advocate for an integration of tasks and technology, defined as “technology-mediated TBLT”, as a way to distinguish such approach from more traditional uses of technology. The authors claim that TBLT has a lot to gain from the incorporation of technology and that the use of technology can be improved if grounded on the rationale of tasks:

If task-and-technology integrations are properly motivated by TBLT theory, we would argue that language learning tasks which are mediated by new technologies can help minimize students' fear of failure, embarrassment, or losing face; they can raise students' motivation to take risks and be creative while using language to make meaning; and they can enable students to meet other speakers of the language in remote locations, opening up transformative exposure to authentic language environments and cultural enactments, along with tremendous additional sources of input (GONZÁLEZ-LLORET; ORTEGA, 2014, p. 4).

Furthermore, the scholars claim that such an integration may promote students' engagement through “learning by doing”. In this sense, in the context of technology-and-task integration, a task would have the following features: 1) a primary focus on meaning; 2) goal orientation (that is, a communicative purpose or an outcome); 3) learner-centeredness; 4) holism (or the integration of form and meaning); and 5) reflective learning. Such definition of tasks in the context of technology shall serve as a basis for the understanding of the proposal of the online course which is the focus of this study.

Method

Research objectives

As we have seen, this study aimed at unveiling learners' perceptions of the implementation of tasks designed for a virtual course of EFL at UFSC. In order to attain the overall goal of the study, the following research question was proposed: *How do students in a distance learning English course perceive the use of tasks in their process of learning English?*

Perception is here acknowledged as “a physical and intellectual ability used in mental processes to recognize, interpret, and understand events, an intuitive cognition or judgment.” (SILVA, 2004, p. 9). More specifically, then, the purpose of analyzing learners' perceptions is to find out whether the online course activities designed under the TBLT rationale were perceived as adequate to foster learning of English.

Context of investigation

The virtual course was envisaged as a public outreach project proposed to *Departamento de Língua e Literatura Estrangeiras*⁷ (DLLE) and coordinated by two professors of the English undergraduate program and the Graduate Program in English (Programa de Pós Graduação em Inglês - PPGI) at UFSC. In general terms, the goal of the English online course was to offer participants the possibility to learn English at an introductory level through engaging them, during one semester, in task-based activities whose theme was traveling; this way, they could learn about culture and people's habits, discuss about what called their attention throughout the (online) trip and get around places they would feel like visiting. The online platform used was Moodle. The course was designed by the coordinators along with its tutors. The tutors were graduate students in the English program and their role included: 1) designing tasks for the virtual environment; 2) offering students' guidance and solving their doubts; 3) providing them with feedback for the writing tasks; 4) holding Skype sessions with the students for the speaking tasks and providing them with feedback.

⁷ Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures (our translation).

Because the course was a pilot project designed for professors and staff members of the university working in different campi in the state of Santa Catarina, the coordinators decided that “traveling” would be a relevant and interesting topic for the course, which would allow for several elementary concepts to be introduced and for real-life situations to be simulated. The table below summarizes the course organization:

Table 1: General organization of the course

Module	Title and Theme
Introduction to the Course	Introductory Module: Learning to use moodle
Module 1	Identifying the passengers: Giving personal information
Module 2	What's your destination?: Describing places
Module 3	So many (different people): Describing clothes and appearance
Module 4	So much to see, so many things to do: Asking about and describing current activities
Module 5	Family trip: Talking about routines and family life
Module 6	Getting around: Describing accommodation options
Review Module	Review and Final Evaluation

Source: data from the online course

In this sense, the students were invited to “embark” on a trip, and each module introduced a situation or a topic related to traveling. However, the topics that were dealt with can be seen as relevant not only for traveling, since they include daily situations such as “introducing oneself”, “describing people and routines”, “giving directions”, among other language functions. Thus, the objective was not to create a course specifically for travelers, but rather to build a context that would create the need for communication in different real-life situations. In other words, the idea was to develop a course of “general English” focusing on a topic that would allow for the creation of

real-world tasks and, at the same time, be relevant for the students' varied contexts and interests.

Due to the nature of this study – a small scale qualitative one –, our investigation regarding learner's perceptions focused on *Module 4* of the course. This is because at the time data were collected, the students had just concluded this module, so we decided it would be appropriate to investigate the tasks they had recently completed so that they could remember them and, consequently, provide more detailed answers.

Participants

For the present study, 4 learners of the English online course, whose ages ranged from 18 to 49, accepted to take part in the investigation. All participants were either university professors or part of the university staff. They were enrolled in the online course at UFSC and their proficiency level in English ranged from basic to intermediate. This was considered a pilot course⁸ since it was the first time an entirely online English program focusing on the four skills (i.e. reading, listening, speaking, and writing) was offered for beginner learners of English at the Extracurricular language program⁹. Only the students who had fully completed all the activities in module 4, which is the focus of this study, were invited to take part in the research. Through a profile questionnaire that was administered in the beginning of the course, it was possible to gather some information regarding the participants' background and reasons to start the online program. The four participants had already had contact with English, be it formally or informally. Their main motivation was to improve their language skills. All of them had already taken online continuing education courses, so they were familiar with Moodle. At last, three of them said to enjoy traveling and to want to use the language in future trips. One participant mentioned not enjoying traveling but mentioned the desire to

⁸ This specific course was offered to the UFSC personnel only and it allowed learners from different campi to participate.

⁹ In addition to the English online course discussed in the present article, the Extracurricular language program at UFSC offers language classes for various proficiency levels. This way, one may enroll to learn different foreign languages in basic, intermediate or advanced levels.

improve his skills so as to be able to communicate with people from other countries. Finally, the four participants were interested in learning English in order to use different internet resources, and to enrich their professional careers and personal life.

Instruments

In order to gather data for the study, four instruments were used: a) a consent form, in which participants declared to be voluntarily participating in the research; b) an online background questionnaire (with information such as place of residence, age, time of contact with English prior to the course, time available to dedicate to the course, motivation to take the course, among other aspects); c) an online questionnaire on learners' perceptions about the task cycle related to the fourth module of the online course; d) a Skype interview, for learning more details about their impressions on the specific assignments of the given module. Because this is a small scale qualitative piece of research, the triangulation of data is seen as an important element in order to better comprehend and discuss the impressions learners had on the proposed tasks. In this sense, as defined by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2005), triangulation is "an attempt to map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behavior by studying it from more than one standpoint" (COHEN; MANION; MORRISON, 2005, p. 112).

Before explaining in details how data for the study was collected, it seems important to introduce the reader to the tasks designed for the module under investigation here: Module 4, *So much to see, so many things to do!*. It consisted of five tasks (two mandatory and three optional ones¹⁰) and two forums (one for group discussion and another for solving learners' doubts).

The first task was mandatory and it focused on the practicing of the *listening* skill. It required learners to watch a video about Dubai in which a tourist would recommend ten things to be done there. After watching the video, learners had to answer a quiz in

¹⁰ The mandatory tasks were necessary for the students' course completion, while the optional ones were intended for those students who wished to have more practice of the language.

which they would match each place with its corresponding description. They had three attempts to answer this quiz.

The second task focused on *reading*. In this activity, learners were invited to get to know Paris by reading a text showing ten important attractions they could visit when in Paris. After reading, they were required to answer some comprehension questions related to it. Here, learners also had three attempts to answer the activity.

The third activity was a *listening* activity, and learners were invited to learn about some cultural aspects related to Japan by watching a YouTube video on the topic. The main goal of this task was to have learners become familiarized with certain customs and what they could or could not do in Japan, following the recommendations of a Japanese citizen. For that, after watching the video, learners needed to show whether they understood its main ideas, being able to notice which actions were considered inappropriate (what not to do) in Japan by answering a true or false activity online.

The fourth task had a specific *grammar* focus: learners were required to know more about how to use the verb *can* to talk about possibilities in English. For that, besides general explanations, they also needed to respond to a quiz related to the topic. At this point, a focus on form activity was provided considering students had previously been offered a great amount of input on how to describe things that you can do while visiting different places. The need for such an activity derives from the communicative context, such as postulated by TBLT, following Ellis (2003) for instance.

The fifth task was a mandatory one and focused on the practice of *writing*. All the previous activities served as a form of preparation for this last task. Here, learners were required to put together the pieces of knowledge they had built up to this point in the course: they needed to recommend a location to other travelers – that is, their colleagues. In order to accomplish that, they needed to choose a place they would like to visit or had already been to and share relevant information about it: things one could do there, interesting places one could visit, clothes one should dress while visiting the place (depending on whether it was a summer or winter destination), restaurants one could try, so on and so forth. They were also required to conclude their recommendation by giving their opinion about the place, justifying the reasons for suggesting such a site to other visitors. This writing activity was posted on Moodle for the tutors to provide feedback on relevant aspects. After finishing this writing activity, learners had to post

an image of a city they liked and comment on it in the forum named *Favorite Cities*. There, learners could not only share information on their preferred cities but also learn about other places suggested by their colleagues while commenting on them.

Table 2: Organization of Module 4

Task	Mandatory or Complementary	Topic
Task 1	Mandatory	Listening – Top 10 tourist attractions in Dubai
Task 2	Complementary	Reading – 10 tourist attractions in Paris
Task 3	Complementary	Listening – Japanese Customs
Task 4	Mandatory	Grammar Focus (use of <i>can</i>)
Task 5	Mandatory	Writing – Giving travel tips for a colleague
Task 6	Mandatory	Forums – ‘Sharing your favorite cities’ and ‘Doubts’

Source: data from the online course

In this sense, even though some of the tasks contained features of more traditional activities and exercises (such as having to decide whether some statements are true or false), they meet the criteria established by González-Lloret and Ortega (2014) of a task in the context of technology: the primary focus being on meaning (students had to understand different authentic texts and also communicate their ideas), there is an outcome (in the case of this module, a recommendation of a place to be visited and activities that can be done there, which was later shared with all the students through a forum), learner-centeredness (since the students were the ones making decisions on the destination, looking for extra material, completing the task for a second or third time, etc), holism (there was a combination of form and meaning, with the latter being prioritized), and reflective learning (the students had to think about their own learning process throughout the course and while participating in this study). For every task, instructions were always given in English; however, learners also had an extra link that would allow them to check a version of the instructions in Portuguese in case they felt such a need.

Procedures for data collection

One week after the fourth unit was completed, several learners from the course received an invitation by e-mail to participate in the study. The email consisted of a general explanation of the study goal and reinforced the importance of learners' opinions about one module of the course; the consent form was attached to the email, with the link to the perceptions' questionnaire, which was designed via *Google docs*. The learners were free to choose whether they wanted to participate or not. The questionnaire consisted of a series of questions regarding the students' perceptions on the tasks in Module 4. The questions were open so as to prevent from inducing the participants' answers. After having responded to the questionnaire, they were contacted to set a time for an individual interview with one of the researchers. The interview consisted of a number of questions outlined to gather more data on aspects that needed to be clarified regarding the perceptions' questionnaire. It was audio recorded and then transcribed for analysis. All the aforementioned instruments were administered in Portuguese, which was the learners' first language (L1).

Results and Discussion

This section is divided in two main parts: first the results of the online questionnaire are presented and discussed; then, to the main findings of the Skype interviews are reported.¹¹

As regards learners' perception of the module as a whole, most participants mentioned in the questionnaire that the topic was motivating and interesting. In fact, their responses seem to focus on what was done with the language, that is, on the context of traveling. For instance, Participant 1 (P1)¹² mentioned that she enjoyed getting to know more about different places and that she could learn new words through an interesting

¹¹ Due to space constraints, data – originally in Portuguese – were reported in the article in English only.

¹² P stands for participant.

and fun module. Participant 3 mentioned the importance of learning about different cultures and places and the connection of such topic with language learning, and participant 4 highlighted that the module was well constructed so as to encourage the student to explore different tourist places by making use of language. Participant 2 focused on the difficulty of the module while answering this question: for him, it was more difficult than the previous one, but such an increase in difficulty was expected.

Most participants emphasized, in this sense, the topic or the context of the module, which suggests that they were engaged in “doing things with the language” while completing the tasks: they got to know different places, shared their traveling experience or interests with their peers, and so on. Such view can be confirmed through their answers in the questionnaire regarding each completed task. Participant 3, for instance, while describing his perception regarding a listening task, mentioned that he got to know what is expected in terms of behavior in the Japanese culture. Similarly, participant 4 explained that he was not familiar with the customs presented in the video, but mentioned that he knew about some others that should have been included in it. In this case, it is possible to observe that the students not only found the content of the module relevant, but they could also establish relations between what was learned and their previous knowledge. Some participants also mentioned that they could relate the topics of the tasks with trips they had taken previously, which seems to indicate that the activities resembled their life experiences. Participant 1, for example, explained that because she had recently arrived from Paris she could revisit some of the places she had been to and also get to know others that she wished she had visited.

For the participants, some listening tasks were more difficult due to the pace of people’s speech. Participant 1 explained that she had to watch the video on Japanese customs around four times because she was interested in understanding every single detail of it. Besides, she said that she also looked for other videos by the same author so as to know more about the topic. Participant 2 explained that it was challenging to understand the girl in the video, but this was not a big problem since he could watch the video again. It is possible to note, then, that in spite of the fact that the students considered the activity as being challenging, this was not seen as negative by them: actually, they made use of different strategies in order to better understand the material. The idea of looking for other resources for learning is recurrent in the participants’

answers. Participant 2, for example, explained that she got excited while completing the writing task and ended up doing some research to enrich her text.

The tasks also seem to have provided the participants – even if indirectly – with opportunities to reflect about their language skills. Participant 3 explains his choice of destination for the writing activity – Chile – and then reflects about his experience with using English in the country: for him, he could realize that he could communicate his ideas despite his low language level. Participant 3 also talked about the focus on form activity in relation to the use of the structure learned – the modal verb “can” – in different real life situations, suggesting an understanding regarding the application of grammar (and not only of the structure per se). In this sense, the focus on grammar happens because of a communicative need and also serves as a preparation for the final task, in which the students have to use the modal verb to suggest what can be done at a specific tourist destination.

When asked about how they felt while completing the tasks, most participants mentioned that they were encouraged and motivated. Once again, some tasks were more challenging for them, but they made use of different strategies in order to overcome such difficulties (P4). Participant 4 also mentioned that the tasks were very involving for him, since he felt like he was actually traveling and following the people in the texts and videos as they presented different tourist attractions and monuments or talked about local customs.

The questionnaire also asked the participants how they perceived the content of the course, which would include its theme, the different tasks that were proposed, and the language aspects that were approached. The course was evaluated positively by them: participants 3 and 4 emphasized the appropriateness of the topic, and participant 1 mentioned that the course was very dynamic due to the use of different authentic materials and to the combination with grammar (which she terms “theory”). Only participant 2 did not consider the topic of the course as being relevant: for him, there should be different topics every module. This might be due to the fact that he does not like traveling, as he states in the very same answer. In spite of that, he concludes by saying that the course was good. Finally, when asked about the impact of the course on the communication skills in English, all participants mentioned the effect of the tasks as being positive. For participant 1, it was possible to improve all four skills besides learning

more about grammar. Participant 3 highlights that, through the course, he has learned that the needs to try to use the language without fear of expressing his ideas.

Based on the learners' answers to the online questionnaire, it is possible to note that they perceive their engagement in the tasks from the perspective of "l'education integrale". This is because they emphasize that they were "learning by doing" – even though they were not actually traveling, the tasks created contexts in which they would have to imagine different situations in a trip or at a specific location. They also mentioned that they learned about cultural customs and tourist attractions, suggesting that they focused primarily on meaning, that is, in trying to communicate ideas through the four language skills¹³. Furthermore, they had to develop different strategies so as to be able to complete some tasks, suggesting that some level of autonomy was necessary throughout the course. In this sense, the tasks were seen by the participants as student-centered since they would decide on how to approach each activity, how to deal with their difficulties, and so on. Not only that, but they could also establish a relationship between what was learned and their previous traveling experience and background knowledge.

At last, the focus on form emerged from the communicative context, since the participants could understand how to apply contextually the structures that were learned and they could reflect about their learning process. In this sense, the participants' perception of module 4 in the questionnaire seems to go hand in hand with the theoretical rationale of technology-mediated TBLT. This is extremely relevant if we consider that a task is a work plan that may not necessarily have the desired effect once it is actually applied. According to Ellis (2003, p. 5), "one of the goals of task-based research is to establish whether the predictions made by designers are actually borne out". In this sense, this study finds relevance to the extent that it serves as a way of understanding the effectiveness of the tasks from the learners' perspective.

It is also important to mention that one of the participants investigated did not consider the topic of traveling as being relevant or interesting. Even though this was not the case for the majority of participants, this should be taken into consideration since the theme or topic is paramount for an approach that aims at having a primary focus on

¹³ Writing and Speaking tasks were mixed throughout the different modules.

pragmatic meaning. At the same time, however, one should consider the difficulty of choosing topics that will be interesting for everyone, especially in very heterogeneous groups. In this sense, it is important that the relevance of the topic is made clear for the participants. In the case of this course, for example, even though all the tasks revolved around traveling, the topics learned could be applied to daily situations (which was also an aspect noted by some of the participants, as we shall see in more detail shortly).

Having discussed the main findings derived from the answers to the online questionnaire, we shall now focus on the data gathered through the Skype interviews with the participants. The interviews contained four guiding questions related to 1) what the participants had learned in the module; 2) the application of the learned content in their lives; 3) the effectiveness of the course; 4) whether they would recommend the course for other people.

While describing what had been learned in the fourth module of the course, the students focused mainly on the context of the course. Participant 1 explained that, besides learning how to use the modal verb “can”, the module approached the topic of traveling and presented different destinations. Besides, for this participant the module was interesting and it involved the practice of different language skills. For participant 2, the videos used in the tasks were very instructive and they dealt with tourist attractions and cultural customs (such as the video on Japanese culture, which presented new cultural topics to him). Even though the participant seems to perceive that language was taught in a contextualized fashion (that is, departing from and revolving around a guiding theme), he claims that he did not learn much in terms of grammar: in his view, because some of the grammar questionnaires contained automatic corrections without detailed explanations for the mistakes, he could not really understand why something was wrong. In this way, he believes that it would have been better and easier to have the explanation for the answers so that the students would not have to look for detailed explanations elsewhere. While this participant’s view raises an important topic regarding the way the more structural activities were organized (since it might be a good idea to include short automatic explanations for certain topics after the correction of such questionnaires), he seems not to perceive that linguistic knowledge in fact permeated the entire module. The students were not only provided with different linguistic input, but they also had detailed feedback from the tutors on the activities that

were aimed at developing productive skills. This might be due to the fact that this participant – probably based on his previous language learning experience – believes that grammar needs to be taught separately and in a more explicit fashion. Besides, his suggestion that the explanations should be ready-made for the student may in a way contradict an understanding of learning by doing, in which learners engage in activities with an overall focus on meaning that will promote language learning (rather than having ready-made explanations presented to them).

Participant 3 presents a more holistic view of what he learned not only in the module, but also in the entire course.¹⁴ He focuses mainly on the Skype sessions - which took place in other modules – by saying that he learned not to be afraid of using the language. For him, it is important to get his message across, which seems to be in line with a course proposal that has a primary focus on pragmatic meaning. This is not to say, however, that accuracy is not important – that is why the course also presented a focus on form. However, this participant does not mention specific linguistic aspects that were learned, probably because the course itself did not have a strong focus on grammar per se. Participant 4 also emphasizes the content that was learned in Module 4: places to be visited as well as entertainment and cultural options. However, he says that he does not include the grammatical focus of this module – that is, the use of the modal verb ‘can’ – because this is something he had learned previously. This participant’s answer suggests that, for him, the course focused primarily on meaning – still, he seems to regard language learning as a linear process. However, from the perspective of TBLT, certain topics should be revisited since being exposed to a particular structure – or even making use of it – does not guarantee acquisition¹⁵. In this sense, even though the use of the modal “can” might be seen as a very elementary topic, especially for those learners who had studied or learned English previously, the fact that they have the possibility of revisiting such structure in a very specific context – which allows them to elaborate on the meanings they want to convey – is seen as very productive.

¹⁴ This might have happened because the interviews were conducted when the participants were ending module 5 and starting module 6. Consequently, sometimes they had to be reminded, by the interviewer, of what module 4 consisted of. They also tended to include more general comments about the course.

¹⁵ Revisiting topics and repeating similar tasks are known to be beneficial to language learning because, for instance, learners may use such opportunities “to build on their previous attempt at completing the task”, as highlighted by Bygate (2001, p. 29). Besides, this revisiting may help learners to perform better in the L2, enhancing aspects such as fluency, accuracy and/or complexity (SAMPLE; MICHEL, 2014).

The participants were also asked whether they could apply what they had learned in their lives. The purpose of this question was to verify whether students could perceive the connection between the course and real daily life activities. Participant 1 emphasized that she had recently come back from a trip to Paris, so the content from Module 4 was meaningful for her since she could revisit or even learn about different attractions. She also explained that her knowledge of English was very important during the trip since she does not speak French. While participant 1 was able to establish a very direct relation of the course with her life – since she was traveling during a part of the course –, participant 2 could think of different situations in which he would be able to use what had been learned: to find a location, to travel, to ask for information, to get around in a different place, or also to help foreigners who are visiting the country. In this sense, for participant 2 this knowledge may be mainly applied while being in contact with foreigners or when inserted in a context in which English is used. Participant 3 highlighted that the course could help him with his job – in which skimming texts in English is required – and also to make himself understood while traveling. For participant 4, one important characteristic of the course was the incorporation of daily situations – a trip, a conversation with an immigration officer, and so on – which is motivating for the student. Even though he also mentions that the course was an opportunity to review grammar, he seems to perceive such structural learning as being directly linked to real-life situations (that is, “what to do with language”). At last, he said that the four skills were encompassed by the course, in an interesting way that made use of different media texts, files, images, and students’ creations. All the participants seem to understand how the content that was learned can be applied or used in their contexts, indicating an understanding – even if at different levels – of language as a tool for communication or for engaging in different activities. This is also in line with the perspective of “learning by doing” and with the concept of task itself – after all, the purpose of the course was to engage students in different communicative tasks that would simulate different traveling contexts.

Finally, the students were also asked whether they would recommend the course for other people and whether they would take a similar course – with the same rationale or organization, but on a different level – again. The answers for all the participants were very positive. Participant 1, for instance, mentioned that she would take the course again

and that its advantage is that it is possible to study English according to one's own schedule. For her, the Skype sessions are also very important since they give the students' the opportunity to practice their speaking skills. Participant 2 also mentioned that he would take this type of course again, but highlighted that he wishes he had been exposed to more grammar practice, since he is concerned about writing correctly. He says he would recommend the course, but not for real beginners, since he believes the course does not present the students with the language but only exercises. It is important to note that, once again, the participant seems to regard learning a language as being equivalent to learning its grammar. He dichotomizes learning and practice, as if learning itself would not take place during practice. Even though he seems to recognize the application of what was learned in his daily-life context, he does not see the opportunity to practice as a moment for learning. This might be due to the fact that he is not aware of what was learned while practicing or using the language, while through a more explicit type of instruction he might have been more aware of what was learned.

Still on learners' appraisal of the course, participant 3 mentioned that a second edition of the course could have the same format of creating daily-life situations or maintaining the context of traveling. For him, the course created opportunities for the student to be in contact with the language in different contexts. Because of that, he was able to overcome his fear of speaking and also understand different texts in English that are part of his routine. Now, participant 4 explained that the course motivates students to learn on their own and, at the same time, provides support for the students' development to take place. For him, it makes the student think and then use the resources at his disposal in order to construct something. Such response signals that, for this learner, the fact that the course is student-centered is a positive aspect of it – unlike participant 2, who stated that there should be more instructions and explanations so that the students would not have to look for information they did not know. Participant 4 also presents an opposite view from participant 2 while saying that he would recommend the course for both real beginners and people who already have some language knowledge. According to him, because the course increases difficulty little by little – with each module adding to the previous one –, it is appropriate for different target audiences. He says that some people starting to learn the language may profit a

lot from the way it is structured, but those who already know something will also have the opportunity to practice their language skills. For this participant, then, learning may also happen through practice – in other words, he seems to believe that such approach for language learning might be effective for both beginners and non-beginners.

In spite of some differences noticed in participants' answers, in general they all seem to perceive the course from the perspective of *l'éducation integrale*. Even though some seem to perceive a shortage of more structural or traditional types of learning, all of them have mentioned what was learned in terms of “doing things with the language”. Furthermore, they could also establish a relation between the learned content and their life. Such relation seems to be a result of the way in which the tasks were proposed, since the daily life situations they mention are the ones that were simulated by the different activities in the module and in the course. Therefore, it is possible to argue that participants' responses seem to be in line with the concept of tasks and with the rationale behind its implementation. It is also important to highlight that perceptions vary, and they may be shaped by previous learning experiences, such as in the case of participants who claimed for more traditional and grammar-centered activities.

Final considerations

Being acquainted with the ever evolving digital technologies and knowing more about how these may mediate the process of language learning seem to be important aspects to be regarded in language learning environments nowadays (GIMENEZ; RAMOS, 2014). Taking that into consideration, this small scale study aimed at investigating the ways four learners perceived the tasks designed and implemented in one module of a virtual EFL course at UFSC. More specifically, the question guiding this research attempted to unveil *how students in a distance online course perceived the use of tasks in their process of learning English*. In order to answer this question, written and spoken data were collected mainly through a perception questionnaire and an interview, in which learners could reflect about the course and about their own experiences in terms of language learning during one semester.

In general terms, results have shown that considering the module as a whole, most participants perceived the topic *traveling* as motivating and interesting, especially because they felt engaged with “doing things with the language”, they could learn about different cultures and places and they could explore different sites while making use of language. This goes hand in hand with the overall claim of TBLT to be meaning-focused as a primary principle (ELLIS, 2003) and to explore the phenomenon of language learning by using it with a communicative purpose. In addition, some participants were able to relate the tasks in the module with their own traveling experiences, which might have positively contributed to their overall learning process. By relating the topics of the tasks with previous trips learners had taken, it seems that the designed activities were adequate in the sense of resembling some of their real life experiences; this might have somehow rendered the course to be more pleasant for them. Not only that, but they mentioned having learned how to use English in daily life situations – so the content learned can be applied in several contexts besides traveling. Furthermore, when asked about their feelings regarding task completion, participants said to have felt encouraged and motivated, even though (or maybe due to the fact that) some tasks were more challenging than others. Challenge was seen as a positive element, since most participants perceived the course and its tasks progressed in a way that was not only interconnected (with tasks being interrelated, one linked to the other) but also driven from simple to more complex steps (with one task providing the base for the following, in order to reach a greater outcome).

Finally, the course in its entirety was positively evaluated by the participants, despite the fact that some did not consider traveling as the most interesting of all topics. Overall, throughout the process, they perceived themselves ‘learning by doing’. They also felt engaged during the tasks and felt the need to take risks, making use of whatever strategies suited them best in order to foster learning opportunities. These aspects seem to show, as it is well understood, that a certain level of learner autonomy and commitment is essential for language learning to take place, be it in online or face-to-face classrooms. At last, as a final course appraisal, participants reported they would not only recommend it to colleagues and friends but also take another online course similar to this one, considering the positive aspects already mentioned and the progress observed in their own learning experiences.

Taking what has been reported into consideration, experiences such as the ones presented here are extremely relevant if one wants to deepen the understanding of how people learn languages in both online and face-to-face contexts. Allowing learners the opportunity to self-reflect upon their learning routes seems to be relevant, since it is also through that that educators and material designers may make more informed pedagogical decisions. Most importantly, perhaps, learners themselves may better understand the ways they learn best, may develop and expand strategies to cope with the challenges that emerge from proposed activities, and may amplify opportunities for engaging in a more autonomous and successful language learning process.

In this sense, most participants could perceive many of the aspects underlying the technology-mediated tasks implemented in the course. However, some of them – in spite of recognizing the course's effectiveness – suggested a different approach to the way grammar could be worked upon and emphasized, for instance. Because this is probably due to one's beliefs regarding language learning, it would be important to provide learners with more opportunities for reflecting about the approach used in the course. Not only that, but it would also be important to make the students more aware of their learning process, since at some points some participants could not really perceive what they had learned (or were not aware that they had indeed learned). After all, as we have seen, reflective learning is an important component of technology-mediated TBLT (GONZÁLEZ-LLORET; ORTEGA, 2014).

Last but not least, an important underpinning of TBLT is the understanding of language as a political act (LONG, 2015 p. 63): “education of *all* kinds, not just TBLT [...], serves either to preserve or challenge the status quo, and so is a political act, whether teachers and learners realize it or not”. Though the study and the course itself did not address this element specifically despite its relevance — which is, in our view, one of the course's limitations —, further proposals could approach the topic of traveling from a (more explicit) critical perspective so as to problematize, for instance, power relations (the fact that not everyone gets a chance to travel), how different places are represented (why certain places are associated with specific images and why some are well-known while others are not), among other aspects. Despite not being the main focus of this study, this seems to deserve further investigation. Most participants were able to perceive the “learning by doing” assumption from TBLT, but how thorough can

l'éducation integrale be in the distance mode? How can we put into practice all the philosophical and psycholinguistic underpinnings of TBLT in an online environment? While we may partially answer these questions, more extensive research that establishes a relation with what has been done in practice is certainly needed.

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