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Task design challenges: the meta task of building PLNs for foreign language acquisition

Bio data

Pilar Munday is an Associate Professor of Spanish at Sacred Heart University. She received a BA in English Philology from the Universidad de Granada (Spain) and a Ph.D. in Theoretical Linguistics from New York University. Her teaching covers all aspects and levels of the Spanish Language, including Spanish Phonetics, Linguistics and Culture. Her research includes uses of technology in modern foreign language instruction.

Jaya Kannan is the Director of Digital Learning at Sacred Heart University. She has a PhD in Computer Assisted Language Learning and more than 15 years of international teaching and research experience in the higher education setting. Her recent research interests involve the study of self-directed learning and the role of affect in the digital learning environment.

Current research

Our latest collaborative research has primarily focused on studying challenges for digital pedagogy in promoting active learning and learner autonomy. These action research projects have been anchored in foreign language contexts in higher education settings. Here is a summary of two projects from 2014-2015:

1) With the goal of enhancing teaching practices in foreign language classrooms, the research project analyzed the use of student created videos to promote active learning. Using a case study of concrete tasks integrating student created videos in strengthening Spanish Language Acquisition (SLA), we were able to a)identify key characteristics of active learning, b)present the challenges involved for pedagogical design in integrating student created videos and c)describe the shift in the learner's role from passive receiver to co-creator and contributor.

(2) This project identified key issues in achieving learner autonomy by studying how to integrate cloud technology tools such as Google+ communities and Instagram into an undergraduate online Spanish course. In studying the complexity of a networked learning environment, we researched the following factors: high variability among learners, design of learning spaces, digital discourse for community building, and the role of the teacher in facilitating learning using cloud technology tools.

Task-based language learning and teaching

Taking up the test case of a Spanish undergraduate course that used a Task Based Learning approach within a digital environment, we will explore the following challenges for digital pedagogy: 1) How do we decide on task types? 2) How do we shape the tasks? 3) How do we monitor and evaluate these tasks?

For an online Spanish Course, *Advanced Grammar and Culture through Social Media*, this “meta” task was designed: For their final project, students had to present a Personal Learning Network (PLN) they had developed to augment their knowledge of the culture and language of the Spanish speaking world. Although most students in the course successfully completed the task of arriving at a PLN, students faced challenges in building the steps involved because of the non-linear and unique path in each student's process of creating a PLN. How to give equal importance to the individualized process and the creation of a concrete product? This was our major challenge when applying a task based learning approach.

To explore concrete strategies to address the question about effective design of task types, we applied the model described by Samuda and Bygate (2008) “A task is a holistic activity which engages language use in order to achieve some non-linguistic outcome while meeting a linguistic challenge, with the overall aim of promoting language learning, through process or product or both” (p. 69). During the course of the semester, students were made aware of different “nodes” that they could add to the PLN, such as different social networks, MOOCS in Spanish, websites with communities of learners, etc. At the same time, they were also reviewing advanced grammar topics in Spanish by doing focus-on-form type exercises.

In shaping the task and guiding the students through the developmental process, the Need Analysis pattern for technology mediated TBLL described in Gonzalez-Lloret & Ortega (2014) was highly relevant. According to the Gonzalez-Lloret & Ortega model, language tasks and technology tasks are of the same importance. When this learning principle was integrated within our task design, students shaped the creation of the PLN by 1) learning to select the suitable technology features within Google Plus and Instagram to gradually develop their PLN and 2) overcoming the hurdles for access and 3) harnessing them effectively for strengthening Spanish language learning.

An in-depth investigation of the interactional patterns within the meta task showed that the digital discourse of students with their peers, with the instructor, and with external agencies showed very high variability. Poor feedback loops and lack of cooperative learning emerged as key issues.

In our presentation we will examine these three pedagogical questions cited above through the lens of data from student learning. Examples from student PLNs will highlight the finding that merely setting up a task and creating an online shared space may not be enough to ensure real language acquisition. Specific strategies will be presented from this test case to enhance motivation and participation when designing meta tasks.

Short paper

Introduction

Students in a Spanish undergraduate course were assigned the task of developing a Personal Learning Network (PLN), with the goal of strengthening language learning by linking several tasks to build a meta-task. Integrating a PLN can be an effective task-based approach because PLNs provide an optimal learning model for language learning by connecting learners with peers, the instructor, and open education resources. Connected networks are essential for language learning. The manner in which the instructor designs, implements, and allows for self-regulation through the process of developing the PLN affects student learning. When this meta-task positions the student in the dual roles of creator and contributor to a PLN, it is the learner who drives the learning process to meet his/her goal.

In this paper, we will take up the test case of a Spanish undergraduate course that used a Task Based Learning (TBL) approach within a digital environment, and will explore the

following challenges for digital pedagogy: 1) How do we decide on task types? 2) How do we shape the tasks? 3) How do we monitor and evaluate these tasks?

Teaching Scenario for Task Based Learning

In an online Spanish Course, *Advanced Grammar and Culture through Social Media*, the instructor designed the following “meta” task: as their final project, students had to present a Personal Learning Network (PLN) that they had developed to augment their knowledge of the culture and language of the Spanish speaking world. Although most students in the course successfully completed the task of arriving at a PLN, students faced challenges at various points because of the non-linear and unique path in each student's process of creating a PLN. Thus our major challenge when applying a task based learning approach was the question of how to give equal importance to the individualized process and the creation of a concrete product.

Understanding this final project requires a review of the course itself. The syllabus for this advanced Spanish course can be viewed at <https://tackk.com/SP299OLF14>. The course had three main objectives: (1) to achieve a higher level of proficiency in Spanish by reviewing advanced grammar topics, which were practiced via social media; (2) to be able to reflect on both the advanced grammar as well as the social and cultural aspects learned throughout the course in a personal, public blog where students commented on each other's posts; and (3) to identify some key concepts related to digital citizenship, such as digital footprint, content curation, privacy and ethics and develop their own personal learning network to be used to augment their knowledge of the culture and language of the Spanish speaking world.

Figure 1 shows the workflow of the course. The course had three main areas: (1) the advanced grammar review; (2) six modules about the concepts related to digital citizenship and lifelong learning; and (3) a group project for which students had to study different social media tools in relation to learning Spanish. For (1), we used an online advanced Spanish grammar book (<http://www.bowdoin.edu/~eyepes/newgr/ats/>) (Yepes, 2008), and students had to review some items of the grammar every week. Then they had to find appropriate examples of the studied grammar as used by native speakers in social media, and post these in our discussion board (we used Google Plus for this purpose). For (2), students had approximately two weeks to research the topics for each of the six modules, complete the assignments (which could range from investigating different social networks in Spanish speaking countries to Massive Online Learning Courses offered in Spanish, to give two examples), comment their findings on our Google Plus community, and finally write a reflection blog post in which they were supposed to also add some examples of the grammar studied. Students also had to read and comment on two of their peers' blogs. Finally, for the group project (3), students created presentations showing how to learn and practice Spanish using social media.

During the semester, the instructor conducted weekly Hangouts through Google Plus. Each student was required to participate in at least two of these. Because Hangouts are saved to YouTube, they were used mainly as a reference for students on how to perform the assigned projects or tasks.

As shown in Figure 1, all of these activities were supposed to help students embark on their final project, the creation of their own PLN.

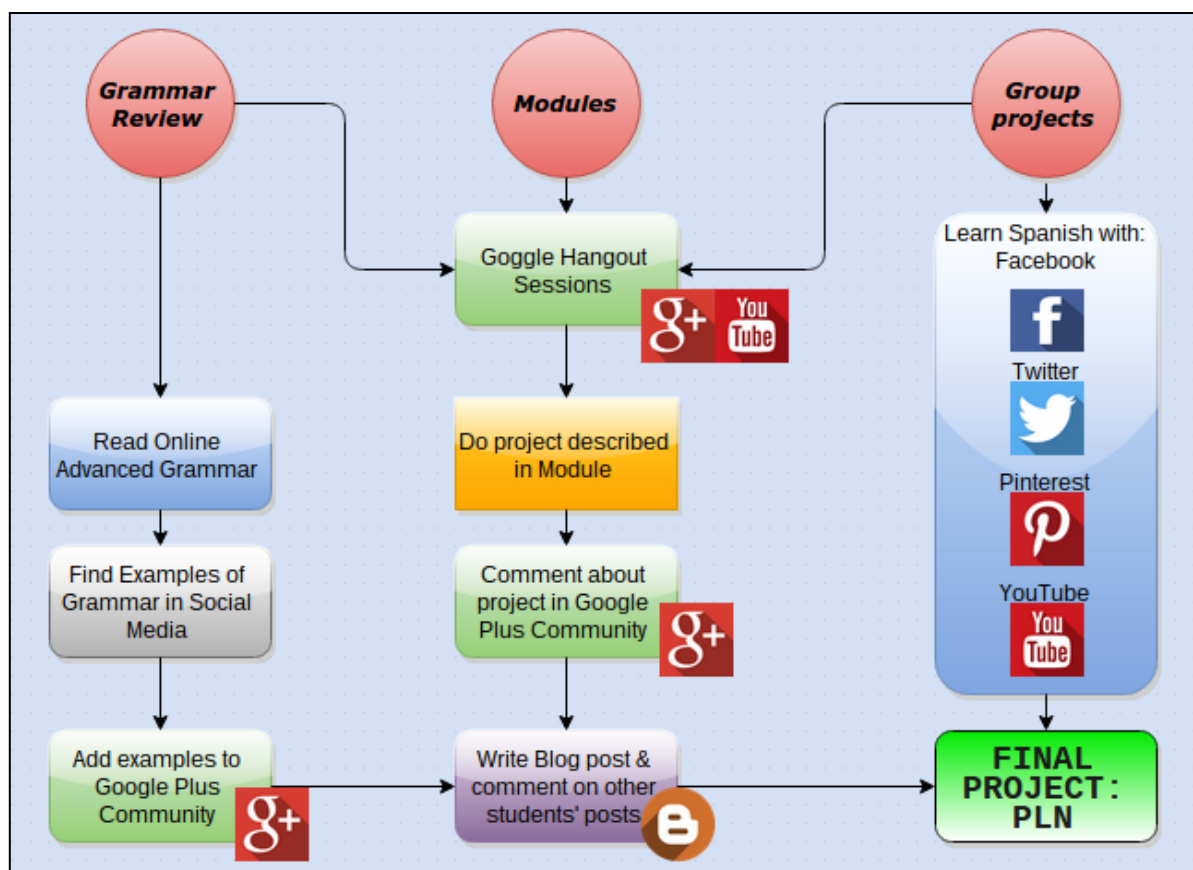


Figure 1: Workflow of class

How do we decide on task types?

The above description of the teaching scenario clearly shows that the use of a PLN served as a meta-task, understood here in the way described by Worchel and Simpson, 1993, as a task that deals with other tasks. In this case, the meta-task included a complex combination of tasks that involved the process of exploring several social media tools through the vehicle of Spanish language learning. This process resulted in a concrete product wherein each student arrived at his or her own customized PLN. To address the high level of variability among the students in the course, the task was set up in such a way that each and every student was viewed as a unique learner driving his or her own individual path of learning. Therefore, this task provided a suitable learning ground for the students in the course to operate as connected learners as they went through the process of building the PLN, and yet enabled them to create a PLN product that was individualized. A balance between the student's role of connected knower and creator of an original PLN to meet one's own learning needs was well achieved.

In exploring concrete strategies to address the question of how to effectively design task types, we applied the model described by Samuda and Bygate (2008): "A task is a holistic activity which engages language use in order to achieve some non-linguistic outcome while meeting a linguistic challenge, with the overall aim of promoting language learning, through process or product or both" (p. 69). With this definition in mind, the instructor created the following task:

- **HOLISTIC ACTIVITY** → Creation of a Personal Learning Network or environment to foster the acquisition of Spanish. It is considered "holistic" because it is composed of parts or nodes which are understood as part of a whole system. For example, Twitter by itself is a social network, but in this case it can be a vehicle for language learning where students connect with native speakers, which can lead to further collaboration through other tools such as Skype or YouTube.

- **ENGAGE LANGUAGE USE** → Students used only Spanish to navigate the different subtasks involved. They were required to use the target language at all times when asking questions to the instructor, sharing their findings through their blog posts, and commenting on other students' work.
- **NON-LINGUISTIC OUTCOME** → Each student would be able to "show" a unique PLN, which could be used in the future. Figure 2 shows an example from one of our students. The student used a tool she liked, Symbaloo, to put together the "nodes" of her PLN, creating an online place where she could go directly to language learning websites such as Duolingo, research a question on vocabulary or grammar in WordReference.com, check the news about her favorite Spanish soccer team, etc. The process by which she created this "platform" for her Spanish needs could also be used for other subjects in the future, and not be limited merely to language learning.
- **LINGUISTIC CHALLENGE** → Students had to practice advanced Spanish grammar points while navigating social networks, websites, MOOCS in Spanish, discussion boards with communities of learners, etc. which could become possible nodes for their own PLN in the final project.



Figure 2: An example of a student PLN

How do we shape the task?

The Need Analysis pattern described in Gonzalez-Lloret & Ortega (2014) for technology-mediated, task-based language learning is highly relevant to shaping the task and guiding the students through the developmental process. According to the Gonzalez-Lloret & Ortega model, language tasks and technology tasks are of the same importance. With this Need Analysis (NA) system, students can offer insights into what kind of social media they already use and why they use it. They can also share subjects that are of interest to them for their future professions and how some of the websites seen in class can help them advance their Spanish in that field. In Figure 3, we see one student reflecting on a MOOC (Massive Online Open Course) she found that related to vision care. She wants to be an optometrist, and in her reflection she mentions that this course can

teach her specific vocabulary in Spanish that no other course in our university could ever cover (highlighted parts in Figure 3).

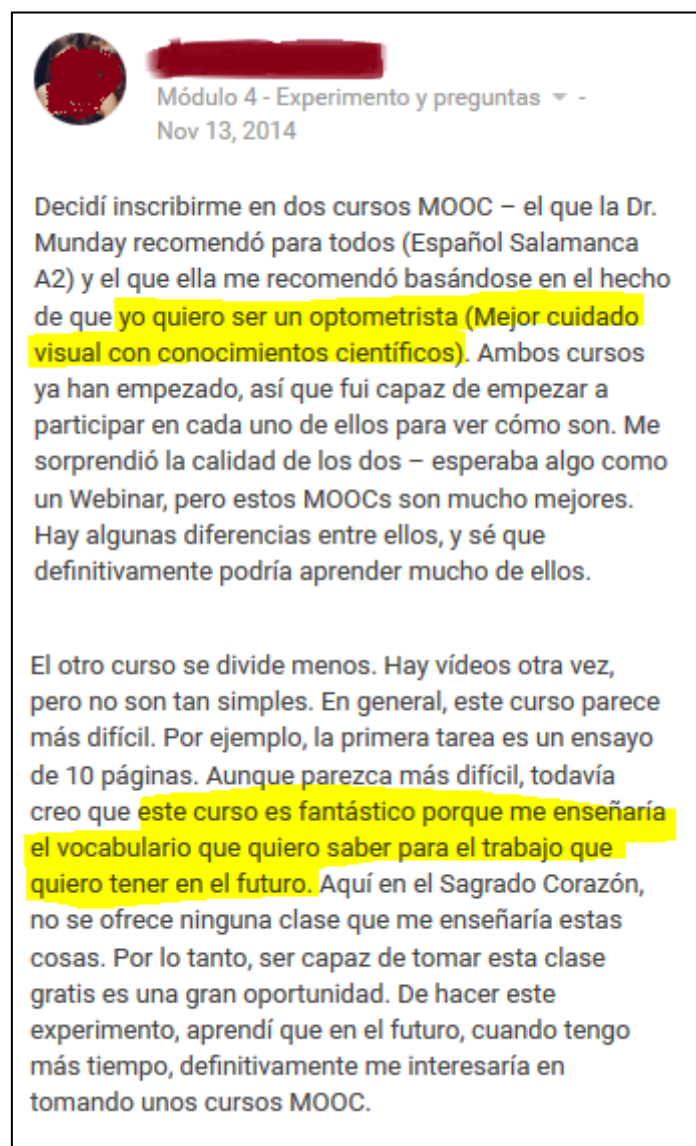


Figure 3: A student's reflection about a MOOC in Spanish and how it can help her in her professional life.

These NA activities should actually be conducted throughout the course in different forms such as surveys, discussion board posts like the one shown in Figure 3, and even conversations, which in the case of this online class took place as video chats conducted using Google Hangouts. Chart 1 presents a summary of possible NA activities (with tools) that can help shape the task. By monitoring student learning needs in this way, we can link the task more closely to learner motivation.

Need Analysis Activities	Tool	Rationale
Survey to establish knowledge and participation about Social Networks	Google Form	Gauge student interest, mastery about these networks in native language
Discussion about different websites	Google Plus Communities	Students can start learning about their own interests
Video interviews with instructor and students to discuss activities to be completed	Google Hangouts	Students can ask questions about elements of activity which are not clear. Video can be posted on class website to clarify activities

Chart 1: Need Analysis Possibilities

When this NA learning principle was integrated within our task design, students shaped the creation of the PLN by 1) learning to select the suitable technology features within the tools seen in class (such as Google Plus or Twitter) in order to gradually develop their PLN, and 2) harnessing them effectively to strengthen Spanish language learning.

How do we monitor and evaluate the tasks?

Assessment of learning involved continuous loops of the following - 1) query from instructor to verify learning, 2) response from student through the task of communication within the Google Plus communities or demonstration of learning through the task submission, and 3) feedback from the instructor to clarify, provide intervention, or guide the student forward in the process of developing the PLN. Several elements of self-regulation were observed in all of these activities. Self-regulated learning is the "process of taking control of and evaluating one's own learning behaviour." (Ormrod, 2009, p. 105). Students had several opportunities to clarify instructions through Google hangout sessions or commenting or checking the instructor's feedback via the Google plus communities. In one instance, a student posted his exercise on the online language learning site called Duolingo in order to obtain feedback on the correctness of his work before submitting his work for the course. This specific example highlights the fact that the student could draw upon a distributed network of expertise for learning rather than relying upon the teacher as the sole authority for Spanish language acquisition. Exposure to Duolingo earlier in the course had enabled the student to apply PLNs as a meaningful model for anchoring the language learning experience within a global sociocultural context. The fact that learners engage with PLNs and go outside the formal Course Management System (CMS), has "caused a new wave of distributed education and yet another paradigm shift in the delivery of learning experiences." (Shepard, 2012. P.128).

Overall Challenges

Although we believe this task has ample pedagogical value, we did find some challenges during the course of its implementation, which are listed here:

- Prior knowledge: Students were not familiar with the creation of a PLN for language learning, even though they have been using social networks. They were also not very familiar with, or had difficulty accessing, some of the tools used in the course, such as Google Hangouts, Google Presentations, or Instagram.
- Timeline: Although the tasks were designed to be developmental in nature, students were required to create the PLN as a product by the end of the course. This was a flawed approach because students arrived at a PLN, but then didn't have enough opportunity to use the PLN for language learning within the framework and timeline of the course.
- Putting together all the elements of the tasks: Students had to review grammar, look up examples of that grammar problem in social media, and then become familiar with the social media itself. Students showed difficulty in making

connections between the different elements and understanding the holistic framework of the PLN.

- Comprehension of task instructions, all of which were in Spanish: This added to the complexity of the task, as there were many levels of navigation - 1-grammar, 2-social networks, and 3-comprehension of instructions in Spanish. The work within the tasks got incrementally more complex.
- Monitoring and evaluating the task: Continuity of feedback loops was not effective because feedback pertained to each sub-task and didn't carry through to the next task. This resulted in some loss of communication. Students failed to see the holistic framework of the PLN when the logical links between the tasks and the overall framework of networked learning were not understood. For example, students had the option to seek feedback before posting on the blog, but only 10% of the students took advantage of this option. Response from the student survey clearly indicated that the limited time and the lack of incentives were two factors that were an obstacle to them seeking feedback for useful intervention.

Evidence of Learning

Despite these challenges, the effectiveness of the TBL approach was clearly evident. 95% of the students in the course had successfully created a PLN by the end of the term. How they strengthened their learning of Spanish by both creating and contributing to a PLN was demonstrated in different ways:

- Students' grammar clearly improved by the end of the semester, as evidenced by the writing in their blog posts. Students were using more complex sentences, including correct use of the subjunctive and other topics discussed in class.
- In their blog post reflections, students described which elements they chose for their final PLNs and why. For example, several students picked Duolingo (and its discussion boards) as a "place" to not only review Spanish, but also to make connections to other language learners.
- The four group presentations created regarding the use of social media for learning Spanish were used by the rest of students to add different blocks to their own PLNs.

This set the stage for students to develop as autonomous learners well beyond the timeline and scope of this course.

Given our study of this course, we have arrived at several strategies for applying the task of creating a PLN in a FL classroom:

- Be flexible: Use the Need Analysis as described above both before and during the course to adapt modules/projects as needed to meet your students' needs.
- Ask students to present their PLN not as final task, but at some point during the course, probably after two-thirds of the course has been completed. This will allow students to actually "use" their PLN and reflect upon this use with their peers. The students could then tweak their own PLNs accordingly.
- Be mindful of continuity: In our course, students had strict weekly deadlines, and thus did not go back to post in a forum if the deadline had passed. This also meant, however, that they could not share new discoveries with peers, either about samples of grammar usage or about possible nodes for their PLN.
- Give more value to "responses" to discussion boards or blog posts. As described above, the instructor often did not receive a response when she made a comment, and therefore did not know if her feedback had been even seen.

Conclusions

As a conceptual framework, PLNs can strengthen language learning because they are built on the foundation of connectedness. This case study presents the importance of pedagogical design when setting up meta-tasks that promote higher-order learning.

Despite the challenges involved in designing and implementing the task, the applicability of this model is worthy of further study.

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