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Multimodal literacy and technology-mediated task Based language learning¹

1. Multimodal literacy, TBLT and CLIL in L2 learning and teaching

Second language acquisition theory (SLA) recognized the relevance of Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) at the very beginning of the 21st century: "...anyone concerned with second language teaching and learning in the 21st century needs to grasp the nature of the unique technology – mediated tasks learners can engage in for language acquisition and how such tasks can be used for assessment" (Chapelle, 2001: 2). As "millennials" and members of the "i-generation", born and raised in multimodal contexts, have entered our classrooms a while ago, it has become necessary to engage in a search of new ways of knowledge construction which could consequently be used in any foreign/second language (L2) learning and teaching process.

TBLT has over the last 20 years or so rightfully taken a significant position in a large number of SLA theory and teaching practice oriented research which successfully combines psychological and socio-cultural dimensions of learning in general (Ellis, 2003; Samuda & Bigate, 2008; Müller-Hartmann & Schocker-v. Dirfurth, 2010). A task is defined as a well designed and purposeful activity with a clearly outlined objective which requires an activation of various language competences and practical communicative skills. However, I tend to agree with Müller-Hartmann & Schocker-v. Dirfurth (2010) in their assessment of the first stages of TBLT as a "top-down" teaching method in which task management (a choice of topics, techniques and outcomes) was exclusively entrusted with the language teachers. According to these authors, emergence of multimodal literacy coincides with an alternative approach to TBLT, which may be labeled as "bottom-up", in which students' discursive and narrative practices and high levels of intercultural communicative competence are prerequisites for the creation of a constructive, contextualized learning space, in which negotiation of meaning and personal and collective experiences may significantly contribute to a successful task design, production and purposeful completion (Filipović, in press). A need for the development of a systemic approach which would encompass the micro-level of classroom practices and macro-levels of institutionalized language education policy and planning as well as wider societal perspectives has also been recognized quite some time ago (Warschauer, 1998: 759, cit. in Müller-Hartmann & Schocker-v. Dirfurth, 2010: 21). In a nutshell, the purpose of this paper is to reiterate the fact that after an initial stage of IT idolatry (deterministic approach) and later recognition of IT as a useful tool (instrumental approach) (Müller-Hartmann & Schocker-v. Dirfurth, 2010), the time has come for us to apply our knowledge in the area of critical pedagogy and critical linguistics, and to make use of socio-cultural contexts of teaching and learning practices, and not only from the perspective of power relations across and within educational institutions. Rather, we need to take a deeper look into the true nature of construction of multimodal semiotic meanings.

In other words, every interaction with multimodal discourses (which in the case of L2 learning imply multilingual discourses) assumes an activation of cognitive process which we apply to the creation of "mindscapes"² (Maruyama, 1980) based on technological semiotic resources (van Leeuwen, 2005). I borrow terms *rhythm* and *layout* from social multimodal semiotics in order to describe the functioning of our choices and combinations of technological semiotic resources which have fundamental impact on the structure and contents of our mindscapes on one hand, and which both directly correlate with sociolinguistic, cultural and cognitive anthropological interpretations of the world we live in on the other hand. *Rhythm* is understood as the creation of "cohesion in multimodal events – composition in time", while *layout* "is a matter of positioning things in or on a space – a bit this way... a bit that way... just a little bit up here... just a little bit down there... etc. – until a sense of a balance has been achieved so that the arrangement feels 'just right' (van Leeuwen, 2005: 181). Therefore, multimodal literacy is herein understood as a harmony among our collective worldview which conditions our existence in a given community (social knowledge about acceptable and non-acceptable language choices, styles, registers and topic selection, as well as discursive competence), recognition, validation and successful negotiation of meaning with members of other cultural and speech communities (intercultural communicative competence), along with an IT competence required for purposeful and successful management of multimodal

¹ This is a companion paper to Vučo, Filipović, Marković (PETALL PROJECT - PANEUROPEAN EXCHANGE OF TBLT AND ICT GOOD PRACTICES; this conference)

² A term 'mindscapes' is borrowed from multimodal semiotics and it is defined as "a structure of reasoning, cognition, perception, conceptualization, design, planning and decision making" (Maruyama, 1980: 591)

semiotic resources (selection of sources of information and their functional and effective application)³. All the above has to be carried out in a suitable rhythm of meaning construction and through a design of a comprehensive semiotic layout if we want our communicative activities to be acceptable and meaningful not only to us, but also to those we create them for (be it a peer group in formal or informal education, teachers or other members of a given educational community, or a person or a group outside of our educational community, such as students or teachers from other cultural and linguistic backgrounds in online collaborative learning).

Therefore, multimodal literacy is herein understood as a prerequisite for any successful and efficient technology-mediated TBLT in computer assisted settings. Multimodal literacy is not limited to receptive aspects of information search, but it also necessarily takes into account a productive engagement in information systematization, organization and representation within a multimodal narrative, understood as a task in L2 teaching and learning. We define a multimodal narrative in L2 teaching and learning as a clearly structured result of a task-based activity with a well defined onset, production sequence and a purposeful and informative product (in form of a poster, power point presentation, web page, video clip or a cartoon, *youtube* channel, online forum, podcast, social networks interactions, and the like). It also includes active knowledge of IT resources such as online applications used to create multimodal narratives, as well as our students' capacity to work with video cameras, video editing tools and other aspects of multimodal material production. This further implies a 'bottom-up' approach to technology-mediated TBLT as students play a crucial role in the selection of types of multimodal narratives they wish and choose to produce within a specific socio-cultural context of a classroom which involves a complex process of individual and collective cognitive analysis and negotiation of meaning targeting not only their L2 competences, but also enhancing their general cognitive capacities and defining new affective priorities both among students and among their teachers (Collentine, 2009). Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) thus also becomes an inseparable aspect of technology-mediated TBLT as the tasks defined by students and their teachers normally include search, selection, presentation and application of multimodal data relevant to the construction of information sets related to topics of local, regional, glocal and/or global relevance (in several languages). Students' active participation in task design and topic selection in the areas of their personal and academic sphere of interest (literature, movies, music, fashion, culture, politics, geography, history, biology, etc.) significantly improves the frequency and quality of L2 interactions, lowers the affective filter, raises the degrees of intrinsic and instrumental motivation (Dörnyei, 2006), enhances critical thinking and creative problem solving abilities. Technology-mediated TBLT assures broader L2 input as well as L2 intake, rich and purposeful interaction and clearly constructed L2 output in form of a task/product which very often integrates a significant intercultural dimension as well.

2. PETALL as a case study

PETALL (*Pan European Tasks for Language Learning*)⁴ is an international project sponsored by the European Commission (see Vučo et al, this conference, for further information) whose main objective was to develop a technology-mediated TBLT approach to teaching and learning different languages which would recognize cultural and linguistic diversity and whose results would be adaptable to a number of socio-educational contexts in which it was implemented (10 countries and 11 languages)⁵.

In the continuation of this section, I will use examples of tasks designed and developed by the Serbian team, targeting English as a foreign language in a secondary vocational school (the Aviation Academy) located in Belgrade, Serbia. All the tasks developed within this project were 'bottom-up' oriented, which means that the Academy students actively participated in topic selection and task design (and, of course, task development). The tasks all have different degrees of linguistic complexity and require various competences and skills in using IT applications and tools for production of multimodal narratives (*youtube*, *BitStrips*, *GoAnimate*, *Picturedots*, *Voki*, *Wikipedia*, *Activityvillage*, *Puzzlefactory*, *Jigsawplanet*, *iMovie*, *Windows Movie Maker*, *Wordle*, *Tagul*, *Lucidpress*, *Jukeboxprint*, etc.). A constructive search for knowledge, rather than factography and memorization, is at the core of all the activities: in each task, the students were required to convert raw multimodal data into organized and systematic information sets, presented in an efficient and effective way as multimodal narratives. All the tasks were very complex in terms of structure, with a long list of activities and multimodal products designed by the students.

In terms of language structures, it is important to point out that both receptive and productive language skills were targeted (levels A1-B2 of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*). Aspects of communicative and grammatical competences were paid equal attention, within tasks which apply the "focus on form" approach to grammar teaching and learning (Doughty, C. & J. William, 1998; Filipović, 2001; Gass, S & L. Selinker, 2008) in highly contextualized settings in which topics such as ecology, history of aviation, healthy eating habits, gaming, orientation in space and time, sports and entertainment, leisure time, family history, documentary video clip on Aviation Academy, substance abuse problems, teenage identity construction through identification with popular culture figures, etc., are covered in a range of multimodal narratives using IT tools and applications described in the previous paragraph. Language is understood as the means of carrying out

³ see Filipović, 2017; in press; for further comments on the application of multimodal semiotics in the understanding of multimodal reading.

⁴ All information about the project available at: <http://petallproject.eu/petall/index.php/en/>

⁵ The Project was awarded a European Languages Label (ELL) for 2016 (<http://petallproject.eu/petall/index.php/en/14-sample-data-articles/91-petall-project-awarded-the-european-languages-label-2016>)

communicative action and negotiation of meaning in authentic interactions, which reduces the chances of mechanical memorization of grammatical structures and lexical items which later on the students could not successfully engage in spontaneous communicative situations outside of the classroom. Moreover, as the illustrative (but not exhaustive) list of task topics illustrates, the project included a very important aspect of social engagement and development of intercultural competence with a strong emancipatory component, accompanied by empathy and understanding of others⁶. As the authors state in one of the tasks:

"This class objective is to develop positive attitudes which value the other and the different."

Finally, complex technology-mediated communicative tasks require an extensive analysis of topics and serious activity planning which makes this approach to L2 learning and teaching challenging in terms of development of students' levels of general cognitive maturity.

3. Conclusions

Application of IT in L2 classrooms has ceased to be a novelty a long time ago. What makes it innovative and relevant to the present moment in SLA development is the creation of new spaces for both theoretical considerations and teaching practice improvements.

Within the realm of SLA theory, a technology-mediated TBLT based on multimodal literacy allows us to research the role and importance of multimodal communication in knowledge construction, and to help us better understand the role of sounds and images in L2 input, intake and output. Likewise, empirical research within this approach adds to the validity of some well known hypotheses, such as that by Lav Vygotsky, about the Zone of Proximal Development, in which group work assures transfer of knowledge and skills within a peer classroom community and thus improves the acquisition rate of each and all students. In other words, as Chun (2016: 99) suggests, if we analyze L2 acquisition within technology-mediated TBLT from the perspective of socio-cultural theory and interactional approach, we can offer a deeper understanding of the relevance of input in communicative contexts (linguistic environment), and focus on cognitive and socio-cognitive processes engaged in task design and development (social environment). "Technology, through the World Wide Web or Internet, allows for exposure to authentic target language input, in the form of multimodal websites that contain text-based, audio, and video information about both language and culture. In addition, the many different types of CMC, often classified as Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 technologies (e.g., email, forums, chats, blogs, wikis, podcasts, videos, social networking sites, virtual worlds, massively multiplayer online games) enable various kinds of communication, interaction, and collaboration, whether it be between learner and computer or between or among people (i.e., learners in and outside of the classroom or speakers of the target language anywhere in the world" (Chun, 2016: 101).

Teaching practice can also be significantly improved through technology-mediated TBLT. The fact that the Internet opens up a limitless access to authentic L2 materials, with countless repetitions of relevant communicative structures, supported by the possibility for collaborative learning through spontaneous interaction, but also grammar learning and auto-correction (in both spoken and written mediums), are likely to alter teachers' attitudes toward the presence of, for instance, smart phones in the L2 classroom. A technological gadget which has until recently been seen as an impediment to classroom management and administration, and which has been treated as an unwelcome distraction to students' attention to the teaching content, has become a meaningful teaching tool which can find its appropriate purpose as a mini-computer which should be used for web searches, systematization and presentation of multimodal contexts from different areas of life and science in the target language. Teaching techniques and methods, should, naturally, be adapted to this new teaching approach.

Finally, technology-mediated TBLT may have serious impact on the development of intercultural communicative competence. If students develop basic IT competence and skills necessary to apply them in the creation of meaningful multimodal narratives, this will open up a path for a continuous improvement of their self-confidence through activities which support the capacity for critical thinking and evaluation of one's own position as an insider within a given community, as well as that of an outsider in interactions with members of other speech, cultural, religious and other communities of practice.

In conclusion, we will make a call to teaching and research communities to *normalize* technology-mediated L2 learning and teaching (Bax, 2003, 2011). By normalization we understand "a state where technology is fully integrated into second language teaching and learning and is no longer special or unusual, in the way that books, pencils, and blackboards were in traditional classrooms" (Bax, 2003, 2011, cit. in Chun, 2016: 107). IT has become a part of our everyday lives a long time ago, and it has been an ever present facet in the lives of "millennials" and the "i-generation" who cannot even imagine living with just analogue technologies, let alone technology-free living! It is up to us to make sure that IT is adapted to every person's real-life and educational needs and to work as mediators in supporting our children and teenagers in controlling the technology, not the other way around.

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⁶ Due to formal limitations of this paper, there is no space for illustrative presentation of the tasks. For further detail, see Vučo & Manić (2016).

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