

## **Blending Task-Based Language Teaching with Technology in Indian Language Classrooms – Practical Application and Challenges**

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### **Abstract**

The emergence of task-based language teaching (TBLT) in the 1980s has been widely accepted in the field of language teaching and institutions across the globe. But it has been commonly employed in face to face communication. Not much work has been done to promote TBLT through technology, especially in Indian language classrooms. The recent trend towards globalisation has urged the language experts to supplement their classroom instructions with technological devices such as computers, smart phones, tablets, and white boards. It offers a wide range of support to both the teachers and language learners to broaden their language skills. Hence, the paper is an attempt to blend the already existing communicative approach of task based instruction with technology in Indian diaspora to expand the recent trends in language education in India. It aims to highlight the advantages of using technology in language classrooms for enhancing the communicative competence of the learners. The paper also tries to highlight some of the challenges faced by the language teachers in employing technology-based instructions in Indian classrooms along with some suggestions to tackle the problems.

**Keywords:** Indian Languages Classrooms, Task-based language teaching, technology, communicative competence.

### **Introduction**

Task- based language teaching (TBLT) is an offshoot of the communicative approach to language teaching which emerged during the late 1980s as a reaction to the traditional presentation-practice-production (PPP). Authors like Breen (1989), Candlin (2001), Ellis (2003), Willis (1996), Nunan (1989), Skehan (1996), Prabhu (1987) are credited for laying the theoretical foundation of the task- based approach. 'Task' is the pivotal component of this approach which encompasses 'real world' activities where learners are engaged in solving a problem for reaching a specific goal by using target language forms (Bygate, Skehan & Swain, 2001; Nunan, 1989; Candlin, 2001). For Ellis (2003) tasks can be "a work plan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of content". In India, TBLT gained impetus with Prabhu's (1987) Bangalore/ Madras Communicational Teaching Project. The ever-increasing number of books and researches done in this area are a clear evident of the significance and demand of TBLT in language classrooms. However, the reality of the classrooms has failed to live up to the

expectations raised by its proponents. It has been observed that even the most effectively designed task failed to reach the desired outcome. Reasons for the low-level outcome from TBLT might have been its improper implementation into the classroom lesson plan. Some of the main reasons for the reluctance towards the use of TBLT comes from the reports of a survey under a project- ETALAGE which revealed that it is time consuming, requires proper training on the part of the teachers and it failed to confront the specific needs of the classes of different countries due to cross- cultural differences (Lopes, 2011). Other factors include lack of motivation among the learners, dependence on the teacher, largely populated classrooms and difference in the level of proficiency among the students (Bruton, 2005; Littlewood, 2007; carless 2007). The advancement in the field of technology and the increasing literature on digital literacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has rendered a valuable support to the language teaching experts. Online resources have expanded the scope of tasks by enhancing its authenticity and autonomy among the students who can utilize it even beyond the classroom context (Skehan, 2003; Kern, 2006; Stone and Wilson-Duffy, 2009). On the other hand, TBLT has also provided an extensive platform for the use of technology for designing tasks and monitoring different areas of language teaching and learning.

### **Review of Related Literature**

Various perspectives and cross- disciplinary studies have been explored highlighting the inter dependence of TBLT and technology for expanding the pedagogical framework of language teaching in Indian classrooms. Authors like Ellis (2003), Willis (1996), Nunan (1989), Prabhu (1987), Skehan (1996) have made a remarkable contribution in laying the theoretical foundation of TBLT and enormous amounts of books and papers have been published. As far as technology- mediated TBLT is concerned, there are still relatively little publications in this domain. However, in recent years, attempts have been made to illustrate how different technologies could be integrated in language classrooms. In this regard, *Chapelle (2001)* points out that “as we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century, everyday language use is so tied to technology that learning language through technology has become a fact of life with important implications for all applied linguists (p.1). In order to fill the gap that exist between TBLT in face to face (FTF) communication and TBLT in technology- mediated contexts, *Michael Thomas and Hayo Reinders (2010)* edited ‘*Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching with Technology*’. It’s the first collection to include international perspectives and contributions from researchers and learners from various countries like Canada, Germany, Japan, and United States. The book is an attempt to highlight “the potential synergies between TBLT and CALL...(it) views TBLT as a continuum, stretching from concerns with the design and adoption of task in classroom practice, to the development of task- based language syllabi and curricula.” (p. 7).

**PETALL** (Pan-European Task Activities for Language Learning) is another important project funded by the European Commission (2013-16) that explored educational institutes and schools in different countries where ICT based tasks has been a success. It aimed at designing similar ICT based projects keeping in mind the cultural and geographical diversities of different nations. In order to achieve their purpose, the project provided training to budding teachers to make them aware of the technology- mediated TBLT (Lopes, 2014). In similar veins, *Marta Gonzalez- Lloret and Ortega’s (2014)* edited a book ‘*Technology mediated TBLT: Researching Technology and Tasks*’ which provides some useful insights into various qualitative and quantitative studies. The book contains a significant number of experimental studies performed with students in real-world instructional settings. It includes needs analysis, possible challenges as well as the frameworks for the design and evaluation of tasks in 3D virtual worlds. In one of the studies carried out by *S.J. Pierson* in USA- “*Bridges to Swaziland: Using Task- Based Learning and Computer- Mediated*

*Instruction to Improve English Language Teaching and Learning*” investigated the impact of blending TBLT and CALL on English language learners and teachers. The impact, as reported by the author was quite empowering for the orphans, vulnerable children and teachers.

Keeping in mind the above literature, it is expected that similar emerging trend of integrating technology into task- based approach in various international context would provide a base for experimenting similar research work in different regional educational settings in India.

### **Practical Application of Technology Blending TBLT in Indian Languages Classrooms**

Teaching in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not limited to the traditional means of pen, paper and chalk. With a wide range of digital devices, internet facility and online tools available in the globalized era, our current pattern of communication is also changing. Thus, ‘Digital Competence’ has also been incorporated by the European Unions as the eighth key competence for life-long learning (Immerfall & Therborn, 2010). Even the Indian Government took a step forward in 2015 in making the country digitalised through the ‘Digital India’ campaign to emphasize on universal digital literacy and to promote inclusive growth. Keeping in mind the political, theoretical and practical aspects of English education in India, some of the technology integrated tasks focusing on developing different language skills have been discussed below.

#### **a. Using Computers into TBLT**

Recent studies have confirmed the effectiveness of using computer and internet for designing communicative tasks. ICT would aid language teachers in designing communicative tasks that can provide learners with the opportunity to use the target language (Jeon, 2005). In Indian schools and colleges, the access to use computers are through language labs or computer labs, which are limited in number. Keeping this factor in mind teachers can divide the class into groups or pairs and engage them in meaningful tasks. *Designing tasks using computer or laptop:* Tasks such as information gap, problem solving, can be designed using digital devices like computers, laptops, whiteboard etc.

**Sample Activity:** For developing the interpersonal and language skills (LSRW) in an integrated manner the class could be divided into groups or pairs.

- In order to teach the class how to make a short film or video clip using online software like ‘windows movie maker’ or ‘filmora’ the teacher with the help of the projector can first show the whole class a short video clip which has been prepared using the software. The film can be of a recipe being prepared or any tutorial for opening a bank account or booking a ticket which has been composed by editing different parts of one or more video clips and merging them into a single clip with some texts inserted along with the video.
- Using the white board, the teacher can explain the process of making the film step by step to the whole class
- For the pre task phase, students can be asked to voluntarily repeat each step of movie making on the white board. This would be a demonstration for the class as to how they can select, drag and drop photos and insert texts or audio files from the computer to the software.
- During task phase, the class would be divided into groups or pairs depending on the number of the computers available. Each pair or group would then be asked to prepare a similar short film using the software for which they have to use videos, images and texts fed into their computer screens that are already jumbled up. One group member would use the system where other members would direct him/her in making the film.

Communication will take place when they would discuss how to solve the problem and organise the content in a sequence.

- As a post task activity, questions should be asked from each group related to their film as to what they have prepared? Or they can be asked to make another film of their choice related to any tutorial or any poem or song where they can insert images, cut and merge different videos or add lyrics of any poem or song along with the video clip.

**b. Using Social Networking Applications into TBLT:** It has been observed that in the last few years, the price of smartphones and tabs have reduced and the masses are enjoying the internet facility at a very cheaper rate in the country. Keeping this factor in mind, the education sector in India could promote mobile based learning. A number of mobile applications are available which when used effectively could accelerate the process of teaching and learning any language (Gay et al., 2001). To name some of the social networking applications commonly used among the Indian masses these days are ‘WhatsApp Messenger’, ‘Hike Messenger’, ‘Viber Messenger’, ‘Imo’, ‘Skype’. These applications run on internet and allow instant messaging, voice and text messaging, video calling, group chat, exchange of videos, audios, text, images and illustrative messages. ***Designing tasks using social networking applications:*** Opinion-gap activity can be designed using these mobile applications which would promote learning even outside the classroom where each student would be able to express their views points on the group created by the teacher. **Sample Activity:** for developing the listening and speaking skills of the students, the teacher can create a group and add all the students of a class.

- In order to give them practice in listening/speaking skills, the speech (audio/visual) of any eminent speaker from a debate or any news interview can be shared by the teacher in the group.
- In the pre task phase, teacher can ask short answer type questions related to the content of the speech. This would give them practice in their listening skill.
- During the task phase, students would be asked to share their voice messages and express their opinion for or against the topic using the target language. This would motivate even the shy students to participate in the learning process who are otherwise hesitant to speak in front of the whole class.
- For the post task activity, peers could be asked to review and evaluate the speech of their fellow classmates.
- Lastly teacher would evaluate and provide feedback to the students on one on one basis.

**c. Using Digital Games into TBLT:** With technological advancement, more and more digital games are emerging which can be downloaded on mobile phones or computers or can be played online. Learners of all levels are fond of games. Early studies in the area of language learning have already showed a positive experience of using game play activities, both inside and outside the classroom context. But, not all games are suitable for enhancing language skills. As language teachers, we need to explore the digital world carefully so that it can contribute in language classrooms. ‘Gamification’ is one of the recent- technology driven approach to learning which attempts to engage students in games within which lessons are already embedded. It not only makes learning more interesting for the students but can also be used by the teachers to collect the data of each student, measure their progress, make corrections or instant feedback through software based platform (Mukherjee, 2014).

**Designing tasks using digital games:** Information gap or puzzle games such as finding clues can be taken up for designing tasks targeting specific vocabulary or language function.

**Sample activity:** popular games having ‘Walkthrough’ or step by step guide to complete the game can be utilised for preparing effective language tasks. These walkthroughs are published on the game sites as directions for the players to follow such as “Point-and-click” and “Escape the room” where they have to click on a certain icon mentioned on the screen to solve a puzzle or to proceed to another level.

- In order to give them practice in speaking, teacher can simply initiate a lively discussion and ask students to speak voluntarily about their favourite games along with the rules. Meanwhile, other students would listen to the speaker and list the set of vocabulary used by the speaker to play the game. This would not even require access to any digital tools to play the game in class.
- For practicing listening, the walkthrough texts can be used as ‘live listening’ where the teacher would instruct the class to play the game on their computer screens. This way, the teacher can easily see how many of them have listened properly and are playing the game correctly.
- Writing activities can also be designed using the content of the digital games for pre-writing tasks where learners can be given homework or extra credit activities as “pre-writing content for a writing task or as an impetus for a classroom debate” (Sykes, 2013). Learners can be asked to maintain rough drafts at home related to the games they played which can include entries like frequency and duration of time spent on playing the game, or describing each level of the game, mentioning the levels they have crossed, what difficulties they faced at each level or any strategies they learnt about the game. These drafts would serve as content for the actual writing task in the classroom.

### **Advantages of Technology Blended TBLT in Indian Languages Classrooms**

- The use of technological devices like computers, mobile phones, online application or software in language classroom pleases our visual as well as auditory senses, thus, making learning experience fun and interesting.
- Designing tasks manually for the whole class is a tedious job for the teacher but using computers, projector or interactive white board reduces the burden and activities can be designed and assigned to every student without taking much time.
- The activities designed using different digital tools provide ample opportunities for interaction in the target language among students themselves as well as with the teachers.
- By working in pairs or groups for solving any information gap activity or giving any opinion on any topic using mobile apps outside the classroom, even the average students are motivated to get engaged and participate in the language learning process.
- Technology blended TBLT would not only promote language learning but would also promote the cultural competencies and digital literacy of the Indian masses.
- When students are asked to explore different games or applications or other multimedia content for developing their language skills, it enhances their creativity to exploit the available digital tools and present learners with more vivid and authentic instructional materials.

- When students are left with different types of learning tasks like problem solving, information gap or opinion gap activities using multimedia devices, it promotes empowered learning, collaborative learning and critical thinking skill of the learners.
- Technology has eased the evaluation process of the learners' performances. The teacher can easily measure the progress of each student using the digital devices and can make desirable changes in the lesson plans accordingly.

### **Challenges in the Way of Integrating Technology with TBLT in India**

- **Strength of the classroom:** Indian classrooms are usually large in terms of students. It poses a big challenge for the teachers to guide and manage the whole class when they are assigned with any task in the classroom. Another problem of crowded classrooms is the mixed level of enthusiasm, motivation, and needs of the learners. Thus, it becomes difficult for the teachers to concentrate and design instructional materials related to the activities and distribute them manually to each and every student in the class. **Suggestion:** big classes can be divided into smaller sections with limited number of students keeping in mind the available tools. Activities should be designed in such a way that every student should get the opportunity to participate in the class. Suppose if one student is using the system, other group members should also be contributing in completing the task.
- **Lack of resources:** availability of hardware and software, access to computer or other devices for every student in the class or internet facility is another challenge for Indian classrooms especially in rural areas which are still facing problems in getting regular supply of electricity. **Suggestion:** the government should be made aware of the potentials of technology-based language teaching so that proper funds can be raised to support the educational institutes in getting technological tools and internet facilities to implement such innovative programs in Indian education system.
- **Lack of trained teachers:** in India, finding trained teacher for digital teaching is one of the most challenging aspects, especially in remote areas. The success of blending technology with TBLT depends on the teacher who could exploit the available technological tools and design various activities based on the perceived needs of the learners. **Suggestion:** In order to foster teacher's digital competence, regular workshops or free in-service training should be conducted by the educational institutes to train the perspective teachers for incorporating technology into language classrooms.
- **Lack of motivation:** learners own learning style, habitual dependence on teacher, exam-based learning and teaching are some of the constraints in the way of implementing technology-based learning in Indian classrooms. **Suggestion:** Teachers can introduce leader boards or award badges to individual learners as well as to groups on the basis of their progress to motivate the learners when they perform well in the task.
- **Administrative challenge:** For adopting such innovative teaching practices such as using mobile applications or digital games in the class, support and commitment is required from the stakeholders at each and every education level which is a time taking process as there is a long list of hierarchy from government to policy makers, curriculum developers, institution heads and teachers.
- **Suggestion:** Stakeholders need to extend their support and harmonize the efforts at all levels of the interest group. Financial as well as political commitment from the policy makers and local government is required along with proper planning for making desirable changes in the curriculum and to implement these innovative teaching practices in the lesson plan.

### **Conclusion**

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Much of the research into Task-Based Approach has gained impetus in Indian language classrooms but blending it with Technology and implementing it is quite under researched. Not much literature is available in the contemporary time revealing researchers working on technology integrated TBLT. Language experts need to ponder on the fact that instead of teaching from technology we can teach with the technology and enhance, augment and improve the already existing teaching methods by making use of the available digital resources.

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