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Settlement, integration and language learning: possible synergies. A task-based, community-focused program from the Region of Durham (Ontario, Canada)

Abstract: Task-based learning and the action-oriented approach have introduced a shift in second language education, opening new possibilities for anchoring language learning in real-life practice. The collaboration of over 80 partners in the Region of Durham (Ontario, Canada) led to the development of an online community-based immigration portal for newcomers, which served as a platform for a language program. This case study shows how this program has influenced immigrants' knowledge and access to essential services, motivation to learn, and confidence levels in the host language.

Résumé : L'apprentissage par les tâches et la perspective actionnelle ont introduit un changement dans l'apprentissage de la langue seconde et ouvert de nouvelles possibilités d'intégrer l'apprentissage d'une langue dans le vécu. Dans la région de Durham (Ontario, Canada), plus de 80 partenaires se sont unis pour développer un portail local sur l'immigration destiné aux nouveaux arrivants, qui sert de plateforme pour un programme d'apprentissage de la langue. Cette étude de cas montre en quoi ce programme a influencé la connaissance et l'accès des migrants à des services essentiels, leur motivation à apprendre et leur niveau de confiance dans la langue du pays d'accueil.

1 Introduction

As global mobility increases, the necessity of accelerating settlement and integration of newcomers is an ever-growing priority. This reality has challenged institutions to find innovative approaches to address the complex needs of a changing population, including language learning based on transparency and accountability, and to validate the results.

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The availability of both conceptual and operational resources in the form of sound methodological options such as task-based learning and the action-oriented approach, and reference tools for assessment and planning, including the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR; Council of Europe 2001) and the *Canadian Language Benchmarks* (CLB; Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks 2012), show great potential for rethinking second language education. The synergies created between effective pedagogic support and terrain for experimentation can fuel innovation on a broader scale.

In this paper, we discuss an exploratory case study, conducted in the Region of Durham (Ontario, Canada), on the use of an online community-based immigration portal for newcomers as a platform for a language program. Starting from the potential of CEFR- and CLB-informed real-life tasks in renewing second language education among immigrants, this study investigated how this program influenced immigrants' knowledge of and access to essential services, motivation to learn, and confidence in the host language.

2 From task-based to action-oriented: opening doors to real life

Although task-based learning originated in the late 1980s (Prabhu 1987), more recent theoretical reflection has enriched its conceptual apparatus (Nunan 2004; Van den Branden 2006). A further step in this direction has been the action-oriented approach, which constitutes one of the pillars of the CEFR. This has led to a marked shift in the field of second language education, while opening new possibilities for anchoring language learning in real-life practice. In particular, there has been research on the following: the nature and typology of tasks; the distinction between tasks aimed at supporting learning and task-based learning where tasks are the backbone of the teaching/learning process; the sequencing of tasks and task cycles; the need for clear criteria for outcomes assessment, and the roles of teachers and learners. The action-oriented approach has moved away from an accumulation of knowledge and know-how toward an activation of competences (both general and communicative language competences) in order to achieve an objective. Action-oriented tasks make it possible to structure learning around moments, actions, and products that are vivid, defined, and concrete. Organizing learning around tasks also makes it possible to effectively link teaching and assessment (Piccardo 2014).

Canada's interest in task-based learning and the action-oriented approach is growing. With two official languages, communities rich with linguistic and cul-

tural diversity, together with localized educational policies, there is a need to refine and/or adapt tools that support task-based learning and assessment and provide transparent criteria and proficiency level indicators. With this in mind, the CLB, the national standard for adult ESL/FSL in Canada, were updated in 2012. This coincided with the identification by researchers (Vandergrift 2006) and institutional stakeholders (CMEC 2010) of the potential value of the CEFR for Canada. The CEFR is presently contributing to language education policies, particularly curriculum development in FSL (French as a second language) and International Languages (K-12 curriculum). The resource which is at the centre of this study is informed by these approaches and aligns with the CLB and the CEFR.

3 Learning and living in English through action-oriented tasks: the case of the Region of Durham

The Region of Durham, 45 minutes east of Toronto, covers an area of 2,590 km² with a total population of 608,125 inhabitants of which 20.7% identify as immigrants, with over 30% in some municipalities (Statistics Canada 2013).

With an aging population and slow population growth, Canada requires immigrants to thrive. With this in mind, both the federal and provincial governments continue to invest in an immigration strategy to address the complex needs of communities and newcomers. One such example is the *Municipal Immigration Information Online Program* from the Ontario Government's Ministry of Citizenship, Immigration and International Trade (MCIIT). Through funding from this program, the Durham Immigration Portal (<http://www.durhamimmigration.ca>) was created, which aims to be “a one-stop community-based web portal, designed to welcome, support, attract and retain skilled newcomers, newcomer entrepreneurs, businesses and other new Canadians to [the Region]” (2016). Over 80 community partners representing diverse sectors developed and continue to share responsibility for content and the long-term sustainability of the portal.

The benefits of using the portal in educational settings lead to the development of support material for ESL instructors and further partnerships between the Regional Municipality of Durham and the Durham District School Board (DDSB). As task-based learning gained ground in Canada, support material was updated, resulting in the creation of a publicly available resource entitled *Exploring the Region of Durham through Task-based Learning. Living in English*,

Discovering Durham (Collins and Hunter 2013), funded by MCIIT. This resource provides community-centred, task-based scenarios, based on information from the portal, to support settlement and integration, as well as linguistic competence in the host language. Given that the target audience is adult newcomers to Canada learning English, the driving framework of reference in the document is the CLB (2012), presented alongside the CEFR to allow for a broader use.

4 A case study investigating synergy between language learning and settlement

With further funding from MCIIT, a small-scale case study was launched to explore the possible synergy between language learning and settlement through the use of an immigration portal. The following research questions were investigated:

- Has this specific language program influenced Canadian adult newcomers'
- i) knowledge of and access to essential services?
 - ii) motivation to attend English language classes and to learn English?
 - iii) confidence in the host language?

The study included three ESL instructors, the Department Head of Language Programs, and 36 learners from Durham Continuing Education, DDSB, as well as the Manager of Strategic Partnerships and Initiatives from the Regional Municipality of Durham. Over the three-month duration of the study, a variety of data collection tools were used with instructors, students, and Region management, including pre and post questionnaires and focus groups.

Instructors participated in four hours of training to deepen their understanding of task-based learning/the action-oriented approach and the portal. Next, instructors were provided eight hours of mentored co-planning time to develop activities that support learners in achieving the defined task. The activities, as well as the task, aimed to develop linguistic competence and to improve knowledge of, and access to, the community for newcomers. The instructors then delivered the learning block of approximately five days, consisting of the activities and the culminating task, to their respective ESL class.

5 Discussion of results

Data revealed that students highly appreciated being exposed to task-based learning/the action-oriented approach. Learners at CLB 3–4/CEFR A2 presented an average score of 8.9/10 when asked “how much did you enjoy task-based learning?” If we break down this score, comparing learners’ pre- and post-intervention questionnaires, the perceived level of proficiency and comfort in the language increased considerably (20% and 18% respectively) together with the perceived ability to accomplish the real-life task (32%). Positive results, albeit less substantial, were observed at CLB 7/CEFR B1+ (5%, 12% and 8% respectively). We interpreted this difference as mainly due to resistance to change in methodological routines from learners who had been longer in the program.

Instructors observed that their students enjoyed using task-based learning/the action-oriented approach and reported increased interest in learning, improved attendance during the intervention, as well as an increase in confidence. They also declared that, overall, they enjoyed teaching this way and that lesson planning was improved. One instructor voiced: “[...] I stayed more focused [in lesson planning], I kept coming back to the question *how is this going to help my students perform the task?*” Instructors felt that the spiraling of learning through the intervention, which led to gradual release of responsibility on their side, was helpful in solidifying learning and building confidence in students. They also observed a transfer of knowledge to other contexts and noted the benefits of embedding grammar and vocabulary in context. Furthermore, they saw this approach as student-centred, and through this intervention, reinforced the necessity to ensure that learning encompasses practical, real-life connections that support community integration. Finally, instructors reported that students benefited from the authentic nature of the task, and their direct application in real-life situations. The application through classroom simulations took place in a safe, supportive environment, where students felt comfortable taking risks. Through the use of the portal, a greater awareness in the students of what their community offers of specific interest to newcomers was also observed.

Instructors identified challenges throughout the study including an increase of planning time and professional development, which currently is not allocated in their contract. The observation was also made by instructors that task-based learning/the action-oriented approach conflicted with some students’ preconceived notion of teaching, especially the more traditional teaching of grammar. Another challenge reported related to classes being continuous intake and exit, resulting in missed instruction. Instructors did express that flexibility and a spi-

ral approach to learning did help to alleviate this concern as there were other entry points for new students to catch up on missed learning.

6 Potential benefits and future developments

Although this was a small-scale case study, it yielded promising results. Task-based learning/the action-oriented approach brings together real-life tasks, strategic/autonomous decision-making in learning, and transparency of objectives and assessment. Targeted resources and professional development coupled with the availability of authentic, locally situated and community-relevant resources available on the same virtual space, maximize the language learning process and support action once learners (newcomers) leave the class, which in turn helps with settlement and community integration. Thanks to funds allocated by MCIIT, this study will be up-scaled in the province as part of a wider immigration strategy.

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