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Embedding Critical Thinking in International Studies Language Programs

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Abstract

In the language component of International Studies BA programs, students do not attain proficiency levels high enough to enable them to develop their critical thinking skills in dealing with texts from the target culture(s). This is especially true for the so-called Less-Commonly Taught Languages. Designing the final course in the language sequence as a 'Language in Practice' course addresses this issue through Task-Based Language Teaching. Abandoning proficiency goal for higher performance goals, and focusing on only a subset of language modes of communication enables integrating critical thinking skills in specific relevant contexts. Maintaining only relevant aspects of Task-Based Language Teaching and allowing others to be carried out in English rather than the target language can preserve task authenticity, and allow for more in-depth development of critical thinking skills using texts from the target cultures.

1. Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected world, International Studies undergraduate programs are gaining popularity as an opportunity for students to gain knowledge and skills in areas of cultural studies, history and languages of a region, combined with the political and economic characteristics of that region. The broad coverage of such programs means that they allow for fewer language courses than traditional Language and Culture or Area Studies programs. While language course reduction has some impact on language proficiency in programs focusing on Europe and North and South America, it is much greater for students focusing on Africa, Middle East, or East Asia

and studying Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTLs). Students taking those languages often complete their language requirement at intermediate level or lower, depending on the specific language and program.

National guidelines on teaching language used in most Higher Education institutions in the US (ACTFL guidelines)[1] and Europe (CEFR)[2] do not explicitly include any critical thinking skills in their descriptors of specific proficiency level of a second language. The text type involved in critical thinking (paragraph-level or discourse-level texts) and skills used (e.g. evaluating an argument, drawing conclusions from evidence) are addressed at advanced or higher language proficiency levels. Indeed, many language programs typically do not include critical thinking in their course or program learning outcomes, leaving it up to 'content' courses to practice complex reasoning. For one thing, critical thinking skills are taken to be transferrable from one academic domain to another. For another, there is little time and limited topic areas to address in elementary and intermediate language classes anyway. Both assumptions are inaccurate and only reinforce the status-quo. Like other skills, critical thinking skills can be graded starting at the basic level, with skills such as applying standards, discriminating basic level language content, or information seeking using simple language, to the more complex tasks such as logical reasoning or predicting complex content, which can only be achieved by more proficient language users.

Indeed, in an International Studies program, excluding critical thinking skills from language courses is grossly suboptimal. As students engage in political, social, and economic discourse, cross-cultural differences manifest strongly in language. For example, signaling disagreement, the role of examples, saving face techniques, or argument-building techniques vary greatly across cultures, and skills built relying on first language discourse structures can be of little help in studying target regions. Students are often left, then, with basic knowledge of the language, leaving students with little preparation in undertaking deeper or more complex tasks for study abroad or some field work.

In this paper I present a framework that uses a modified version of the Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) approach, supported with online (social-)media resources, to expand the typical proficiency-based language learning program in higher education to improve students' critical thinking skills. As students leave the novice level, language performance, rather than proficiency, is stressed as the goal of learning. TBLT allows the teacher to to focus on content that is relevant to the students and design tasks that embed critical thinking skills, and provide a product that is usable in the students' discipline. Finally, using online resources allows student autonomy in developing aspects of language skills they deem most valuable. I then describe how this framework is implemented in a third year Language in Practice that will be offered in Spring 2019 at Leiden University BA International Studies (BAIS).

2. Proficiency, performance, and guidelines

As early as the beginning of this century, an increasing number of university programs have been adopting standards-based approaches in describing learning outcomes for programs and courses in foreign languages. In the US, this has been catalyzed by focus on accountability and transparency in academic achievement, as well as mandatory National Standards for Foreign Language Education. The proficiency guidelines published by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) offer a set of benchmarks that are referred to in designing courses and measuring student progress. In Europe, mobility between academic institutions across the European Union stimulated the publication of the Common European Frame of Reference (CEFR). ACTFL proficiency guidelines, CEFR, as well ILR descriptors used by a number of US government agencies, use proficiency descriptors rather than achievement descriptors: they describe what a language learner can do in a given language regardless of the curriculum (s)he has followed. Those descriptors are stated as a set of 'can-do statements' checklist typical of each proficiency level.

Proficiency is often thought of as what a language user can do any time, anywhere. There are tools to assess language proficiency, such as ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI). As mentioned above, using proficiency indicators for describing learning outcomes of courses or programs is advantageous because they are independent from any single curriculum, allowing student mobility across institutions. However, as language proficiency increases, it takes longer in-class hours and self-

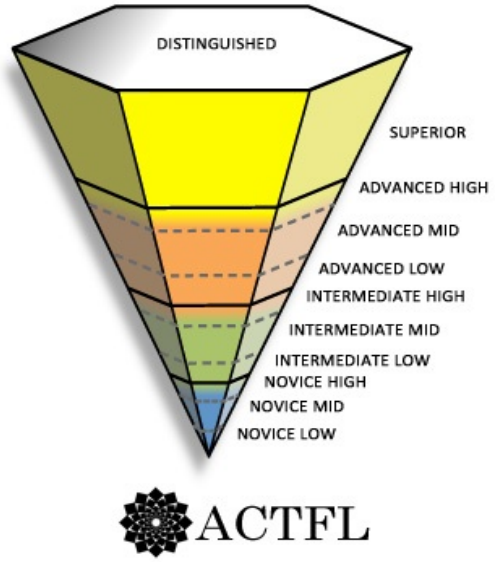

Figure 1: ACTFL Proficiency Levels (www.actfl.org)

study to move up on the proficiency scale (c.f. figure 1). Language performance, on the other hand, is guided by teaching. A learner knows in advance what situation (s)he will encounter, what language forms will be needed, and (s)he will have practiced/rehearsed the language needed to complete that language function or situation. In terms of teaching, instruction often takes the form of modelling the language needed and practicing the relevant language. Integrated Performance Assessment (IPA) is gaining popularity as a method that creates a feedback loop whereby teaching feeds directly into assessment.

3. The critical thinking gap

The term Critical Thinking probably has as many interpretations as the educators offering them. Critical thinking could be seen in STEM as the application of the scientific method [3], focusing on the ability to make decisions based on quantitative data, while recognizing the inherent uncertainties and variability in data in physics [4] and chemistry [5]. In social sciences and humanities, critical thinking is viewed in more domain-specific light. In political science and economics, critical thinking has been characterized as the ability to examine and evaluate data [6]. In history, it can be defined in terms of abstraction, identifying patterns, and evaluating historical evidence [7]. While it is practical to define critical thinking in terms of the larger goals outlined by the subject area, foreign language learning faces a rather different challenge in following the same approach, as language acquisition is content-independent. If language is considered a general-purpose vehicle for conveying content, critical thinking in the context of language learning will be much less amenable to a narrower-domain definition. Some approaches fall back on the general nature of Bloom's taxonomy and define critical thinking in terms of the higher levels of Bloom's Taxonomy: analyzing, synthesizing and evaluation [8]. This general understanding of critical thinking can be interpreted into the following skills (adapted from [9]):

- **Information seeking:** searching for information by identifying relevant sources and gathering relevant data.
- **Applying Standards:** judging according to established criteria.
- **Analyzing:** breaking a whole into parts to discover their nature, function and relationships.
- **Discriminating:** recognizing differences and similarities among objects or situations and distinguishing carefully as to category or rank.
- **Transforming knowledge:** changing or converting the form, or function of concepts across contexts.

There is potentially a large gap between language proficiency attainment and the language level needed for effective use of critical thinking skills in an International Studies undergraduate program. For students whose first language is English, this gap

is particularly likely to occur in level 4 languages such as Arabic or Chinese. LCTL courses do not typically assume any familiarity with the language, and start at novice level. After three courses, students reach Novice High or Intermediate proficiency level on the ACTFL scale, or A2(+) on CEFR. At that level, students are capable of understanding and creating second language content of their own at the sentence level expressing simple content about familiar topics. Critical thinking skills, on the other hand, require ability to use language at the paragraph or discourse level. Functions such as breaking an argument to its elements, identifying fact or opinion information require Advanced High (B2+) proficiency. While some skills are transferrable from general education courses, such as logical reasoning, many others are not (e.g. signaling agreement/disagreement, discourse structure of academic writing in the second language, and sarcasm and formality in social media posts).

Such gap leaves students, and at times administration, skeptical of the value of the language component of their International Studies programs. At Leiden University, student course feedback and communication with students have reflected increasing interest for additional more advanced language course offerings. However, offering two or three additional language courses could compromise the quality of other aspects of the program. Even if it were possible to offer a couple of additional elective language courses, it takes much more time to move students from Intermediate to Advanced levels in languages like Arabic, Russian or Chinese.

4. Bridging the gap: task-based performance

In Task Based Language Teaching, students are faced with a realistic task they face in their current studies or are likely to face in the future. The task itself may be linguistic (summarizing a report) or non-linguistic (a visit to the doctor). The task can be completed using real language, and students learn the language through completing that task. Learning tasks are designed such that there is an information gap that students need to negotiate and bridge in order for the task to be completed. Language acquisition takes place through deliberate building of metalinguistic knowledge in the case of complex tasks, and through automatization of language performance through repetition in completing simple tasks [10]. TBLT has been the subject of a great deal of literature, leading to variations and implementations of the general approach (e.g. [11]–[14]). A model based on the shared characteristics of those implementations can be summarized as follows:

- **Pre-task:** students are prepared for the task with detailed instructions and description of the task to be completed, and a roadmap to the successful completion of the task.
- **Task:** typically completed in pair- or group-work settings.

    - **Task performance:** students complete the task (typically without instructor interference).
    - **Planning:** students prepare to report on the task outcome.
    - **Reporting:** students report what they have prepared (task outcome)
- **Language:**
    - **Analysis:** Teacher reviews language forms needed for expanding the task.
    - **Practice:** students perform a more complex version of the task for expansion and further practice.

TBLT renders itself well to performance, rather than proficiency, assessment. Being able to perform a complex task that requires a higher level of language than that of a student can be managed with sufficient scaffolding, input, and well-managed modelling of the learning. Achieving that task, however, does not necessarily mean that the student has achieved a higher proficiency level. The potential of integrating performance assessment with TBLT is in fact a welcome characteristic of that method in a number of intermediate-level LCTL courses. As moving from Intermediate to Advanced proficiency is not a realistic expectation from a single course, assessing performance would give better progress indicators of students.

There is considerable research on TBLT in teaching English as a Foreign Language, world languages, and ESP. Integrated Performance Assessment in world languages has also been the topic of much recent research, as well as critical thinking skills. To the best of our knowledge, the interaction between the three areas has not been explored. In the next section I address how critical thinking skills can be integrated into an intermediate-level course using TBLT.

5. Concrete example: Arabic in practice

Responding to student demand for more language courses in the BA International Studies at Leiden University, a new course, titled Language in Practice, is to be offered to third (final) year students in all languages in the program. It is a Students are expected to spend a total of 140 hours on that course (28 classroom hours and the rest is for independent study and assessment), and receive 5 ECTs (European Credits, approximately equivalent to 3 US upper-division college credits). Students enrolling in Arabic in Practice will have completed three Arabic courses, and are at proficiency level A2+/B1-. The general aim of the course is to consolidate previous knowledge and offer students a way to utilize the language they have already studied for the previous three semesters in a way that helps them in their BA thesis (capstone paper) or professional careers after graduation.

A major challenge in designing the course is that the stated goal is rather ambitious: academic language is well above the level of the students and there is not time to allow

sufficient practice to reach the required level. A number of tradeoffs has to be made for the course goal to be realistically achievable:

1. *Language learning is incidental to task completion:* In the true spirit of TBLT, the main focus is completing a task that is of immediate relevance to the students, or is likely to be relevant to their professional life after graduation. In departure from the core TBLT model, language acquisition (acquiring new structures, vocabulary, and skills) is abandoned as a course goal. Within the acquisition model underlying TBLT, noticing the language needed to complete the task will contribute the necessary structures and vocabulary to the learner's language repository. However, given that the gap between the language needed to complete the tasks of the course and the language level of the students is so large, scaffolding and noticing language can build very little metalinguistic knowledge, or acquisition of relevant structures. If the course goals are entirely stated in terms of task completion goals, higher-level language still needs to be used. However, instructional focus will be on research and reference skills necessary to deal with relevant texts to complete the project. Retention of the language used is not to be the focus of the course, freeing up time to concentrate on completing the task.
2. *Focus on one task, do it well:* TBLT serves the need for focus in the course. For a student to pass the course, they should demonstrate their ability to independently use Arabic in their thesis or in a professional report they may write after graduation. While languages like French or Spanish can use academic materials as parts of their tasks, it is more practical for Arabic to use authentic primary texts. Although such texts are still at a higher level, they can be selected to be at a level of difficulty that can be handled, such as newspaper articles, video news reports, or social media posts.
3. *If it does not contribute to the task, do not teach it:* the needs analysis shows that students will not produce written academic texts in the target language, only in English. They may be likely to be involved in field work where spoken Arabic can be used, but that is the case for only a minority of students. The task can be achieved without practicing productive skills (writing and speaking). The time saved is used to further enhance receptive skills at higher levels.
4. *Performance fits better than proficiency:* drafting portions of academic writing based on primary source in a foreign language is a deliberate matter which lends itself to performance assessment. The task is still authentic even though completing it is deliberate and rehearsed.
5. *Selectively implement TBLT principles:* focusing only on reading and listening allows for building a course around aspects of TBLT, but not others. For example, the 'planning' and 'reporting' stages of the Task phase outlined in the last section typically involve planning and presenting in the target language, allowing active use of target language forms and structures. Designing the tasks in the course such that they allow students to complete these two stages in English rather than Arabic

allows for more time for the passive knowledge of relevant structures. In addition, completing the Practice phase will be faster, followed by a shorter Analysis stage.

5.1 Course overview

Arabic in Practice builds on the TBLT design, observing the tradeoffs described above. The course will consist of a single individualized task per student involving the use of Arabic. To be able to achieve their tasks, students will look at a case study modelling the skills involved in the successful completion of the task. The course has three main components:

Case Study: by following the journey of an imaginary student writing his thesis on a topic relevant to International Studies, students will explore main steps in dealing with authentic Arabic materials: GRASP (Get, Read, Analyze, Summarize, and Paraphrase) an Arabic text so that it is used in the thesis.

Task Analysis: for the first half of the course, students complete reading activities based on the hypothetical student, as well as their own topic.

Task Completion: students produce a portfolio of a short text in English that can be incorporated in a BA thesis on their topic of choice, based on material they have located, read and analyzed.

The course proceeds as follows:

- **Pre-task:** Students are informed about the task description: produce a short text in English based on Arabic authentic materials that can be used to support your BA thesis. To be able to do so, students will follow the process of completing that task through guided practice case study coached by the instructor. After each step in the process, students duplicate the step on a topic of their choosing.
- **Task:**
    - **Task performance:** to support an argument as part of their thesis using primary sources in Arabic, students need to be able to locate and understand relevant Arabic texts, analyze and evaluate their usability for the thesis, and transfer the knowledge within such texts by means of paraphrase or summarization to be usable in the thesis.
    - **Planning:** after each step of the process, students report to their groups about their progress, as well as reflect on how they completed each stage.
    - **Reporting:** students report the product of their task in the form of oral presentations and portfolio that reflect the task as a process, as well as the final product of the task.
- **Language:**
    - **Analysis:** throughout the task-as-process, students are introduced to relevant Arabic forms and structures. In the Task Performance stage,

students receive guidance from instructor to enhance passive recognition of forms and structures related to their individual tasks.

- **Practice:** is achieved through the individual task in the form of their free practice.

5.2 Critical thinking, global culture

Given the very narrow focus of the course, it is now possible to allocate time and practice for critical thinking skills. As students deal with only one topic for half of the course, only subtechnical vocabulary (words used to signal textual relation in a given genre) are focused on, as well as sample structures. As discussed in the previous sections, passive recognition is preferred to active use of the language at higher levels, and only a subset of skills involved in TBLT are focused on. Critical thinking skills, especially those discussed in section 3 above, can now be incorporated in each of the Arabic-text-based stages:

- ***Get*** (students will identify usable news and social media data): students will identify credible sources of information in the target culture. The text type is only slightly higher than students' current proficiency level, making it possible to use such skills as **information seeking,** through identifying search terms and using provided internet resources, and **analyzing**, through identifying which parts of the texts located are worthwhile to further carry to subsequent stages of the task.
- ***Read:*** Students will identify how the target culture mix and switch between Modern Standard Arabic and colloquial Arabic, employing skills such as **discriminating** and **applying standards**.
- ***Analyze:*** students will be able to identify how target language choices that convey attitudes and political affiliations, functions achieved by code switching, separate fact from opinion. The ability to analyze a foreign language text, and recognize it as a product of a potentially different culture and a different value system, entailing e.g. different text organization or different argumentation strategies goes beyond simple **analyzing** of the text at hand to **discriminating** and **applying standards** to complex cultural products and practices, not only in their familiar language and culture, but also in the target language and culture. This component helps students develop not only a better understanding of the area they study in their BAIS program, but also will provide them with insight on their own cultural practices.
- ***Summarize*** and ***Paraphrase*** are carried out in English. They involve a great deal of **transforming knowledge**, not only in format – creating a summary or a paraphrase, but translating the discourse strategies from one culture to another.

6. Conclusion

In this paper I have outlined an approach whereby aspects TBLT are used to help undergraduate students of International Studies complete tasks relevant to their studies in Arabic. Although such tasks are considered typical of a higher proficiency level than a typical BAIS student is expected to reach, they are achievable through careful evaluation of the feasibility of each component of the TBLT framework as it applies to the project at hand, and excluding ones that are unrealistic or require too long to achieve at that proficiency level. Carefully selecting a task that relies on appropriate text types and bearing on highly relevant cultural aspects of the area of the student bestows the benefits of (1) allowing students more time working on a task they are interested in, and (2) scaffolding students for heavy use of their analytical skills for information seeking, applying standards, analyzing, discriminating and transforming knowledge.

This course will respond to the demand on a higher-level course that uses the language of specialization. More importantly, it demonstrates to students as well as administration the added value of the foreign language component in International Studies, especially in less-commonly taught languages, where students achieve lower proficiency levels compared to European languages in Western universities.

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