Theme and Task Based Learning Model to Develop Reading Comprehension Skills

Mg. Gonzalo Romero Martínez

Abstract— This paper reports an implementation proposal that examined the current situation of the English Specific Purposes process in a Major of Physical Education in a Colombian university, which has shown low results in the standardized national tests. The literature review, about the current models to develop communicative competence in major students, concluded that both models Theme Based Learning and Task-Based Language Learning share some important principles and complement each other. Findings showed that the reading comprehension skills are related to the main core of the content based instruction model by developing High Order Thinking Skills. The Task Based Language Learning is the backbone in the classes planning that let students be involved in meaningful communicative activities.

Keywords— Content Based Instruction, English for Specific Purposes, reading comprehension skills, Task Based Language Learning, Theme Based Learning.

I. INTRODUCTION

Big efforts have been made to develop bilingual citizens in Colombia in the last two decades, however the results have been mainly negative by showing that just **11% of university graduated students reached the required intermediate level (B2)** in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages - CEFR (Sanchez-Jabba, 2013). The Colombian Ministry of Education has regulated the national standardized test for tertiary level students called Pruebas Saber Pro (Colombian Congress, 2009) to evaluate students' competences, in which English is an important part and it is evaluated through **reading comprehension** questions. This is the way to measure the achievement of the goals proposed in the national bilingual policies called Programa Colombia Bilingüe 2014-2019.

In the light of these ideas, this study aims at focusing on the situation of the Physical Education Bachelor Degree program at Unidad Central del Valle del Cauca – Uceva, whose results have been under the national average for the last five years, although all students at Uceva have to complete four compulsory courses of **English as Specific Purposes** offered by the Institutional Languages Department, which attempt for students to reach an intermediate level before graduating. The two first courses are supposed to develop

basic communicative competences, whilst the third and fourth courses should work on specific purposes content. According to a brief observation of the syllabi, there is a need for searching new methodologies to improve the results in the Saber Pro tests.

The importance of the achievement of the standardized test involves the new required and compulsory level for future teachers in Colombia that is B2 in the CEFR (Ministry of Education, 2016). That is to say, Physical Educators students should reach the intermediate level of English to be graduated.

Consequently, the integration of two important models in the English teaching theoretical framework is presented in order to improve the previous situation. On the one hand, **Theme Based Learning** is probably the most popular model of *Content Based Instruction approach – CBI*, which has become widespread because its success by using the current learning content related with language skills in a content driven curriculum (Brinton, 2007; Dueñas, 2004). CBI shares its principles with Content and Language Integrated Learning - CLIL (Banegas, 2012; Ohmori, 2014) that is a trendy approach in Europe to develop plurilingualism in all the citizens through the integration of the curriculum content with the linguistic competences (Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010). On the other hand, **Task Based Language Learning** is a spin-off approach from *Communicative Language Teaching – CLT* and it has become popular for its modeling structure of lessons where the learners are engaged to develop a set of activities in which negotiating of meaning is the clue to develop the communicate competence (Ellis, 2009; Nunan,2004; Willis, 1996).

The concept of **Theme and Task Based Language Learning model** has been implemented before (Grajales, Martínez, &Valencia, 2005). However, this was only a general proposal to develop an **ESP curriculum** through the usage of themes and tasks as a core to develop communicative competences in major students. Hence, this study focuses on the reading comprehension skills and its relationship with the integration of the joint models, as well as their shared principles and the big opportunity for complementing each other.

II. METHOD

This is a qualitative study conducted in the Physical Education Bachelor Degree program of a university in Tuluá - Colombia, which looked for proposing an implementation to

develop reading comprehension skills through the joint of Theme Based Learning and Task Based Language Learning models. To do so, it was necessary a set of steps: firstly, the analysis of the bibliography was done in order to establish the main shared principles of the models, their relationship to complement each other and their benefits in the context of the study; it was also able to define better the most important elements of the joint model. Secondly, the analysis of the current situation of the third course was an important tool, which considered the results in the standardized tests and the current syllabus. Finally, a guide was created under the conclusions of the bibliographical revision.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To build a complete state-of-art about models and approaches for teaching English as a foreign language is quite hardworking due their continuous researching process. Nonetheless, there have been some scholars who have described the main principles of the most popular approaches and methods (Brown, 2000; Kumaravadivelu, 2008; Richards and Rogers, 2014). These authors have let teachers make important decisions for curriculum development through the classification of the approaches and methods according to the main principles. In this case, it was possible to get close to the two proposed models that could help improving the situation of ESP courses at Uceva and any other place: Theme Based Learning and Task Based Language Learning.

A. Theme Based Learning

It is currently well-known as "probably the most popular prototype of CBI" (Dueñas, 2004: 84). Many successful conclusions have been published about CBI and its models. For instance, immersion programs in Canada and United States have let known the influence of the integration of content and language (Brinton, Snow & Wesche, 1989), or the case of Europe that has established Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) as an official policy to achieve the plurilingualism as a "dual-focused educational approach in which and additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language" (Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010). Thus, **CBI is an umbrella term that involves some models that can be classified into a continuum** whose ends or limits are related to the priority on content on the one hand and language on the other (Met, 1999; Stoller, 2008) as it is seen in the following figure.

Fig. 1 A Continuum of Content and Language Integration. Taken from Met, M. Content-Based Instruction: Defining Terms, Making Decisions. 1999

As it is seen before, Theme Based courses are near to the language driven end since they let learners work on interesting subject to learn or communicate about while language is used to explore and its growth emerges as students need to comprehend or produce language related to content (Met, 1999). It could possible to conclude the appropriateness of this model for developing reading comprehension skills in major students, however three different authors were analyzed in order to establish common elements among them: Crandall (1994), Richard and Rodgers (2014) and British Council (2004).

Table 1. Benefits of CBI models

BENEFITS	Crandall	Richards and Rodgers	British Council
Language Learning	According to Krashen, language learning is more successful if it is closer to the acquisition process of L1.	It offers excellent conditions for language acquisition increasing the exposure to the FL (foreign language).	Students can use the language to fulfil a real purpose, which can make students both more independent and confident.
Cognitive development	"Cummins (1981) argues that individuals develop two types of language proficiency: basic interpersonal language skills [B.I.C.S] and cognitive academic language proficiency [C.A.L.P.S]... Integrated language and content instruction... offers a means by which foreign language students can develop fuller proficiency in the foreign language they are studying." (pág. 2).	It provides pedagogical accommodation to different levels and skills.	Students can also develop a much wider knowledge of the world through CBI which can feed back into improving and supporting their general educational needs. Taking information from different sources, re-evaluating and restructuring that information can help students to develop very valuable thinking skills that can then be transferred to other subjects. CBI is very popular among ESP teachers as it helps students to develop valuable study skills such as note taking, summarizing and extracting key information from texts.
Affective factor	Language learning is successful when it is engaging in a meaningful usage of language in a relatively anxiety-free environment.	It reflects the interests and needs of the learner. It provides meaningful and real materials for students.	It can make learning a language more interesting and motivating.

As it is seen in Table 1, there are three significant major benefits in CBI models: it allows students to develop communicative competence by **engaging** them to meaningful and authentic activities; it lets learners to develop not only communication but also demanding **cognitive activities** through **authentic content**; it helps to engage students by material about their real **interests and academic needs**.

B. Task Based Language Learning

It has a wide theoretical framework whose foundations are based on the Communicative Language Teaching and many successful results have been showed (Prabhu, 1987; Ellis, 2009; Nunan, 1989, Willis, J, 1996). This model materializes the idea of meaningful negotiation of meaning through a real language activity. **Students learn by carrying out specific tasks or projects**: for example, "doing science" and not just reading about it (Crandal, 1994). Many advantages of using TBLT are established after successful studies around the world, in this paper the advantages shown by Ellis (2009: 242) are considered:

• It offers the opportunity for 'natural' learning inside the classroom.

• It emphasizes meaning over form but can also cater for learning form.

• It affords learners a rich input of target language.

• It is intrinsically motivating.

• It is compatible with a learner-centred educational philosophy but also allows for teacher input and direction.

• It caters to the development of communicative fluency while not neglecting accuracy.

• It can be used alongside a more traditional approach.

Besides the previous cores of the Task – Based model that match exactly with the elements found in the Theme-Based revision, Willis (2007: 12) proposes a well-structured way to develop a course through the correct planning of a task in three different important moments as it is seen in Fig. 2.
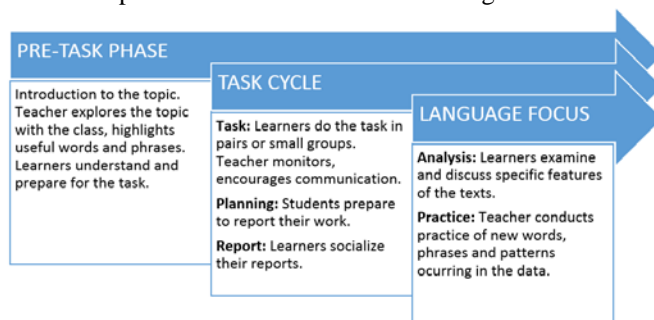

Fig. 2 TBLT pattern. Taken from (Willis, 2016)

C. Theme and Task Based Language Learning

In order to establish the main cores of the proposal model it is necessary to find the similarities between the approaches according to the previous literature review. Therefore, **it is a must to define the complementarity of the content-based instruction model with the communicative teaching strategy**, whose core are tasks.

Firstly, Theme based model has been successful around the world by showing the advantages of "emphasizing learning about something rather than learning about language" (Davies, 2003), thus "the goal is to assist learners in developing general academic language skills through interesting and relevant content" (Crandal, 1994). Secondly, it is a suitable model to use in an English for Specific Purposes arose as a need for training learners for particular contexts and events according to their **academic matter and interests**. It is coherent according to Richards & Rodgers when they say "The English for specific purposes (ESP) movement likewise begins not from a structural theory of language but from a functional account of learner needs (2014: 17).

Above and beyond, one of the most interesting feature of Task Based Language Learning is **its focus on a language moment**. It supports the idea of Schmidth's Noticing Hypothesis which directly addressed two fundamental issues: the role of the explicit and conscious learning and the explanation about why only a limited input becomes internalized by learner (Schmidt, 2010).

Next figure summarizes the most important elements of the Theme and Task Based Learning models - TTL and how they complement each other.
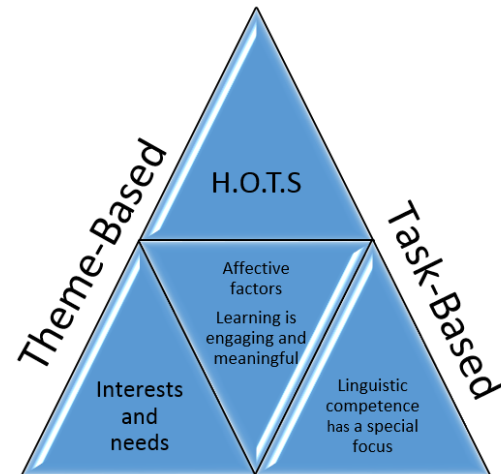

Fig. 3 Theme and Task Based Learning Model – TTL

The center of the model is to bring meaningful and **engaging activities** in class. On one hand, the **content** and the course design integrate the learners' **interest and needs** as an authentic ESP process demands, besides the **High Order Thinking Skills** are reached through developing challenging cognitive activities according to Bloom's taxonomy revision (Krathwohl, 2001; San Isidro, 2015). On the other hand, these activities should **focus on the linguistic competence** that is structured by the Task-based pattern (pre task, task and language focus).

IV. FINDINGS

Firstly, thanks to the bibliographical revision it was possible to see how well both models, Theme-based and Task Based Teaching complement each other. They share some principles as the importance of affective factor and the language learning through a special emphasis on the meaning, rather than on the form. However, there is a need for complementing each other: Theme-based lacks of a clear pattern to develop activities in class and Task-Based misses an important better selection of the material and topics. That is why the **TTL** becomes a new way to design ESP courses.
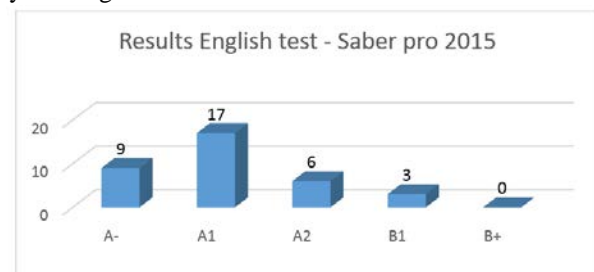

Fig. 4 English test results – Saber Pro 2015

Secondly, the analysis of the results of standardized tests and the current syllabus of the third module, where students are supposed to start working on specific content, it lets know the

need for a new strategy to develop communicative competence in students, above all the reading strategies. For instance, in 2015 from 35 students that took the Saber Pro test in 2015, 0% reached B+ that is the indicated level for graduated students in Colombia. Just 3 students (8%) reached B1 and 6 (16%) achieved A2. The worst fact is that 25,7% of the students did not reach even A1, which is represented as A-.

V. PROPOSAL

A. A TTL course design.

In order to create a guide proposal taking into account the features of the TTL model, four important stages suggested by Met (1999) were used: **(1) selecting content, (2) determining language outcomes, (3) assessment and (4) preparing qualified teachers.**

The selection of content will be coherent with the proposed model. It will be chosen from the general topics in the curriculum of the Bachelor Degree in Physical Education. According to the design of the academic program, the content for this major is divided into big areas of knowledge with a set of subjects:
- Bio human.
- Human Motor Skills.
- Pedagogy.
- Teaching practice.
- Research.
- Physical Condition Evaluation.

Consequently, six themes or topics will be considered in this third module of English that represent or integrate most of the areas:

Table 2. Selecting of content

	Name of the Theme	Area of knowledge
Theme 1	Physical Education Specializations	Everyone
Theme 2	Sports and adventure	Human Motor Skills
Theme 3	Teaching experiences	Pedagogy Teaching practice
Theme 4	Rules in the sports	Human Motor Skills
Theme 5	The human body	Bio human
Theme 6	My pedagogical or training project	Pedagogy Human Motor Skills Research

As it is concluded in the literature review, the model proposed is supported in the idea of integrating content and language through challenging outcomes. In the same way, the proposal is designed as language-driven course. These factors represent a twofold objectives design. On one hand the objectives of the Theme and Task Based model to improve reading comprehension skills through the use of curricular content and meaningful tasks, on the other hand the modules have their own aims at developing the communicative competences that the National Bilingual Program requires through the reference of the CEFRL.

Table 3. Proposal

Session	Time	Theme	Language outcome	Final Task	Language focus
1-2	12 hours	To diagnose the level of the learners in order to suggest some extra exercises for reviewing the competences for A1 and A2 levels.	To share personal information. To understand frequently used expressions in daily life. To communicate in routine tasks and familiar environments.	A portfolio with the reflection of their own process of diagnosis and autonomous review.	The most important features for A1 and A2 levels.
3-4	12 hours	Physical Education Specializations	To express and read ambitions, dreams and plans about the specializations or other plans for studying in the future.	An oral presentation with students' expectations about their studies.	-Different future forms: will /going to / present continuous. -Would
5-6	12 hours	Sports and adventure	To evaluate and share experiences and anecdotes about the practice of sports.	A video about a role play about the experiences in sports and adventures.	-Present perfect tense. - Have as an auxiliary verb. -Past participle. - Since/for
7	6 hours	SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT			
8-9	12 hours	Teaching experiences	To create and understand texts about the experiences of teaching.	A Blog about teaching experiences.	- Review Simple Past. - Past perfect - Used to
10	6 hours	Rules in the sports	To describe and explains the rules of familiar sports. To understand the most important descriptions of sports.	A digital presentation about the most interesting sports.	- Modal verbs: should, can, have to. - Comparatives and superlatives.
11-12	12 hours	The human body	To create hypothesis about the possible problems in health.	A blog about health problems and suggestions.	-Zero Conditional. -First Conditional. -Second Conditional.
13		SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT			
14-15	12 hours	My pedagogical or training project	To create a pedagogical or training project.	A pedagogical or training project.	All the topics
16	6 hours	PRESENTATION OF THE FINAL TASK			

B. Lesson plan.

The number of the lessons, timing and some suggested material is given. The teacher must complement the resources and adapt the text according to the students' needs and progress. The material is seen as an example of resources that could be implemented.

Content, language outcome and final task are presented in the same line in order to see the important relationship they should have in the lessons. The language focus is also visible for clarifying the pacing on the grammar, something it is important in the Task-Based Teaching model.

The task cycles are defined in order to establish the back bone of the lessons. These activities can be enriched by more multimodal input, differentiated process, advanced organizer or other challenging activities that allow learners to get reading comprehension skills and communicative competence in general.

The assessment is just a set of suggestions to implement. The rubrics should be considered after the first two lessons in order to establish the students' levels, needs and interests. The teacher should create his/her own rubrics and it is advisable to involve learners in the process. This process must be transparent and formative.

An observation space is given for gathering information about the implementation results. This information will be very important for improving the proposal every time is applied. The following lesson plan is an example:

Table 4. Example of lesson plan

THEME Physical Education Specializations				
SESSION	3-4	**TIME**	12 hours	**Materials**
				Texts about specialized studies for Bachelor in P.E[1]. Text about future plans.[2]
Content		**Language outcome**		**Final task**
Vocabulary related to specialized studies for Bachelor in P.E.		To express and read ambitions, dreams and plans about the specializations or other plans for studying in the future.		An oral presentation with students' expectations about their studies.
Language Focus				
-Different future forms: will /going to / present continuous. -Conditional Would				
TASK BREAKDOWN				
Pre task		Brainstorming: About the learners' interest for studying in the future. Advanced organizer: Website about a master program for Bachelors in P.E. Mind-map: Learners complete a mind map with the usage of the language focus.		
Task		Ss prepare an oral presentation with their personal information and their interests to study or work in the future by using the structures recommended with future forms and would.		
Language focus		Leaners are corrected after their presentations. Ss should take notes about their classmates' ideas.		
ASSESSMENT				
Self-assessment / peer assessment.				
Observations:				

VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The general objective of this implementation proposal is developing reading comprehension skills in the Physical Education B.A. based on the Theme and Task-Based Learning model. According to the theoretical framework of Theme Based Learning and Task-Based Language Teaching, it is possible to conclude that the combination of their features brings **an optimal model to improve not only the reading comprehension skills, but also an integral communicative competence in the students of that academic program**.

The content-centered instruction allows to focus on **interesting themes** for learners and it offers the development of **challenging cognitive actions** which become essential for any reading comprehension activity. On the other hand, the tasks let establish meaningful activities where the learners undertake the texts as meaningful source of negotiating sense. Consequently, the analysis of the results about the current situation in the English program shows the need for implementing interesting proposals that enhance challenging cognitive processes in students. The proposed model has as a core **to develop High Order Thinking Skills** through **the use of meaningful tasks** related to disciplinary themes from the curriculum of Physical Education Bachelor program.

The lesson planning presented for the implementation shows the significant relationship that could exist between content and language. In this way, **students' needs and interest** play an important role in the achievement of the outcomes. This affective factor is fundamental for the proposal due the impact that engaging and motivating activities have in language learning processes. **The language outcomes** also represent an important improvement of the current syllabus of the course that do not present integral outcomes, but just isolated linguistic aspects.

As conclusion the model proposed in this paper has a very useful opportunity for collaborating in the institutional goals about foreign language instruction. It is suggested an ongoing process of improvement of this proposal by the consideration of strategic assessment tools that take into account the group of students' characteristics, the material is also necessary to enrich through the innovative ideas of each teacher who executes the proposal.

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