WhatsApp: A Tool for In-Company Training
by Maria Luz Callejo

I have been training in-company for the last 20 years, and I have seen many changes in technology and the use we, trainers, make of it. However, WhatsApp is the single tool that I have fallen in love with, and so have my participants. Mainly, this is because WhatsApp is an app we all work (and live!) with. We are all used to using WhatsApp, so our use of it in the sessions is not an end in itself but a means.

WhatsApp and Task-Based Learning and Teaching

WhatsApp is an application that allows users to send and receive text and voice messages; to share documents, images, links, and screenshots; and also to make voice and video calls for free when using Wi-Fi.

Let's see why WhatsApp perfectly fits English as a lingua franca in-company training. Business people often need to work in English and be able to solve "problems" every day all day. For this, the task-based learning and teaching (TBLT) framework proposed by Nunan (2004) comes in super handy (see Figure 1).
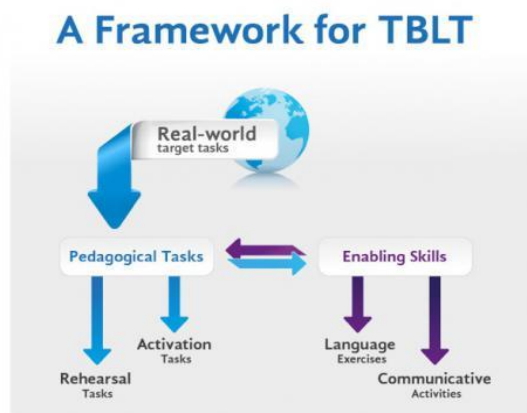

Figure 1. Framework for task-based learning and teaching (by Nunan, 2004, p. 25; licensed under CC BY 4.0).

Within this framework, pedagogical tasks are described as real-world tasks brought into the safety of the training room. In fact, while carrying out pedagogical tasks, our participants are asked to perform in their second language (L2) to reach an aim other than the use and manipulation of a particular linguistic item. Conversely, the aim of communicative activities is specifically the manipulation of a particular linguistic item (e.g., put a story in order, find someone who…, or complete a given timetable).

Basically, the aims of pedagogical tasks are nonlinguistic, and participants achieve these aims through the free use of the L2. For example, learners might be asked to create a poster for the new summer dress-code policy at the office or the list of new company benefits for the new year.

Characteristics of Adult Learners

It is worth recalling at this point that we are training adults in a business context. Thus, it is essential to keep in mind andragogy is not the same as pedagogy. Knowles (2001), the father of andragogy, suggested back in the 70s that adults learn best by doing, and he put forward the following characteristics of adult learners:

1. **Need for Knowledge:** Adults need to know why they should learn whatever it is they are learning. Briefly, the "what for?" question guides them.
2. **Motivation:** Adults are driven by internal reasons. They will learn *if* they want to learn; if they feel they can answer the question, "What's in it for me?" or "*If* I learn this, I will be able to *do* that."
3. **Willingness:** Their willingness to learn comes from perceiving relevance in what they are trying to acquire. They want to know how learning something will help them lead better and in a simpler way their (personal, social, or professional) lives. That is, adults learn best when they know that what they are trying hard to acquire has immediate value for them.
4. **Experience:** Adults already have rich experiences that are the foundation of their learning. They usually analyze, rationalize, synthesize, and develop new ideas or tweak old ones through the filter of their own experiences.
5. **Self-Direction:** Adults are self-directed individuals. They want to take control of the learning journey.
6. **Orientation to Learning:** Adults learn best when they *do*, as we have already said. Adults find relevance in task-oriented learning because they can align it with their workplace realities. In addition, TBLT exercises their problem-solving ability, which gives them confidence to conquer their challenges by applying their newly acquired knowledge.

WhatsApp for Business Language Learning

Taking all of these six characteristics into account, the TBLT framework fits andragogy perfectly, and so does WhatsApp as a tool to mediatize learning, because it can do the following:

Generate Spaces for Meaningful Communication

For example, when there has been a sudden change in the schedule and you need to inform learners of this change, or when you need to arrange a new session (see Figure 2).
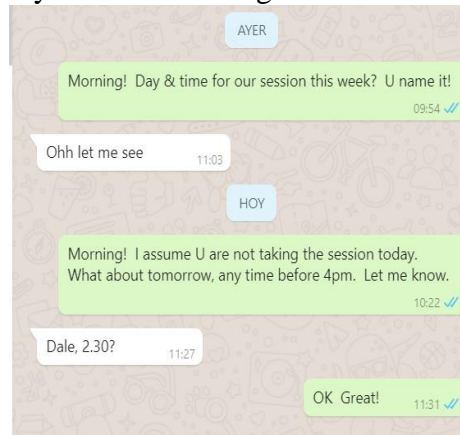

Figure 2. WhatsApp confirmation message example.

Create a Feeling of Group Belonging

The use of a WhatsApp group can connect participants among themselves and enhance group ownership, leading to an increase of presentism and self-direction, which is critical in adult learning.

> *Task:* After the first session is over, ask group participants to exchange ideas and decide on the name of the WhatsApp group and its profile settings (e.g., photo, name, and about line) to generate the sense of group belonging. Needless to say, this sense of group belonging will need to be nurtured, as illustrated in the screenshot in Figure 3, taken from a Monday-morning group.

Figure 3. Monday-morning group spontaneous WhatsApp exchange.

Enable Asynchronous Sharing of Tasks

In many cases, when participants were actually replying to emails, they sent me a screenshot using WhatsApp while writing them, with doubts, or after sending them as proof of their accomplished real-world task. I have used this learner-provided input both to give them feedback and as a trigger for the following sessions.

> *Task:* Encourage participants to choose a voice message they had to send in-between sessions in real life. Have them send this message to another participant in the training and have that participant reply to it as if it had been truly sent to them.

Increase Motivation

Participants can actually see their work and listen to it through WhatsApp voice messages. The latter have proven very useful, though intimidating for learners at the beginning! In my personal experience, when participants are faced with their own work and given feedback on it, they immediately feel more motivated to continue improving. For example, I have asked participants to send me voice messages during the session many times and given them feedback on the spot. I was taken aback the first time learners asked for another chance to repeat the task once, or even twice, until they felt comfortable with their outcome. Now, this repetition has become a usual practice in our sessions.

> *Task:* Select a message learners sent at the beginning of their training and one they sent toward the end. Ask them to compare and contrast these two. I am positive you will be happily surprised by participants' comments on their own work. I have seen learners highlight points such as wider use of vocabulary, fewer mistakes in the use of tenses, better sounds, fewer hedges, and new or increased use of connectors.

Final Thoughts

All in all, adult learning theories call for the *use* of the L2, not the knowledge of it. Using Chomsky's (1965) always current distinction, adult learning needs to foster performance over competence. In this light, WhatsApp is a versatile tool to give our participants the genuine opportunity to use the language as a means to achieve an aim that transcends the mere manipulation of the linguistic items under focus.

What's more, using WhatsApp resembles a real-world way of accomplishing pedagogical tasks. I have found through hard (and successful!) experience that by incorporating the use of WhatsApp in my training sessions, my participants have increased their motivation, have become more self-directed, and have also interacted more naturally in the L2. In my humble opinion, WhatsApp should be a must-use tool in English as a Lingua Franca in-company training.

References

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Maria Luz Callejo is from Buenos Aires, Argentina. She is a teacher of EFL and holds an MA in applied linguistics from King's College, London. She has been doing in-company training for the last 20 years and is currently training business people in English as lingua franca and teaching teachers and trainers-to-be at different universities in Buenos Aires in the areas of applied linguistics, second language acquisition, and materials design.