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RIBÉ, RAMÓN, *Tramas creativas y aprendizaje de lenguas: prototipos de tareas de tercera generación.* Barcelona: Universitat de Barcelona. 1997. 306 pp. ISBN: 84-475-1828-0 (Pb).
(with the collaboration of María Luz Celaya, Margarita Ravera, Fernando Rodríguez, Elsa Tragant y Núria Vidal).

The extent to which language learning through performing activities, or experiential learning, —task-based learning, content-based learning and/or project work— has taken hold in ESL/EFL circles can be appreciated in this valuable book on foreign language methodology which seeks to stimulate learner autonomy. In the Preface, Ribé alludes to the growing universality of teaching through tasks or projects, not simply as an addition to other classroom activities but as the principal organizing concept for syllabi.

The book, the outcome of several years of investigation carried out at the University of Barcelona, represents individual work realized by Ribé as well as team work, which involves the collaborators in this volume. It is organized into sixteen chapters, six of which make up Part I, 'Theoretical Underpinnings'. These chapters, written mostly by Ribé, with some excellent input from Núria Vidal, provide both an explanation of the historical development of experiential methodologies as well as a contextualization for the comprehension of the different models of creative-framework practices offered by Ribé and his collaborators in Part II. Part III presents frameworks focusing on specific aspects of language learning: acquisition of spoken and written codes and changes in attitudinal variables. Ribé uses the final chapter to present some general conclusions gleaned from the research projects described and from other sources dealing with experiential and collaborative language learning paradigms.

To some extent, this summary compensates for the lack of clearly stated objectives for each section of the book which might have served to orient the reader. No where is the purpose of the book in its totality specifically set out. For this, the author seems to rely on the *Objectives* section of the DGICYT project, described at the end of Chapter 1 and in the short paragraph which ends the chapter by setting out the contents of each of the three parts. In a word, the book is not very user friendly. There are also some notable typing errors, but these are a minor nuisance frequently found, unfortunately, in books published by some university services. Each chapter is followed by an excellent, up-to-date bibliography, which younger teachers could certainly use to develop background knowledge.

Given the structure of the book and the assumed background knowledge, this volume is not for the uninitiated. In fact, in the Preface, Ribé states that it is not intended to be a pedagogic handbook, supplying explanations and illustrations. And he keeps his word. For example, in chapter two, Ribé organizes a wealth of background information in a table which traces three different periods of methodological tendencies: the first period, up to the 1980s, based on following a method; the second, 1970-1980, a breakaway from the method concept; and, the third period, experiential approaches. The first-period information has been adapted from Brown's *The Elements of Language Curriculum* (1995); the second, from Stern's *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching* (1983); and, the third period constitutes Ribe's reworking of three levels of

syllabus components presented by Allen (1983) in 'A Three-Level Curriculum Model for Second-Language Education'. For both the table and the three brief explanatory sections which follow it, comprehension of Ribe's information-dense propositions would be difficult without having experienced for oneself some of these significant shifts in paradigm. Much background information is assumed. In the same fashion, the differences Ribé establishes between 1st-, 2nd- and 3rd-generation tasks are probably difficult to grasp without having had abundant experience in pair and group-work activities in the classroom. For experienced teachers, though, these sections constitute a genuine historical dossier of methods and approaches and some of the beliefs which spawned them. Ribé's courageous attempt to put communicative approaches into some kind of taxonomy provides us with a framework which can, subsequently, be analyzed, criticized, reworked, built upon and so on.

The concept of third generation tasks as constituting Creative Frameworks is more completely developed in chapter 3. Here, Núria Vidal and Ramón Ribé offer, as a starting point, examples of final tasks developed by Spanish EFL learners from different educational contexts and levels —1° de BUP; 5° curso de Filología Inglesa; 3° de BUP, etc.— followed by two more detailed descriptions of projects carried out with third generation tasks. In chapter 4, Ribé provides an excellent, detailed explanation of how simple communicative activities (for example, information gap) can be worked into elemental tasks or episodes and these, in turn, into creative projects which have as underlying goals the communicative, cognitive and attitudinal development of the learners. The next chapter discusses the benefits of creative projects; not only does the creativity of the learners help to structure the tasks themselves but the personal involvement of the learners helps to anchor learning experiences as ways of knowing as well.

The second and third parts of the book offer prototypical tasks and projects for different age levels of learners (primary, secondary and university) and a sub-chapter on prototypical types of evaluation. It is with this latter aspect, the evaluation, that one may begin to be concerned about one of the claims put forward by Ribé and his collaborators, namely that project-work approaches are superior to other types of methodologies. When teaching approaches become very powerful, they tend to overshadow other frameworks which might be valid in certain contexts. Approaches should be linked to the purposes of the learners, the time available, etc. For example, a text-linguistic approach might be adequate for adults who wish to improve reading skills. For Ribé and collaborators' learners, who are students in educational institutions, task-based and project work may be the best pedagogical framework, but we must always keep in mind that other contexts may demand other frameworks.

Given their context, Ribé and his collaborators have fixed as their particular objective the increased communicative competence of the learners. As compared to teacher-controlled classes, the experienced teacher can readily accept the effectiveness of project work in regard to increased communicative activity and attitudinal development, since task-based and project activities are designed to enhance students' interaction through negotiation of meaning. Some convincing research on tasks and interaction (Long, 1985:13) shows that two-way tasks [both partners have gapped information] produce more interaction than do one-way tasks [one partner transfers the information to the other].

However, it must also be pointed out that much of this two-way task activity has actually involved a native speaker with a non-native speaker, or speakers of different native languages, thus forcing the use of English as an instrument of communication. Furthermore, these studies have been carried out mostly in ESL contexts, which provide many hours of out-of-class language input; such input would be important for the maintenance of results over the long term, i.e., the modification of cognitive representations. Both the obligatory use of English and the extra input are two intervening variables not usually taken in account in ESL research contexts. For this reason, EFL research from contexts like Spain may be useful in accounting for the effects of these variables.

This circumstance raises the interest all the more in relation to part III of Ribé's book, where studies of specific aspects are presented. Unfortunately, the studies presented therein are not really able to convince the reader that the creative task approach (CTA) is any more effective than the simpler communicative approach (CA). For example, Celaya and Tragant's study on written language (chapter 13) compares two groups which are not comparable: the written production corresponding to **group** projects (creative task approach, N=9) is compared to the written production of individual students (the data on the control group is actually not clearly presented) from the simpler communicative context (N=7). The authors do not tell us about the proficiency level held by the subjects **before** receiving intervention (the application of CA and C methodologies); hence, the comparative part of this study lacks internal reliability, i.e., the question of whether the treatments (the CTA and CA approaches) make a difference for the specific variables studied. The differences between the two groups can not be attributed, with any degree of exactness, to differences in teaching approaches.

There exists as well an intervening motivational variable. The CA group was not writing about a topic chosen by the students, but rather by the teacher. The researchers acknowledge this motivational difference but do not seem to attend to its relation to some of the variables studied. For instance, the number of words per sentence and the number of different lexical items used are not comparable. And even if the topics had been chosen freely by the subjects in the two groups, there would still have been a problem of reliability of measurement due to lack of norming. The total number of words produced by each of the two groups was different; consequently, variables such a "coordination" should have been normed to the number of coordinators per 50 words, per 100 words, or at least per sentence or per T-unit. There is also the question of control of the time variable; we do not know if each group has spent the same amount of time specifically on the skill of writing.

It must be stated that it is a well-known fact that the control of variables in educational research is a persistent problem, given the variability natural to this context. The authors admit that the comparison of the CTA and CA subjects' production will not stand up to "rigorous comparison". This is, I believe, quite an understatement. As Brown (1995) explains, one way of comparing the proficiency which results from two different teaching methods is to apply various tests which are fair to each type of method. These researchers have not done so.

I am not suggesting that the data can or do show nothing. For instance, the data on the number and the types of clauses is interesting and might be a fruitful area of study.

However, it might have been better to stick to a merely descriptive analysis of each group as a pilot study for a later, more rigorously controlled study.

The study of oral production presented in chapter 14 by the same two researchers also presents problems of internal reliability, i.e., test-retest information is lacking. There has been no previous measure of the oral proficiency of the subjects. Consequently, outcomes cannot be attributed to differences in methodologies. The researchers seem to know this —their language is modalized in relation to the reliability of their results. Again, then, a simple descriptive presentation might have served better. While all of these are serious problems, they are not insurmountable, and these researchers should be encouraged to carry out pre-tests on subjects and to continue to search for ways to control intervening variables. Ribé, as an experienced researcher can certainly guide them in this. Again, it must be pointed out that educational research is frequently vexed with problems of validity and reliability. These, unfortunately, may hinder teachers working within a very innovative and creative framework, as is the case here, from being able to confirm what their actual teaching experiences reveal to them in daily classroom activities.

In the final chapter, Ribé presents ten general conclusions, with which most teachers would agree. In many educational contexts, we need to be moving towards types of methodologies which not only encourage but develop student autonomy. For this, Ribe's book will serve as a source of information and creative suggestion. Ribé claims that such approaches to learning and teaching will provoke radical changes in educational institutions. And about this, he is absolutely right.

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