In the Classroom

Drama in Project-Based Learning

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Abstract

This paper describes a student-centered project-based language learning approach currently practiced at an English language school in Japan. The approach focuses on the creation and performance of original dramas as part of a school festival held every six months. These dramas are written and staged entirely by students. Instructors are responsible for providing language support and content feedback. Assessments are handled through peer and self-assessment based on criteria developed in consultation with instructors. While there are a number of important empirical questions about both project-based learning generally and this learning approach specifically that need to be addressed, the learning approach outlined here provides a good organizing frame for incorporating drama into more rigorous, student-centered project-based language courses in a variety of contexts, e.g., elementary, high school, or university English language courses.

The present paper describes an approach to using drama as the basis for project-based learning (PBL) courses. First, PBL is described in terms of a dialectic relationship between course content and language tasks. Then, this relationship is situated in the context of student centered learning: specifically a distributed view of language learning and a negotiated syllabus. Then, drama is introduced as the primary course content, and a general structure for the course is given. After this, a list of ten principles for those interested in developing a similar course is given. Finally, implications and future directions for a course of this type are discussed.

The instructional approach described here is currently practiced at an English language school in Tokyo. The school serves approximately 300 hundred students aged 15 to 80 years old. The majority of students are university educated and currently working fulltime jobs. Under the school's curriculum, students generally take a public speaking class, a pronunciation class, an elective class focusing on one of the four macro-skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) and a PBL course. All students are required to take PBL courses. These courses last approximately six months, and serve as the foundation of the curriculum. The content of each course focuses on presentation, debate, or original student dramas.

Project-based Learning

Any discussion of PBL must begin with a discussion of content-based instruction (CBI) and task-based language teaching (TBLT). As noted by Stoller (2006), successful PBL will accommodate student-centered learning focused around a long-term set of tasks that lead to a concrete final product. This final product emerges from a synthesis of the language and content knowledge acquired during the project's development. Therefore, a successful PBL course will use both CBI and TBLT syllabi as primary points of departure. In this way, PBL may be understood in terms of the tasks that lead to the project's completion, and the content that focuses those tasks.

The instructional approach described here generally assumes the definition of language learning 'task' laid out by Ellis (2003) as "activities that call for meaning-focused language use" (p. 3). Meaning is primary because a successful task will naturally focus students around the language needed to accommodate the cognitive processes within the task. This may be contrasted with the more form-focused instruction first articulated by Long (1991) as explicit attention to grammatical language forms. Unlike form-focused instruction,

the tasks in the instructional approach described here determine the language forms emphasized in class; the language forms do not themselves determine the types of tasks that are done.

PBL may be understood as a series of tasks that act as steps towards the completion of the project. This means that the content of each task must be related to one another. In this context, content means the overarching topic or focus of the class. Because the focus of a PBL course is the completion of a project, the course must make a dual commitment to both the language skills and the content knowledge needed to complete the project successfully (Stoller, 2006). CBI generally refers to courses that balance non-language content instruction with the language needed to work with that content effectively (Stoller, 2008). In this way, PBL is a natural extension of CBI because the tasks within the project are sequenced to facilitate students' deep understanding of the content (Stoller, 1997).

However, it would be inaccurate to say that explicit attention to language forms is not a central concern in PBL. Rather, it is the ways in which students identify the specific language forms they learn that makes PBL distinct. That is, the relationship between tasks and content determine the language forms that are taught. This relationship may be understood in terms of Folse's (2006) distinction between the language forms *for* a task and the language forms *in* a task. In the context of this distinction, the language needed to complete the tasks within the project constitute the language forms for the task, while the language forms necessary to understand and show knowledge of the content constitute the language in the task. A successful PBL course will balance CBI and TBLT elements with an appropriate commitment to these language forms.

In the author's experience, the language necessary to complete the task requires explicit teacher support. This includes providing vocabulary, some grammar, appropriate content readings, and other media with support activities. For example, in one recent project that focused on the musical *Les Miserables*, students were given support through vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation instruction in order to help them discuss the staging of the drama in meaningful terms. This support constituted the language for a task or the TBLT element within the course. However, the teacher did not dictate the way students staged the drama—which constituted the language in the task or the CBI element of the course. Instead, the CBI elements were decided through student-centered learning activities.

Student-centered Learning as Distributed Learning

As noted above, the CBI element of a PBL course is focused around the content of the project. However, the instructional approach outlined here assumes a student-centered

orientation to this content. Generally, student-centered learning can refer to any number of instructional practices that represent a contradistinction from what may be conceptualized as teacher-fronted or teacher-directed classrooms (Stoller, 2006). In this context, student-centered learning refers to course content organized around a negotiated syllabus. According to Nation and Macalister (2010), a negotiated syllabus allows students to decide elements of the course design. This can include learning objectives, topics covered in class, or methods of assessment.

The instructional approach outlined here adopts a negotiated syllabus based on the assumption that language learning is a distributed process. This means that language is always context specific, with context being rooted in what Thibault (2011) calls first-order and second-order languaging. The term 'languaging' refers to the emergence of language in response to both the physical environment and the other language users therein. First-order languaging emerges in real time relative to the immediate environment. Second-order languaging emerges relative to the value systems and creativity of each language user. In other words, first-order languaging is the language involved in the completion of a task, while second-order languaging interprets the meaning of the task for each individual. Second-order languaging causes first order languaging because an individual learner's value system determines how they interpret the task they are completing.

This instructional approach assumes that when first-order and second-order languaging are brought into alignment, successful language learning can occur. However, such alignment is only possible if students can engage meaningfully in language tasks that are both immediately challenging and allow them to bring their personal value systems and creativity to bear (Zheng, 2012). In the instructional approach outlined here, the negotiated syllabus effectively integrates second-order languaging into the course by allowing students to determine the content and the learning objectives entirely by themselves. The teacher integrates first-order languaging into the course by determining the format of the project, the tasks required to complete it, and the language support needed for the task.

Self-assessment

Naturally the question arises: how can a negotiated syllabus like this be effectively assessed? At present, the instructional approach outlined here relies on 'can-do statements' as its primary form of language assessment. Can-do statements are essentially succinct declarative sentences that represent a certain level of language ability (e.g. "I can answer simple predictable questions") (ALTE, 2002). These statements are then self-evaluated as true or false at the end of a course of study, in consultation with the instructor. In the context of

both a negotiated syllabus and the instructional approach outlined here, these statements are devised entirely by students and self-evaluated at the end of the project.

It should be noted here that traditionally the content of a negotiated syllabus was only partially decided by students (Nation & Macalister, 2010). Particularly in institutional settings where the quantitative assessment of carefully defined learning objectives is central to the curriculum, a negotiated syllabus where content and objectives are chosen entirely by students may seem both radical and untenable. However, these are empirical questions that require investigation beyond the scope of this paper.

The Teacher's Role

As noted above, while the students have primary control over determining the content of the project, the teacher is responsible for directing students through the completion of project-related tasks. Practically speaking, this involves setting clear deadlines and providing feedback on student progress. In terms of language feedback, the instructional approach outlined here can be loosely associated with Community Language Learning (CLL) (LaForge, 1971), in the sense that the teacher remains on the periphery of the classroom while students engage in project tasks, and only offers language feedback in order to ease student communication. Another similarity with CLL is that the bulk of teacher feedback comes at the end of class, after students have completed their project tasks.

Drama as the Content for Project-based Learning

As Kawakami (2012) has observed, the language tasks involved in drama are challenging by nature. Like PBL, a drama project requires students to work collaboratively through a series of tasks towards the concrete outcome of performing the drama on stage. In the instructional approach outlined here, these tasks generally include: (1) choosing a premise for a drama, (2) presenting that premise to other students and faculty as part of a 'mini-presentation,' (3) deciding on roles for the staging and performance of the drama, (4) writing the script, staging, and lighting plans, (5) revising the script and rehearsing, and finally (6) performing the drama live on stage.

It is here that a distinction must be drawn between drama as the basis for PBL, and drama exercises as part of a traditional language class. Kobayashi (2012) observed that drama exercises are different from drama as it is described here because drama exercises do not culminate in a live performance. If drama is used as the basis for a course, but that course does not culminate in a presentation of student work, then it is not a PBL course. This is not to negate the many benefits of using drama exercises in a language course, but in order for

drama to serve as the basis for a PBL course, there must be a culminating project.

Student Roles

In order to facilitate the completion of the project, and to give students a sense of personal investment in the process, it can be helpful to create a number of roles and responsibilities as part of the instructional approach outlined here. The roles are typically related to the tasks necessary for the completion of the project, and can include: (1) a group leader and at least two sub-leaders who work with the teacher to guide other members through project tasks, (2) a director, (3) a script writing team, (4) a staging team which is responsible for props, costume design, sound effects, and lighting, and (5) the actors who perform the drama. These roles are salient, and often students will take on multiple roles throughout the course of the project. In addition to these roles, every class meeting has a facilitator who prepares the agenda for the day, and a minutes writer, who takes attendance and notes what was covered in class. Students who are new to this instructional approach are assigned a mentor, who can guide them through each of these roles.

10 Principles for Implementing this Approach

Based on the above discussion, 10 key principles appear to be necessary for the successful implementation of this type of course. These elements are:

1. The drama should be broken down into a series of tasks that lead to a final performance.
2. Explicit language instruction should be incidental; i.e., the tasks naturally determine the language forms taught—language forms do not determine the nature of the tasks.
3. The content of the drama and the ways in which students approach the tasks in producing the drama should be completely determined by students.
4. Learning objectives should be determined entirely by students.
5. Can-do statements should be written by students at the beginning of the course in order to assess their learning objectives, and reviewed in consultation with the teacher at the end of the course.
6. The teacher should provide clear deadlines for each of the tasks involved in producing the drama.
7. The teacher should remain on the periphery of the classroom, and contribute language feedback during discussions only when necessary to clarify meaning.

8. The teacher should give substantive language and content feedback at the end of every class.

9. Students should work with the teacher to design specific roles and responsibilities in the service of producing the drama (i.e., leader, director, minutes writer).

10. Every class should be run by a student facilitator and documented by a student minutes writer.

Conclusion

As Stoller (2006) noted, support for PBL is largely anecdotal and more empirical research is needed. This instructional approach is even more anecdotal in that support for negotiated syllabi, distributed views of language, self-assessment, and the efficacy of drama as a basis for language learning are largely untested areas within the field of TESOL and Applied Linguistics. Yet, personal testimonies of success abound among educators who have implemented any combination of these elements into their classrooms, and so there is no reason to believe that empirical studies looking at the efficacy of one or all of the elements in this instructional approach cannot or should not be done.

Specifically, there is an urgent need for experimental studies that measure project-based learning in terms of specific language learning outcomes. The same can be said for negotiated syllabi at all levels of teacher involvement. Lastly, while measures of self-assessment such as can-do statements seem to necessarily preclude any formalized third party assessment measures, studies are still necessary to establish correlations between self-assessment outcomes and the formal learning objectives often required by institutions and tests. It is only through studies of this type that instructional approaches like the one outlined here can gain broader acceptance among stakeholders across language learning communities and contexts.

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