

Project-Based Learning Activities for Short-Term Intensive English Programs

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Abstract

This paper examines the effectiveness of the project-based teaching approach in a short-term intensive English program for Japanese university EFL students. Four distinct projects are described and evaluated, and the benefits and limitations of the four projects are given. The paper shows that project-based instruction is a viable and flexible alternative to traditional intensive English coursework.

Keywords: project-based learning, intensive English programs, technology in EFL learning, English for Specific Purposes, curriculum development

Introduction

Short-term intensive English programs held during vacation periods for high school and university students have various benefits, particularly when they are sponsored by the

students' own schools and use on-site facilities. They are cheaper for students than study-abroad programs, they maintain student focus on English, and they can enrich student-student and student-teacher relationships. Furthermore, school-sponsored programs can be tailored to specific scheduling requirements and curriculum needs. This latter benefit is particularly useful given the rise in courses focused on English for Specific Purposes and English for Academic Purposes.

Within these short-term intensive English programs, project-based learning can take a central role. A flexible methodology which allows for English skills and subject-based or technical skills to be developed in an integrated way, project-based learning enables teachers and students to move beyond the limitations of the traditional intensive English curriculum.

This paper first gives a brief introduction of a science-focused short-term intensive English program offered by a large private university in Japan. Following this description, the rationale behind using project-based learning is detailed. Finally, the reasoning, descriptions and results of four projects created by students and teachers are given.

Description of the program

The program described in this paper is a seven-day intensive English course for juniors in the science and technology division of a large Japanese university. Begun in 2004, the program is a two-credit elective. Interested students apply in March and are selected for the program based on their sophomore grades and their most recent TOEFL score. (All students take an institutional TOEFL test in December or January of their sophomore year.) In 2006, seventy-five students applied; sixty-five—the maximum number—were

selected.

The seven days of the program are not consecutive. The first two days are held on campus at the beginning of August and do not have an overnight component. The final five days are held at the beginning of September at the university's retreat, a wooded campsite with cabins and meeting facilities 15 kilometers from campus. Students and instructors work, eat, and sleep at the campsite for these five days. In between the August and September segments, students do assignments related to coursework on their own and with the other members of the program online, via the free Internet tool, Nicenet (www.nicenet.org). Students receive approximately fifty hours of English instruction over the total seven-day period. For twenty-two of these hours, students work in small groups of eight to ten led by a native English-speaking instructor. The remaining time is dedicated to larger group activities such as lectures, panel discussions, teleconferences, technology training, and communicative teamwork activities.

The overall theme of the course is the relationship between science and ethics. The aims of the program are fourfold:

- a) to present opportunities for motivated students to explore the use of the English language in both academic and informal contexts,
- b) to encourage future development of the students' English language skills and educational technology skills once the course has concluded,
- c) to give students an opportunity to develop new friendships with others who are interested in English language and culture, and
- d) to help students enter Science and Technology English classes in the Fall term with a renewed sense of what they need to improve in order to meet their professional English learning goals.

Ideally, all four goals for the program should be achieved during the limited time of the

course.

Rationale for project-based learning

In the short-term English language program reported on in this paper, the instructors implemented a curriculum of project-based language instruction in order to achieve program objectives. Project-based language instruction is a flexible methodology allowing multiple skills to be developed in an integrated, meaningful, ongoing activity. Project-based instruction (also referred to as project-based learning, or PBL) has been defined differently by various authors, but perhaps at its simplest, it is “an instructional approach that contextualizes learning by presenting learners with problems to solve or products to develop” (Moss & Van Duzer, 1998, p. 2). Projects are generally thought of “as a long-term (several weeks) activity” (Beckett, 2002, p. 54) which are part of an instructional method which “promote[s] the simultaneous acquisition of language, content, and skills” (Beckett & Slater, 2005, p. 108). A major goal of project-based instruction is comprehensible output (Beckett, 2002), which generally occurs both during the project and as the final product of the project. In terms of the final product, Stoller (1997) outlines several variations such as production projects, performance projects and organizational projects, all of which yield qualitatively different end products.

Project-based instruction allows instructors to teach the four core English skills (along with related cultural elements) while giving both instructors and students freedom in what project they choose and how they carry it out. It is advisable that teachers do not seize full control of projects but rather leave many things to be determined by students (Alan & Stoller, 2005). This element of self-determination may

enhance student motivation. Díaz-Rico contends that “because a project is emergent and negotiated rather than fully planned by the teacher, it encourages students to go beyond the minimum standards of involvement” (2004, p. 1). However, due to this “emergent” nature, project-based instruction demands rapid adjustments by the teacher and the faith of the students to succeed. There is an element of unpredictability in project-based instruction; “sometimes a project will move forward in a different direction than initially planned” (Moss, 1997, p. 11). Also, there is no certainty that students will see the same benefits of a project as a teacher does (Beckett, 2002; Beckett & Slater, 2005). Projects can fail just as projects do in the real world if there is a lack of sufficient organization, group cohesion, or determination to reach the project goal.

There continues to be a relative dearth of empirical project-based language learning studies. As Beckett (2002, p. 58) reports, “research on project-based work in L2 education is rare...[with] most of the available literature consist[ing] of anecdotal reports of how language teachers organized project work for the purpose of second-language acquisition.” In the five years since her comment, her own work (Beckett and Slater, 2005) is one of the few empirical contributions in this area. Beckett and Slater (2005) carried out a three-week project that involved her 57 university upper-level English language learners using a project-based framework to assess and track their own language learning in the content-based English learning program. Her data revealed that student themselves were impressed with the language learning they could achieve through their projects. This is significant because Beckett noted in 2002 that “[the project-based] approach to teaching may not be appreciated by all L2 learners at all times” (p. 64) because it is unclear that they are learning language through the project (as opposed to rote vocabulary study or lessons with frequent testing). Beckett

and Slater's (2005) study emphasized this point that students do not always recognize the different ways project-based and content-based language instruction are leading toward real language development and offered the project framework as a method for helping students recognize and record such progress. Through interview and reflection data, Beckett and Slater (2005) found that a large majority of the 57 students – 79% -- were able to see how the content-based English class led to positive language development through use of the project framework model.

Four different projects

In the project-based learning program described here, all the program instructors are free to design their own individual class projects so long as they fit within the framework of the course. On a practical level, this means that all projects have to:

1. Be at least partly focused on the relationship between science and ethics.
2. Encourage the building of educational technology skills.
3. Encourage the development of the four core English skills.

Following are descriptions of four different types of projects and the relative merits and demerits of each within the context of a short-term intensive English program. These projects are:

1. The Wikipedia Project
2. The Newspaper Project
3. The Small-Groups Video Project
4. The Whole-Group Video Project

The Wikipedia Project

Create a well-formed Wikipedia entry for the university retreat in English as well as a professional 15-minute PowerPoint presentation about the project.

Web-based projects have been shown to demonstrate a multitude of positive language learning attributes: they result in authentic communication, they are flexible in subject matter, and they foster collaborative learning (Kitao, 2002; Kitao & Kitao, 2001). Given these benefits, a project involving the Internet-based encyclopedia Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org) seemed an ideal choice for this program. One of the most-visited websites in the world, Wikipedia has now become a mainstay of many Japanese university students doing any kind of minimal research for their EFL classes. Their familiarity with Wikipedia and the website's billing as "the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit" (Wikipedia, 2006) led one instructor to think that students would be intrigued to work on creating an original entry for Wikipedia about the university retreat, the location where they would be living and studying for five days. Its natural setting would allow for investigations into local plant and animal life as well as the ethical issues involved in the development of the camp facilities. Creating the Wikipedia entry and giving the final presentation would also force the students to draw on multiple English and technological skills. Finally, the truly authentic outlet through which the students would be sharing their information about the retreat with the world would serve to increase student motivation and bring an intrinsic meaningfulness to the project.

The project was completed in a step-by-step fashion. In the August segment of the course, students looked at Wikipedia entries and brainstormed ideas for the university retreat entry with other group members. These ideas were narrowed down to the ones the students found most interesting and feasible. Students then formed pairs based on similar interests and began the process of finding resources. Each student was required

to find at least two resources for citation purposes. Over the summer break, students were assigned to look through the resources found and post relevant findings on Nicenet. At the retreat, students did the necessary on-site research, wrote their entry section and posted it on Wikipedia, and prepared for the final presentation.

Overall, the students were excited by the opportunity to publish on Wikipedia and worked diligently on the project throughout, often with little direct supervision. The students were also able to successfully complete their challenging tasks of creating the Wikipedia entry and presenting their work to the class within the short time frame of the course.

Some aspects did not go as the instructor had hoped. For example, only one pair chose to research the plant life at the university retreat; the other three pairs chose to research basic details about the camp, its history, and the location and facilities. While these are all legitimate aspects to include, the instructor had envisioned a more scientific project. This example shows how student freedom can be an advantage or disadvantage for project-based instruction. Second, students were unable to find adequate resources in English, which led to more student time using L1 than was envisioned. Third, while posting on Wikipedia is relatively easy (users must register with the site and follow certain clearly outlined steps), site guidelines as to what is and isn't acceptable are complicated, and both a computer program and volunteer editors are constantly patrolling Wikipedia to enforce the guidelines. This created confusion for the students who were in control of posting their own information but occasionally came across warnings, error messages or inserted text. Finally, there was a lack of sufficient time for revision. The students did not have enough time to work on crafting their parts of the entries so they did not make it through enough of the revision process, which led to a

less than polished final product.

The Newspaper Project

Learn about the various production aspects behind a newspaper, and proceed to research, design, write, and publish a *Retreat Newsletter*.

Newspaper projects offer numerous opportunities for language learning, particularly for writing skills. Having students create their own newspapers can enhance journalism skills, community involvement, teamwork skills, and critical thinking (Tal & Rishpi, 1998). Reading and creating newspapers can also offer advanced-level students the chance to extend their reading and writing skills beyond typical exercises and into real-world literary scenarios, while also providing a chance to develop post-literacy skills (Schmetzer, 2000). Motivation is also a key factor; when students see how they can interact with the outside world in their second language to help them publish their own literature, they realize the benefits of second-language learning firsthand. It is also a very flexible project. Newspapers can be used with interdisciplinary topics and themes, and they also allow for various levels of English, from intermediate to advanced.

For the purposes of this program, the flexible nature of a newspaper project was ideal in that it could easily be designed to fit within the “Science/Ethics” framework of the course by directing students to appropriate topics. The researching, interviewing, writing, and editing components of newspaper work ensured that all four English skills would be covered, and the design process allowed technological skills to be addressed as well. One of the educational technology goals of the project, for example, was to get

students more familiar with the more advanced features of Microsoft Word. Creating a newspaper involves changing fonts and type sizes, creating headers and footers, drawing boxes and columns, and inserting pictures from digital cameras or via the Internet. Except for changing fonts and type sizes, most students were unfamiliar with these features before the project began.

This project was completed in much the same way as the Wikipedia project. In August, students looked at various examples of English newspapers and made a list of the different elements. Using the “Science/Ethics” theme as a starting point, they then brainstormed ideas for different sections and stories as a group. Over the summer break, each student was required to submit, over Nicenet, 3-5 final article ideas and write a short practice article complete with a picture and caption. At the university retreat itself, final decisions were made on article ideas. Students then spent the majority of the week on researching, writing, and designing the actual newspaper. The final product was eleven pages long, and included a wide variety of sections and articles: a report on the debate over stem cells, an editorial on science ethics, a weather report, a review of the camp cafeteria, additional food and travel articles, reports on the projects of other groups and on retreat activities, a sports page, and reviews of ethics-related books and movies.

Students rated the activity highly and demonstrated a lot of pride in the finished project. Lack of time to do everything the students wanted was the major criticism. For example, eleven pages turned out to be very ambitious. Printing and assembling an 11-page newspaper for every camp member consumed a lot of extra time. Students found themselves racing to complete their articles by the deadline. Students were also interested in publishing the newspaper online with extra articles to appeal to a wider

audience, but there ended up being no time for this either. Another complaint was that they had to spend too much time in front of computers, designing, writing, and editing their articles. Finally, the students quickly reached the limits of Microsoft Word and were frustrated that they could not produce more attractive newspaper templates. Adobe's Pagemaker or another more advanced type of desktop publishing software might have been a better choice, but this also would have required more instruction and time in front of a computer.

Two Video Projects: Small Groups vs. Whole Group

Student-produced video drama has always been an excellent EFL language learning activity that requires learner participation in a variety of ways. Now, with the relatively recent advances in digital video technology and concomitant drop in cost of video hardware and editing software, drama has become an even more powerful teaching and learning method in the EFL classroom. Examples and testaments to the usefulness of drama for speaking skills and pronunciation (e.g., Carkin, 2004; Hardison & Sonchaeng, 2005), intercultural awareness and identity formation (e.g., Gareis, 2000; Heathcote & Bolton, 1998; Isbell 1999) non-verbal communicative abilities (e.g., Dickson, 1989), group collaboration (e.g., Elgar, 2002), increasing student motivation (e.g., Heldenbrand, 2003), and all of the above (e.g., Dodson, 2000) are not difficult to find in the literature. Digital video recording, editing, and DVD authoring add to drama's allure, as easy viewing and distribution possibilities enable students to see their own second language-speaking persona and share it with others.

Specifically for this course, the multiple English skills required to produce a video drama and the technology skills needed to effectively use digital video cameras and

editing software made this type of project attractive. Many of the students participating in the course had used digital video cameras before, but none had attempted to make a movie in English or use video editing software. Two program groups approached this challenge in two very different ways.

Small Groups Video Project

With a partner, use a digital video camera and computer software to produce a three-minute movie about an ethical dilemma concerning the use of science or technology.

At the start of this project, students were shown a teacher-produced video to serve as a frame of reference. They were also given a brief introduction to the computer-editing software they would be using later (iMovie, as installed on an Intel iMac). They then chose partners and brainstormed ideas. Students were given wide latitude as to the type of movie they could make. The only rules imposed by the instructor were that the story had to have 3-4 characters and that two of the characters were required to have some kind of debate about the dilemma at the heart of the project. (The specific English focus of this group was on debating language.) The main assignment for the summer break was to write the script for each movie. Students collaborated online via Nicenet, where they were able to post drafts and get feedback from teacher and students alike. Students were also asked to study a condensed manual for iMovie to prepare them to use the program later. Much of the teacher role during this stage was to point out usage errors in individual scripts and to work with students on debating language. Once at the

university retreat in September, with final scripts in hand, students assigned roles amongst themselves and determined the shooting schedule. This had to be organized very carefully, as there was only one camera and one computer available to the group, and small group time itself was limited. Each group had approximately three hours to film their project and another three hours to edit. When they were not filming or editing, they were acting in another group's movie. In this way, each student was involved in every step of the filmmaking process.

Despite the technical challenges, four movies—one for each group—were produced: one on the ethics of cloning, another on electric cars versus gasoline-engine cars, a third on robot work versus human work, and a final film on electronic surveillance. Students were motivated and engaged throughout the project and excited to show their finished films to the other groups on the final day of the camp.

However, having four groups working on four different films at the same time created easily identifiable problems. During the editing process, for example, the instructor needed to be on hand to deal with technical problems and questions. This left little opportunity for the instructor to work with students who were acting on intonation and pronunciation. The final movies suffer as result. There are periods in each film where the student speaking is not very intelligible. The instructor was also not able to advise students on certain technical aspects of filmmaking (sound, lighting) which would have led to better finished products.

Whole Group Video Project

Create an ethically-themed dramatic film related to the question: What does it mean to be human?

While this project followed many of the same initial steps as the small-groups video project, the fact that the final goal was to produce only one film made it very different. There were two key questions to address. How would drama production tasks be divided among the eight group members? How would unequal speaking roles be divided among the eight group members? In this case, the instructor and students decided on a division of labor approach in which group members assumed control of certain tasks and were relatively not involved in other tasks. In other words, all students would work on one project but be involved in different ways and to different extents. There were six tasks – director, writer, costume designer, and set/sound designer, camera operator, and editor. Two students volunteered for each task. (While some other students did in fact lend a hand in tasks they had not volunteered for, e.g., creating the costumes, some students did nothing at all with costumes or other tasks for which they had not volunteered.) In terms of speaking roles in the drama, the final script had four roles with large parts and four roles with smaller parts. The roles were presented as such, and students chose their roles accordingly. Most students requested smaller roles, but eventually, through negotiation with peers, accepted larger roles. The rationale behind both the division of tasks and the division of roles was the notion that learners are not equal in terms of desires, abilities and interests. A division of tasks and roles allowed, for example, students who liked art to work on costumes and students who liked technical work to do video editing or run the video camera. Students who enjoyed acting and speaking in front of groups could volunteer for longer speaking roles while

those who did not could chose smaller roles.

The final film, a drama about animal rights, was thirteen minutes long, and it was well-received when presented to the entire group at the camp. One of the benefits of filming only one drama was that the instructor was able to be on hand at all times for intonation and pronunciation guidance, which led to a more understandable and better-acted finished product than the average small-groups film mentioned above. However, the final film also showed clear limitations of the instructor's division of labor approach. Because there were a limited number of tasks and someone had to be responsible for each, it is quite possible that a student had to be responsible for a task in which he or she had no interest. Likewise, the number of students doing a certain task had to be limited. There could not, for example, be four directors. Therefore, while this approach gave some freedom and catered to students' individual talents and desires, it was decidedly not equal, a fact which could have caused some students to have a better experience than others. A similar argument might be made about the fact that speaking roles were unequal in this drama. While the benefit of this was to allow anxious or shy students an easier role, it is possible that students receiving longer or shorter roles felt slighted when comparing their roles to those of other students. These were issues that did not exist in the Small Groups Video Project as reported above, and they are problems to consider when taking this approach.

Final thoughts

Project-based learning activities for short-term intensive English programs require both students and instructors to plan carefully and adjust to unexpected developments. However, when they succeed, they are satisfying in ways that tests and other traditional

modes of assessment are not. By combining English learning with the development of other skills, project-based learning enables EFL students to connect the English of the classroom to their own real-life interests. Another benefit of this approach is the final product. In addition to finishing the program with a grade and academic credits, students also all left with a tangible product of their work. In a world in which cooperative group efforts and achievement of tangible products is often a measure of success and accomplishment, project-based learning prepares students well for real world events. In addition to benefits, evidenced in all the projects here were limitations and unexpected problems. While these shortcomings may have led to less than perfect final products in each of the projects, the need to negotiate such real-life occurrences with other speakers in a foreign language only serves to make project-based learning an even more appealing choice and, indeed, a focal point for intensive English learning.

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