What can Project Work Achieve in the Asian Teaching Context?

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Abstract: The advantages of using project work in the English language classroom as a means of promoting learner autonomy, authentic language use, and a learner-centred approach are well-documented. However, in the Asian teaching context project work is often either not used at all or used with limited success. This paper seeks to identify problem areas when using project work in this teaching context, and explore strategies which may help to make the use of project work a more valuable experience for our learners.

Introduction

Project work within English language teaching (ELT) has gained currency in recent years as a way of encouraging students to use "real life" language in authentic situations (Fried-Booth, 1997). Project work requires students to work in small groups over a period of time on a variety of tasks within the project framework to achieve an end product. This can produce collaborative learning, creative thinking and self-directed inquiry. By recycling information in different forms and from different perspectives, students may process the materials more deeply than when just presented with the information by the teacher. Furthermore, the sense of ownership that is derived from the completion of a project can also increase self-confidence in the student.

Taking a constructivist point of view, this paper first argues that project work should be incorporated into the English language classroom. This is in order to allow students to construct their own meaning through problems to be explored in dialogue rather than as information to be ingested and regurgitated at exam times (von Glaserfield, 1995). It then goes on to look at common problems encountered when using project work within classrooms in a "high context culture" (Hall, 1976). Finally, consideration is given to possible strategies for addressing these problems through examples taken from the author's own experience of using project work in classrooms around Asia.

Features and Structure of Project Work

While project based learning should not be seen as a replacement for traditional skills-based activities within the language learning classroom, it should neither be seen as merely a diversion or adjunct to the formal curriculum. Projects serve the educational goal of expansion of the realm of inquiry based on the student's own interests and level of curiosity. Project work represents an alternative method to organizing the syllabus. Instead of resting on the assumption that language learning is best served by the teacher simplifying the learning challenge for the student into discrete parts (synthetic approach), project work allows students to communicate through interaction in the target language, use authentic texts, and to focus on the process of learning (Nunan, 2006).

Moreover, there is a link between classroom language learning with real life tasks. Completing a project will often involve the construction of new knowledge for the student as he/she delves further into the content associated with the chosen topic. For example, the student may be

required to communicate information, express opinions, cite reference materials or present findings. In this way, the learner develops an understanding of, and an exposure to, a range of language activities through their use in real-world contexts. Stage et al. (1998) suggest that group projects "allow a student to observe other students' models of successful learning, and encourage him or her to emulate them" (p2)

Numerous authors have identified the features and the structure of project work (see for example, Fried-Booth, 1997; Haines, 1989; Legutke & Thomas, 1991). While there are differences in emphasis and approach, there are a number of common features in terms of benefits that have taken on currency in the ELT classroom. These include:
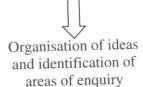
- **Integrated skills focus** – all four skills are used in a natural way

- **Student-centredness** – content and methodology can be decided by learners promoting autonomy

- **Increased motivation** – with content learning being the focus learners become personally involved in the project

- **Cooperative and collaborative** – interpersonal relations are developed through the cooperative rather than competitive nature of project work

- **Learning outcomes** – end product of presentation or publication provides authentic purpose for the project

- **Balance of process and product** – provides focus for fluency and accuracy work throughout the project
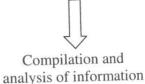
(Adapted from Haines, 1989)

Structure of Projects

Naturally, the structure of all project work with students will be dependent on a number of variables. These can include limitations of time, resources, level of language proficiency, class size, age, etc. Nevertheless, the sequence of the process of the project can be categorized as shown in Figure 1.

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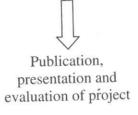presentation and
evaluation of project

Figure 1   Project Work Development
(Adapted from Stoller, 2002)

Why is Project Work often Unsuccessful in the Asian Context?

While students in an Asian teaching context may be familiar with a project-based learning environment for subjects such as science, they frequently have very little experience with such an approach in the language learning classroom. Indeed, it has been suggested that many students from an Asian background perceive project work negatively in terms of what they feel they should be doing in a language learning class. This may also be true of non-native teachers of English.

Student Perception

It is clear from the literature that the main body of opinion among educationalists is in favour of project work and the problem-solving approach it advocates. Nevertheless, there are those who have identified pitfalls related to student perception of the value of project work. Beckett and Slater (2005) describe a number of studies where students were "dissatisfied with the project approach ... because they did not think that these tasks were worthwhile pursuits in ESL classes" (p109). They go on to highlight project-based instruction courses which suffered high dropout

rates and/or high dissatisfaction levels among participating students due to the students' belief that "an ESL class is for learning language components, such as vocabulary , grammar, speaking, and writing , rather than for building skills in such areas as research and cooperative work" (p109). However, they do offer some comfort in the idea of effective "socialization of students [into] new ways of thinking about language and language learning" (p110). They advocate the use of a 'Project Framework Tool' which allows students to map their language and language skills development throughout the course of the project process (see Beckett and Slater, 2005 for a full discussion).

Clearly, an understanding by the student of what is happening in terms of language development is essential to the success of project work as an instructional method. Therefore, at each stage of the project the teacher may have to input language practise for particular skills and demands of the project. For example, students may need to practice interview techniques prior to interviewing native speakers outside of class. Moss and Van Duzer (1998) advocate pre-project activities to introduce problem-solving strategies and cooperative learning techniques, especially in the case of low level learners or those students with little experience of working as a group.

Teacher Resistance
Over a period of four years, the author was involved in several in-service training sessions in Japan and Taiwan delivering intensive Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methodology courses to junior and senior high school teachers of English.

In 2007, in a survey of 76 Japanese English teachers at the junior and senior high school level, only 6 had used projects as a core component of their teaching syllabus. Reasons for not using project work were varied, including: lack of time; unfamiliarity with the concept/technique; exam focus; and institutional constraints. When interviewed, a number of the teachers put forward a perception the project work lacked validity as 'real' language learning, and had little substance that could be grasped by the students. Many confessed to a long-standing adherence to traditional grammar-translation methods in their classrooms. Often this was linked to a lack of confidence in their own English language skills. They felt the unpredictable nature of the language that might be demanded by students involved in researching a project might threaten their position as 'the teacher'. This is a common conception among non-native English teachers and maintains a barrier to those teachers trying and using activities unfamiliar to them. This was certainly true of the Japanese high school teachers and was also backed up in feedback sessions the author had with Taiwanese teachers under similar circumstances. While it may not be within the scope of this paper to discuss changing teachers' established practices and beliefs, it is possible to identify teacher resistance and maintenance of traditional pedagogies as contributing to a lack of widespread use of project work within the Asian classroom.

Strategies for Overcoming some Common Problems
It is the aim of this paper to identify some of the general problem areas encountered when using project work in the classroom and to offer some consideration of examples of ways of addressing these problems.

Motivation
Interest is a key in motivating students to take part effectively in project work. With a monolingual group which is homogeneous in nature, the possibilities of finding dissenting voices

from the recognized 'normal' response become slim. Students who come from a high context culture tend to have had similar experiences and expectations. The voice of the group dominates the voice of the individual, resulting in the obvious problem of lack of debate. One way to overcome this problem is by providing an external dissenting view that can be challenged by the students. Of course, this can be provided by the teacher, but this is often not the most successful way, as students, especially those from Confucian heritage cultures, are generally not really ready to contradict the teacher's opinion. Instead, it may be possible to provide students with an adversarial view that they can collectively challenge.

An illustration of this method can be made using a project given to fourth-year undergraduate English major students at a university in central China.

Method
Stage 1 - The news report of the first manned space flight by China was taken as the topic for discussion. Predictably, a national sense of pride at the achievement was taken as the theme where the news was reported in local and national English language newspapers. A variety of articles was given to the students for discussion and summary of the main points. It was generally agreed that this was a great step forward for China and that the motivation was one of peaceful technological advancements.

Stage 2 – Photocopies of the same news item from western news sources were circulated for students to read. Most of these articles concentrated on the 'potential threat' that China could now pose to the West. This was specified in terms of China being able to deliver intercontinental ballistic missiles onto the soil of Europe or the United States. This naturally prompted a reaction from the students which was then discussed.

Stage 3 – Students were then required to research areas of interest stemming from the differing perspectives in the news reports. A range of project topics was developed, including such things as media bias and propaganda, Western attitudes to China, and the historical development of space programmes. It was decided that assessment would be based on a presentation of the project findings as well as the process stages in organizing and structuring the project. Finally, students would be required to produce an individual reflective piece of writing to describe their own development, both in terms of language and attitude towards the project.

Problems Associated with Internet Use
It has been pointed out that in educational environments in developed countries, students now often use the Internet as their first choice of information (Heil, 2005). With this in mind, teachers who are implementing project work assignments need to be aware of a number of problem areas:

Inexperience Using the Internet
If students don't have enough experience searching the Internet for information, the task soon becomes laborious and pointless as they waste valuable time on checking countless websites. Students are unable to discriminate between those sites which are merely personal opinion or ranting and those which have a valid, balanced and academic tenor to them. Familiarization with Internet search techniques and website addresses is a necessary skill that needs to be introduced prior to students researching independently for their project.

Internet Plagiarism

On the other hand, when students are proficient users of the Internet and information technology in general, they will often try to find ways and means of cutting and pasting information to produce what looks like a coherent piece of work with the least possible effort. Students may concentrate on designing the content so it looks impressive using such things as PowerPoint slides and complex graphics at the expense of any real input from themselves.

Internet Translation

Another area of concern with students using the Internet for project research purposes is that of students' reluctance to use English language websites or search engines. For example, Japanese students often prefer to locate relevant information from Japanese websites and then attempt to translate the material into something meaningful that they are able to use in their projects. McCarty (2007) believes this is a consequence of grammar-translation pedagogy continuing as a preferred model of instruction in Japanese high schools. He further maintains that "Japanese teachers tend to view the Internet as only useful for gathering information" (p3). Again, if project work is to be successful in encouraging critical thinking and authentic enquiry from students, there needs to be preparatory instruction using specific exercises designed to raise students' awareness and familiarity with English language websites and search engines.

Strategies to get Students Communicating in English

Speaking

Eguchi and Eguchi (2006) cite limited effect from project-based learning using a case study from the University of Shimane in Japan. They describe a project which involved students in the production of an English magazine. While there are reports of some authentic use of language for achieving specific tasks, especially in relation to computer use, they confess disappointment at the students' use of the L1 in order to complete the tasks. This is obviously a problem with a monolingual group of learners. Steps can be taken to minimize this aspect by providing students with direct questions they need to answer in relation to their project topic. They can be provided with English language websites to look at where the requisite information can be found.

On the other hand, students can also be encouraged to use English as the medium of communication with the use of a points system whereby the group can earn extra marks towards their grade depending on how much English is used in the carrying out of the project work. While these techniques may not eradicate the use of L1, they may go some way towards encouraging the use of English in the classroom in what still remains an artificial situation.

Authentic interaction with native speakers is also still possible by encouraging students to use surveys and interviews as part of their investigation. This can be carried out on a face-to-face basis with students interviewing native speakers outside of the class. This may be, for example, at a railway station, airport or tourist location. Alternatively, students can be encouraged to use English language weblogs to gather information and opinion. This was one method used with a class of first semester freshmen students at a Japanese university near Osaka. Several of the groups were researching differing attitudes to fashion for older women in Japan, America and Europe. Students were able to post questions on English websites and gain replies from native speakers of English about their subject. This method produced 'real-life' language interaction about a topic that the students themselves were interested in.

Writing

Following the presentation of their projects students are required to write a reflective piece detailing the project process. Allocating a specific grade for this piece of writing often means that students will put more effort into real reflection about the project. One recurring theme that has come to light with Japanese students is that when allowed to take on another persona due to the nature of the project, they feel more able to participate fully and engage with the project. Recent project work with freshmen students in an oral English class where students were required to put together various news magazine items in the format of a television programme produced some very active, imaginative, language rich, and entertaining pieces. Allowing students the opportunity to remove themselves (even briefly) from the cultural and hierarchical constraints of the language learning experience they are used to can produce dividends.

Conclusion

Project work is often neglected or unsuccessful in the Asian teaching context due to a variety of factors. However, many benefits can accrue from its use in the English language classroom. These range in scope from increased motivation and use of authentic language to prepare students for problem-solving tasks they will require in the future. It may be true that not all projects will be successful, yet, with proper preparation and careful planning project work can produce a dynamic learning environment for students and a rewarding and challenging experience for us as teachers.

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