

## **Project-based learning: Challenges and recommendations**

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### *Abstract*

*While teaching a course in a computer lab with the goal of giving “students advanced information retrieval and processing skills with the aim of improving their communication ability,” the author chose to use a project-based learning approach. The students researched and created a multimedia document about a chosen country for the Foreign Country Project. The second semester the students maintained a class blog about Japanese culture called the Japan Information Communication blog. A project-based class that produced their own comics in English and research based project will also be discussed. Discussions of these projects are followed by an analysis of student perceptions of learning and potential problems with these projects. The conclusion suggests several organizational and structural changes that could improve student productivity and learning in project-based classes.*

### **Introduction**

Project-based learning (PBL) is a specialized task-based curriculum, in which students need to use information retrieval in order to construct a comprehensive study of a particular topic. Project-based learning can be an effective means for promoting English language acquisition for a number of reasons. These projects emphasize the use of the target language to accomplish tasks and are student centered in the vein of Experimental Language Learning (Brown, 1994).

Additionally, according to Eguchi and Eguchi (2006), project-based learning can offer English learners exposure to authentic materials, opportunities to use the target language, and motivation to learn, which are all considered to be essential conditions for language learning (Willis, 1996).

Nunan (2006) has stated that tasks pedagogically strengthen several principles and practices as a needs-based approach to content selection, the use of authentic texts in the learning situation, opportunities to focus on not only language, but also on the learning process itself, as well as linking classroom language learning with language outside the class among others.

The author has had the opportunity to utilize project-based syllabi in two courses and has successfully incorporated project-based tasks in several other courses that were not exclusively

limited to a project-based curriculum. In one course called Information Communication 2, the core curriculum was made up of two, one semester long projects: the foreign country project and a class blog, Japanese Information Communication (JIC) blog. In another summer intensive English course, a small-sized class created their own English language comic books. In addition, the author has had students complete project-based tasks in courses that had extensive reading, business, and listening based curriculums. A description and discussion of the positive and negatives aspects of these different approaches will prove instructive in the decision whether or not to employ a full or partial project-based curriculum.

## **Types of Projects**

### *Overview of “Information Communication 2”*

Information Communication 2 is a four-credit course that all English majors are required to successfully complete before graduation at a mid-sized private university in Tokyo. In order to take the course, the students must have successfully passed Information Communication 1, an introductory course for basic information retrieval and processing, and have a standing as a junior or higher. To be specific, the course description states: “the purpose is to give students advanced (more advanced than Information Communication 1) information retrieval and processing skills with the aim of improving their communication ability.” There were four sections of this course. Each class ranged in size from 27 to 40 students starting from the Spring Semester of 2007 and ending at the completion of the Fall Semester 2008 over a period of 15 weeks per semester. The participants were 128 English majors. There were 111 students with junior standing and 17 students with senior standing. Overall, there were 87 female and 57 male students. The classes were subject to open enrollment, therefore, not tracked according to ability. The instructor chose to focus the research in this course in the area of culture. The first semester focus was on foreign cultures and the second semester focused on Japanese culture in English.

### *Foreign country project*

In the first semester of the course, the students researched a foreign country of their choice and compiled data about different aspects of their country from weather patterns to the group values of that particular culture using texts, pictures, graphs and other images on a MS Word document created by each individual student (see Appendix A). Students were also responsible for orally presenting their research for one of the three parts of the Foreign Country Project.

The first several weeks of the first semester involved introducing the students to strategies for researching topics in English on the Internet. This included Boolean logic (Boolean logic refers to the logical relationship among search terms and is named after the British-born Irish mathematician George Boole) for searches. In addition, there was a discussion on what made some sites more authoritative than others and signs that identify whether or not the site constitutes a legitimate primary source. Also, a sample document was discussed and criteria for evaluation of the completed document and presentation were introduced before students began their research project after selecting the country of their choice (excluding their country of origin). There were three parts to the project. After every three-week cycle one third of the class was responsible for presenting the information that they had researched during the project cycle (see Appendix A).

#### *Japanese information communication (JIC) blog*

During the second semester student groups of three to five students selected topics about their own culture to compile posts for a class blog project. First, they created a plan to research and post entries on different aspects of their topic in English for a class blog. Then they used the Internet research skills for compiling information about Japan on the class blog. These topics ranged from Cuisine to Newspapers/Magazines, the blog can be seen at: <http://patrickmccoy.typepad.com/jic/> (see Appendix B).

The second semester project, the JIC Blog, was designed to provide students a different medium to present research done in English about Japanese culture. Students were arranged in groups of 3 to 6 and chose categories to research. Once the categories were selected, students were responsible for creating a blog post plan from 9 to 12 posts depending on group size (some groups had only three members due to class attrition and poor attendance). The next three weeks were devoted to becoming familiar with other blogs and the possibilities for presenting information through researched text, images, and other media such as YouTube videos and hyperlinks. The students were also familiarized with the operation of making blog posts using the TypePad blogging program (which the instructor uses for his own personal blog-and hosted the class blog at no additional cost). Again students were informed of blog post requirements, proper citations of referenced material, and evaluation criteria. There were two deadlines for the blog posts to be evaluated, one mid-semester and the other at the end of the semester. Occasionally, there would be mini-lectures on common errors throughout the process. Student groups met with the instructor to receive oral evaluations and suggestions for their blog posts

after the mid-semester deadline.

### *English comics*

In the first two classes of the summer intensive English course and students did introductory activities to introduce comics and some of its specific vocabulary. Some of these activities included: writing titles for comic strips, adding a panel to a comic strip, writing their own dialogue, completing a jigsaw, putting panels in order, as well as perusing samples of English language graphic novels and comics.

Then the class was divided into two groups of five and roles were assigned: researcher-writer/penciller / colorist-inker / letterer-editor. Most of the logistics and structure were adapted from *Going Graphic: Comics at Work in the Multilingual Classroom* (Cary, 2004). Next the group collaborated on filling out a log line, which summarizes the story in a single sentence. The log line was then expanded by using a narrative template, which included: title, conflict/problem, plan/action steps, resolution/climax, and coda/moral. From there, the groups collaborated on page plots there were derived from the narrative template. In this case the groups chose to make stories between 8 to 11 pages long. In the next step, the students planned individual panels, 3 to 6 per page, for a total of between 25 to 50 individual panel descriptions. The penciller then proceeded to rough in, or lightly sketch, the panels from the panel descriptions leaving room for captions and dialogue. After the captions and dialogue had been added the pages were proofread for errors and continuity of pictures. The final stage involved lettering the text, inking in the drawings if the students so wished, and adding covers and coloring if they so desired (see Appendix C for Job Descriptions and Plotting).

Once the model copies were finished, the students photocopied the pages and assembled comics for distribution. On the last day of the intensive sessions the students gave every student who participated a copy of the two comics.

### *Research presentation project cycles*

One of the syllabus requirements for English language study in the Law Department of another Tokyo area university is an opportunity to complete a research presentation cycle several times throughout the year. The research cycle is comprised of research gathered on a topic of the students' choice, note taking of the main points and re-organization of notes for use in presentation of the topic. Small groups of listeners (usually three to four) actively listen taking

notes and participate in a conversation on the topic in question. There is a lot of room for different approaches in this style depending on the class' ability. The extensive reading and business language classes in question were tracked with pre-intermediate students. A somewhat similar research presentation approach was used at another Tokyo area university with advanced level listening students.

The first presentation research cycle was simplified for scaffolding purposes. In the extensive reading course the students were required to research a contemporary person of interest, the examples ranged from John Lennon to Mother Teresa. In the business class the students chose to present on a company, CEO, or aspect of business like marketing or public relations. The second presentation was based on a social or business related topic. The presenters were required to create true/false statements, comprehension questions, and discussion questions related to the topics they presented. After the presentation, the listeners responded to the presenters pre-written true/false statements, comprehension questions, and discussion questions. The listening class would research information based on the listening chapters and make group presentations on their findings.

### **Challenges and Recommendations**

Project-based learning as the sole component of a curriculum lends itself more to certain advantageous pedagogical factors or conditions. For example, in the case of the curriculum for Information Communication, there was the advantage of conducting the class in a computer lab with the explicit goal of "information retrieval and processing skills with the aim of improving their communication ability." The English Comics curriculum was also designed to be project based since the students were in a more traditional curriculum designed class in the morning sessions. Furthermore, students had a choice, as to which afternoon course they would take, which created built-in motivation, in addition. Student choice is also a key component in the research cycles, since students get to choose the topics they present.

However, research-based presentations are projects that can be incorporated into any curriculum. As mentioned before, research cycles were incorporated into an extensive reading and business English curriculums in classes in the Law department. In addition, students in an advanced listening class at another major Tokyo university have done presentations on topics from content studied in class as a means for activating new vocabulary and speaking patterns. As well as gathering further information in English on the topics presented. For example, the students

presented information researched after every two-chapter unit on similar topics: global business, art, psychology, and health.

One of the biggest problems in the Information Communications 2 class projects was monitoring student progress. This stemmed largely from the class sizes. Ideally, a class of this nature would be less than 20 students. However, the instructor felt pressure to accept as many students as possible since this was a course required for graduation. It was difficult during both projects to stress the importance of giving proper citations and references for information gathered from the internet despite lessons, handouts, and instruction on the proper procedure as well as constant reminding and monitoring. A smaller class would have allowed for more opportunities for one-on-one progress meetings with students about their research, which would have also allowed for personalized guidance and critiques. A cap of 30 students would be essential for future incarnations of a course of this nature in the instructor's opinion. It should be noted that many students worked well autonomously, but many more students fell behind, worked on projects for other classes, did the absolute minimum, and used their class computer time poorly. In addition, proper monitoring would also insure students were on task in English, that is using the target language for planning and research. Proper monitoring of the class, in general, in a class of this nature, is crucial for success.

### **Conclusion**

Despite these concerns, the projects were effective for several reasons: access to authentic materials, creation of a real need to communicate and collaborate in English, and higher student motivation through student choice/interest in the subject being studied. Many of these projects were dependent on web-based research but a library or access to authentic English texts would suffice as well. Students needed to collaborate with each other in groups to organize and design blog posts or to create comics, but also needed to present their research on countries and other topics. Students seemed to be more motivated and enjoyed researching or presenting on topics of their own choice.

### **References**

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### **Biographical Statement**

**Patrick McCoy** teaches English as a second language in the School of Global Japanese Studies at Meiji University in Tokyo, Japan. The 2009 Conference in Dhaka, Bangladesh was his first conference for THT. He has been teaching ESL in Japan for more than 12 years. He is originally from Washington State in the USA.

## **Appendix A - Foreign Country Project: Parts 1-3**

### **Part 1**

**Page 1: Flag** (illustration needed) / **Title Page** (include name, student number, day and class period) / **Facts & Statistics:** A. National Anthem, B. Country Capital, C. Largest Populated City, D. Official Language and Languages Spoken, E. Area of the Country, F. Population, G. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) Per Capita, H. Currency

**Page 2:** Food (describe different types of food eaten for breakfast-lunch-dinner-snacks)

**Page 3:** Weather (charts of average rainfall and temperatures would be helpful)

**Page 4:** Famous People (please list at least five)

**Page 5:** Places of Interest (please list at least five)

### **Part 2**

**Page 6 & 7: Culture:** Give information about your country’s traditions in art (painting,

sculpture, crafts, architecture, film), literature (poetry, prose, drama) and music/dance (traditional, classical, tribal, etc.). Please describe their cultural traditions in these areas and profile the most influential artists, writers, and musicians. (You could cut and paste copies of famous works of art for visuals)

**Page 8: *Holiday Customs / Celebrations:*** Give information about your country's holiday customs (Are they religious? Cultural?) and how they celebrate at them (What do they do? What do they wear? Is there music and dancing? What do they eat or drink?). You could also give information about weddings, birthdays, christenings, and funerals as well as beliefs about hospitality.

**Page 9: *Family:*** What are your country's beliefs about child raising (children and teens), the responsibilities of children and teens, the role of family, and their attitudes toward age? (Do they value older members of the community?) Find out information in these areas and present the information.

### **Part 3**

**Page 10: *Individual Values:*** What are your country's attitudes about personal space/privacy? What is the relationship between the public and private areas for the people of your country? What is this culture's concept of self?

**Page 11: *Group Values:*** What are the rules for polite behavior? What is their concept of fairness? Can you explain your country's ideas about the nature of friendship? What is their work ethic like? What is their concept of beauty? Can you explain the general worldview of your country's people?

**Page 12: *Religion:*** What are the religions your country's people believe in? What are the respective religious beliefs? Can you explain the rituals of these religions? Find out information in these areas and present the information.

**Last Pages: *Reference Pages*** (please continue to make electronic citations to identify where you found the information about your country and remember to keep page headings for all of the pages you are compiling).

## **Appendix B - Japanese Blog Topics**

1. Cuisine
2. Religion
3. Values
4. Japanese Language
5. Visual Arts
6. Performing Arts
7. Clothing
8. Architecture
9. Education
10. Sports
11. Traditional Music
12. Popular Music
13. Literature
14. Film
15. Holiday Customs/ Celebrations
16. Manga/Anime
17. Television
18. Technology
19. Politics/Government
20. Business
21. Crime
22. Folklore
23. Customs/Etiquette
24. Samurai
25. Geisha
26. Historical Places
27. Historical Figures (People)
28. History: Edo (1603-1868)
29. History: Meiji (1868-1912)
30. Newspapers/Magazines

## Appendix C - Making Comics: Job Descriptions

*This is a collaborative project and all group members will do a little of everything. It is useful to have a group role that makes each group member responsible for a particular aspect of your comic.*

- 1. Researcher/Writer:** gathers background information for the story and checks facts/ drafts and reviews the script, all the comic's written text
- 2. Penciller:** is the chief artist and does the roughing (first draft) and final versions of all pictures
- 3. Colorist/Inker:** adds color to the penciled drawings/ traces over pictures with black ink, adds shading when necessary, and erases leftover pencil lines
- 4. Letter/Editor:** prints the words in captions and dialogue balloons/ reviews all visual and written work for accuracy consistency.

### Plotting

*The writer begins with a log line, which summarizes the story in a single sentence, for example:*

A small village hires a band of samurai to protect the village from raids by bandits in the Edo period of Japan.

*The log line is expanded by using a narrative template. A typical template includes:*

- title (What the comic is about): orientation / time / setting / characters (introduced)
- conflict/problem
- plan/action steps
- resolution/climax
- coda/moral

*The template serves two functions: (1) it reminds the writers of the key ingredients that go into a good story, and (2) it provides a basic plotting sequence for writer and penciller-what they write/draw for the beginning-middle-end of the story. We'll use an 8 page sequence.*

**Log line:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Title:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Time:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Setting:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Characters:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Conflict/Problem:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Plan/Action Steps:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Resolution/Climax:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Coda/Moral:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_