Project-Based Learning And ESP: A Perfect Match

Sripathum Noom-ura
Language Institute, Thammasat University

ABSTRACT

This paper proposes benefits of Project-Based Learning (PBL) implementation in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classes. The main components of PBL, the distinguishing characteristics of ESP, and how they can help improving language acquisition and proficiency are discussed. Two sample lesson plans are also presented with the hope to give a clearer picture on how to put the ideas into practice.

Keywords: Project-based learning, English proficiency, Language learning

INTRODUCTION

The modern focus on student-centeredness in language learning has led many teachers to investigate the benefits of incorporating project-based learning (PBL) into their English-language classes. A PBL approach enables students to develop and improve their language fluency and accuracy, and at the same time build personal qualities and skills such as self-confidence, problem-solving, decision-making, and collaboration. (Fried-Booth, 2002; Stoller, 2006; Beckett and Slater, 2005).

However, unsuccessful implementation of PBL has also been reported by Marx et al, 1977 (as cited in Bradley-Levine et al, 2010). For example, PBL is time-consuming, and it is difficult to achieve an appropriate balance between giving students both independence and support. PBL necessitates the reforming of classroom structure, the re-orientation of teacher and student roles, and the creation of alternative assessment schemes.

Nevertheless, in integrating PBL in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classes, the potential benefits seem to outweigh the drawbacks because the main

components of PBL and the distinguishing characteristics of ESP can proceed hand-in-hand to enhance language acquisition and achieve of proficiency.

MAIN COMPONENTS OF PBL AND ESP

Thomas (2000) proposed a definition of PBL from PBL handbooks as being "a teaching model that organizes learning around projects" and projects as being complex tasks based on challenging questions or problems that involve students in design, problem-solving, decision-making, and/or investigative activities, that give students opportunities to work relatively autonomously over extended periods of time, and culminate in realistic products or presentations (Jones, Rasmussen, & Moffitt, 1997; Thomas, Mergendoller, & Michaelson, 1999).

As an extended illustration, Stoller (2006) defined PBL as: (1) having both a process and product; (2) giving students (partial) ownership of the project; (3) extended over a period of time (several days, weeks, or months); (4) integrating skills; (5) developing student understanding of a topic through the integration of language and content; (6) students both collaborating with others and working on their own; (7) holding students responsible for their own learning through the gathering, processing, and reporting of information gathered from target-language resources; (8) assigning new roles and responsibilities to both students and teacher; (9) providing a tangible final product; and (10) reflecting on both the process and the product.

These characteristics can be practically employed in ESP courses, where the main objective often is to develop student abilities required for successful communication in occupational settings. Three abilities necessary for communication in a profession that Gatehouse (2001) has listed are the ability to use the particular jargon of a specific professional group, the ability to use a more generalized set of academic skills, and the ability to use everyday informal language to communicate effectively. In other words, ESP classes prepare students to converse about or communicate specific technical-field information while employing academic skills in

activities such as conducting research, summarizing, and giving presentations using English, and chat comfortably in English with colleagues over tea time. Most ESP classroom activities are simulations of situations likely to occur in professional practice. ESP teachers have the duty to train students to use English related to their future careers; they are not teaching students the professions per se in English. So it is not uncommon that students in ESP classes know more about their specialized subjects than their English teachers do. English teachers are only helping students develop the skills essential for acquiring, understanding, and sharing information authentic to their professions, and such skills can be well-developed through PBL.

A PERFECT MATCH: THE WHY AND THE HOW

When analyzing the project framework proposed by Beckett & Slater (2005) depicted in the diagram below, an English project consists of three main parts: language, content, and skills. The content that students know best is that of their professions, and they acquire and share knowledge through a project using English
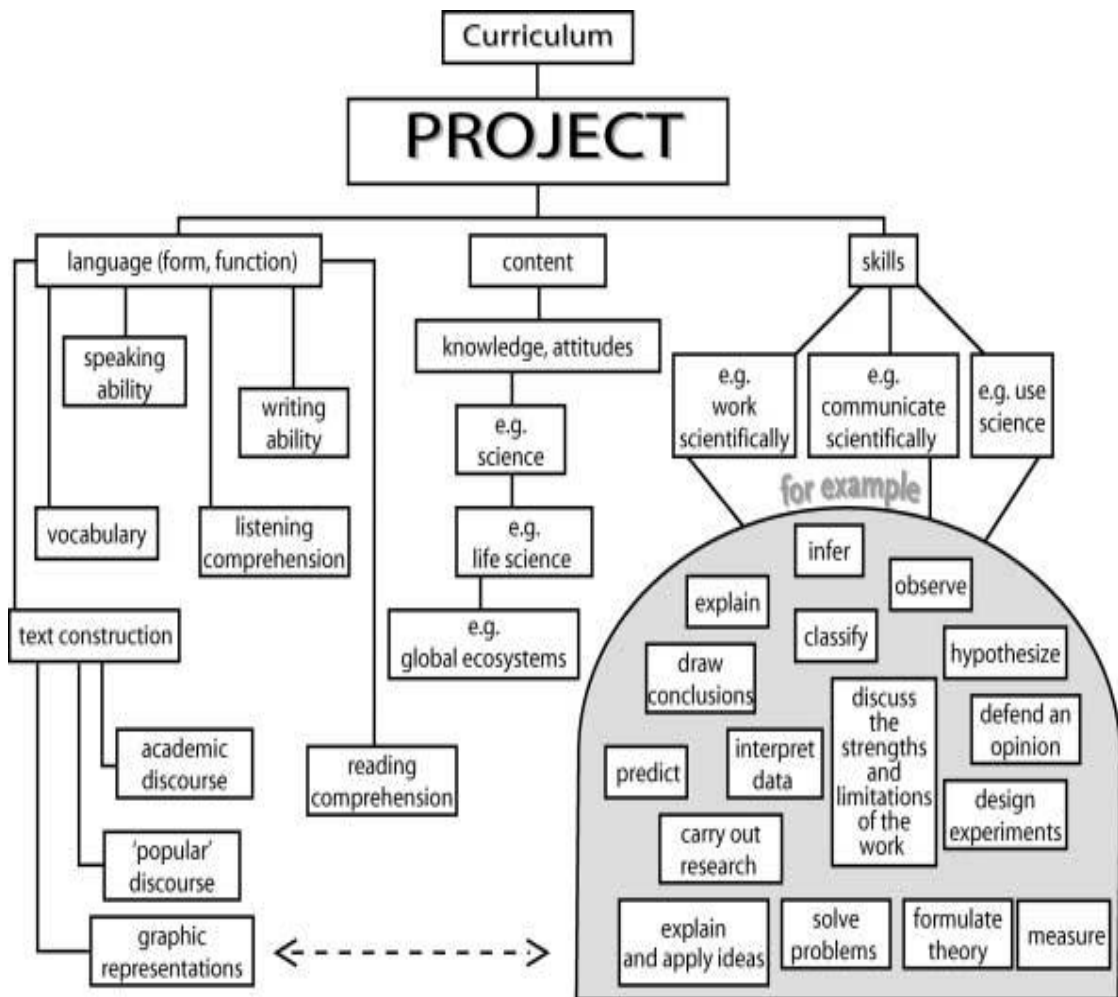
The multiple skills required to finish a project include various learning and communication skills. Students need to gather information – content – either through reading, or through listening to authentic materials. They employ academic skills in carrying out research, collecting, organizing and summarizing data, or formulating it into graphic representations. They explain their project, or discuss its strengths and limitations and draw conclusions about their work through writing or oral presentations. ESP can promote and maintain learning motivation because the content is relevant to the students' professional goals, when compared to that of general English classes in which content focus is usually much more diverse.

SAMPLE LESSON PLANS

Below are two lesson plans that illustrate PBL procedures useable by ESP teachers incorporating PBL into their classes. The first example is designed for, but not limited to, engineering students, and the second is for business students.

Lesson Plan 1: "Design"

Goal: To design a simple gadget for use by people not having either arm or leg use

(This involves either paraplegics or quadriplegics.)

Step 1   The teacher arouses interest and develops a climate conducive to speculation and investigation by showing a picture of a swing in a layground and asking students in groups of three or four to brainstorm s to how a child without legs could move the swing. Students engage in formulating ideas and sharing them with other groups.

Step 2   The teacher gives feedback by showing a picture of a new swing with a handle tied from the top of the A-frame through a pulley. A child without legs can use both hands to press the handle down. That will push the swing forward, and the child's own weight will pull the swing backward. This is also a stage to provide both linguistic and task models.

Step 3   Students are directed to form groups of four to design a gadget that helps a person without either legs or hands lead a practical life on his/her own.

Step 4   Students – outside class-time – formulate ideas, design, experiment, and make a model of their project. In class, the teacher introduces language commonly used when describing dimensions, shapes, and forms in one lesson;

language describing material properties in a second lesson; and language describing a process or procedure in a third lesson, aiming to equip students with the language necessary to describe their projects. Also, the teacher can provide opportunities for consultation and monitor project progress.

Step 5   Students from each group present their project. They must bring their model along and show how it works. Students can use technology available in the classroom, such as

a projector or computer, for their presentations.

Step 6   Projects are assessed by the teacher alone, or by the teacher and student-peers. The assessment works well if the teacher designs a marking rubric and makes students aware of it before the project begins. In addition, the teacher should encourage students to reflect upon the learning process and/or the outcome of their project.

Lesson Plan 2: "Young Entrepreneurs"

Goal: To start a small business with a small loan

Step 1   Students listen to a mini-talk by a boy who begins his own boat-rental business using his savings and a small loan from a bank.

Step 2   Students are, in groups of three, placed in a context where they can get a loan from the school if their business plan is approved.

Step 3   The teacher gives examples of how to write a concise proposal, and draws student attention to various appropriate language patterns.

Step 4   Students spend two weeks in their English class writing up a draft of their proposal. The teacher gives help when necessary.

Step 5   The teacher and students help make a checklist of criteria to determine approval or rejection of a proposal.

Step 6   Students bring their typewritten proposals to class.

The whole class sits in a circle, members of each group staying close to each other. Each group passes their proposal to the group on their right for evaluation of it using the agreed checklist.

When each group finishes evaluating a proposal, they will pass it on to the group on their right while receiving a new proposal from the group on their left. The procedure continues until every group has seen every proposal.

After that, the scores are added up and averaged to find the winner.

Step 7   Submit the approved proposals to the appropriate school committee. (optional)

CONCLUSION

Both of the sample lesson plans above involve all or nearly all of the elements necessary for as PBL defined by Stoller and Thomas (as mentioned earlier): process and product, integrating skills, problem-solving, decision-making, and collaborative skills. The projects stimulate people's constructive instincts, and they will be even more relevant and provide a sense of achievement in an English class if they are related to the students' main fields of study. PBL and ESP: a perfect pairing!

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