

A Project-Based Language Learning Model for Improving the Willingness to Communicate of EFL Students

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ABSTRACT

Anxiety and inadequate motivation due to misapplication of some language teaching methodologies and learning materials have been shown to affect the Willingness to Communicate of students in EFL programs. This study used a Project-Based Language Learning to improve learning motivation and content relevance. Students were grouped into pairs to conduct fieldwork activities on their chosen topics and learned the English language that was suitable for describing their activities and outcomes. They interacted with content and peers through Web 2.0 environments. In the classroom, they engaged in communicative tasks in a jigsaw format and presented their projects where their peers used an online rubric and forum to give feedback. They also participated in a speech contest with peers outside their class or from another university in order to broaden their confidence. Findings from this study show that students were able to develop the language and evaluation skills for presentation. Additionally, they indicated a reduction in communication anxiety.

Keywords: Project-Based Language Learning, Communicative Language Teaching, Technology Supported Learning, Willingness to Communicate, Learner Motivation, Project-based Learning

1. INTRODUCTION

The current foreign language education emphasizes on language production. That is the ability of students in foreign language programs to write and speak fluently and comprehensibly in the target language. However, in order for students to attain that skills, there is a need to place them in an appropriate learning environment that would empower them to learn and use the foreign language. Therefore, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has been shown by many studies in the field of second language acquisition to motivate students to acquire communicative competence. Some of these studies have added that CLT reduces anxiety and increases self-confidence and motivation. As pointed out in [2], studies have shown that motivation is the key to success in learning a foreign or second language. On the other hand, the road to acquisition of the second language means hours spent in a classroom environment learning a complex topic, especially for those who are trying to master material not for its own sake, but as means to another end such as conducting business in a second language or English proficiency courses, can seem a burden. Additionally, teachers and students may find themselves in a quagmire, endlessly preparing for tests, stuck in outmoded paradigms of teacher/student roles and looking for relevance in materials not suited for achieving the expected outcomes. These situations cause anxieties, especially to students, which can lead to demotivation [3]. To improve this situation, one of the recent approaches used in CLT is problem-based learning [1], [4], which is referred to as project-based language learning (PBLL) in this study. PBLL method focuses on engaging students in the exchange of information, opinions, ideas, and so forth, in both written and oral form [1]. It also allows students to engage in a process of exploring ideas and then planning,

collecting and analyzing data and reflecting on what that means within an action research framework [5].

Therefore, this study employed a PBLL model to improve learning motivation and content relevance. In this study students engaged in fieldwork activities on their chosen topics. They were provided with Web 2.0 environments to facilitate their interaction with contents and their peers. And, they learnt the English language that was suitable for describing their activities and project outcomes through different modes that included coursebook, input from the teacher, peers and family. The rest of the article will discuss the study background, method and findings.

2. BACKGROUND

At the center of language learning is communication, regardless of its form, and CLT has been shown to encourage language learning and development of communicative competence [1], [2], [4], [5]. However, studies have pointed out some important issues that affect language learning. These include the teaching method, willingness to communicate in the target language, which sometimes is influenced by the learners' communication culture, and learning context, which relates to materials and learners' environment.

Learning method: Over the years many learning methods have been suggested for language teaching. Some of these methods include grammar translation, audiolingualism and situational language teaching which can still be found in some classrooms. The situational approach has a three-phase sequence, which is referred to as Presentation, Practice, Production cycle, also called P-P-P approach. In the Presentation, a new grammar structure is presented, often by means of a conversation or short text. The teacher explains the new structure and checks students' comprehension of it. In the Practice, students practice using the new structure in a controlled context, through drills or substitution exercises. And, in the Production, students practice using the new structure in different contexts, often using their own content or information, in order to develop fluency with the new pattern. However, the underlying theory for a P-P-P approach has now been discredited [6]. This criticism has led to a paradigm shift from the older methods, mentioned earlier, to a more communicative language teaching that focuses on communicative competence. CLT uses almost any activities that engage learners in authentic communication. Two common methodologies that are used to develop learners' communicative competence are content-based instruction (CBI) and task-based instruction (TBI). Krahnke [7], defines CBI as "the teaching of content or information in the language being learned with little or no direct or explicit effort to teaching the language itself separately from the content being taught." The content refers to the information or subject matter that we learn or communicate through language rather than the language used to convey it. However, CBI is argued to focus mostly on the language that the content provides rather than being a sufficient basis for the development of the language skills. According to Nunan [8], TBI in second language acquisition, which is also referred to as Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT), is an activity that involves learners in comprehending, manipulation, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form. And, the task

should be able to stand alone as communicative act in its own right. TBLT has three phases. The first is the pre-task phase, which prepares students to perform the task in ways that will promote acquisition. The second is the main task phase. It involves task-performance options that relate to decisions taken prior to performing of the task and also process options that relate to on-line decisions taken during the performance of the task, with focus on form. The third is the post-task phase. This involves repeating the performance, reflection on performance of the task, and giving attention to form. Even though Task-based teaching offers the opportunity for 'natural' learning inside the classroom, there have been some issues against the use of TBLT. These include the problematic nature of criteria for selecting and sequencing tasks, difficulty in applying TBLT to novice and sometimes intermediate learners, and the problem of language accuracy.

Willingness to communicate: Willingness to Communicate (WTC) is a concept that focuses on how language learners will utilize any opportunities to communicate in a second, or foreign, language. One of the main factors that affect WTC is anxiety [9], [10]. Horwitz et al. [3] pointed out three foreign language anxiety scales that are common in the traditional language learning classrooms. These are Communication Apprehension, Test Anxiety and Negative Evaluation. These anxieties in the foreign language class affect motivation [11], which could easily lead to code switching among the students and also widening of communication gap between the speakers of the foreign language and the learners of that language in a foreign land. The latter is further influenced by the differences in communication pattern and group dynamics between members of these different cultures. For example, the western communication style is linear (active, direct and individualistic) while that of some Asian countries like Japan is non-linear (passive, partial and collectivistic). The communication between members from these two cultures who are not aware of each other's communication norm could lead to communication conflict.

Learning context: EFL students are often surrounded by their own native language and culture and do not have much chance to use English. This is the case of the Japanese EFL students [12]. Their grammar, some other linguistics features, and also presentations could differ from that of English. Therefore, reading English texts, and also listening to English, requires several cognitive processes, such as word recognition, syntactic parsing, and inference making [13]. One of the strongest indicators of how well students will learn new information relative to the content is what they already know, which literature refers to as the background knowledge. This background knowledge-academic and cultural- is stored in the permanent memory and is activated by any item in the working memory to facilitate information processing and improve schema. Therefore, students' background knowledge, when considered in learning materials, improves content relevance and learning motivation [2], [14], [15], [16].

3. METHOD

The purpose of this study was to answer the following three questions.

1. *How do EFL students learn foreign language in a project-based learning?*
2. *What language skills can EFL students acquire in a project-based learning?*
3. *What is the effect of project-based learning on Willingness to Communicate of EFL students?*

In order to answer these questions, thirty second year Japanese university students who enrolled for a fifteen-week semester course in Business English Communication became the subjects of this study. The students were grouped into pairs for their

project activities since Project-Based Language Learning (PBL) method was adopted for the study. PBL is the use of Project-based learning (PBL) for language acquisition. According to Larsson [4], students are known to develop greater communicative, thinking and problem-solving skills when engaged in PBL. And, PBL is a form of situated learning, and it is based on the constructivist finding that students gain a deeper understanding of material when they actively construct their understanding by working with and using ideas [17]. In PBL, students engage in real, meaningful problems that are important to them and that are similar to what scientists, mathematicians, writers, and historians do. This learner-centered learning allows students to investigate questions, propose hypotheses and explanations, discuss their ideas, challenge the ideas of others, and try out new ideas. Mitchell et al. [18] pointed out that PBL gives students the autonomy to learn knowledge and elements of the core curriculum, to apply what they know to solve authentic problems and produce better results. Additionally, PBL provides opportunities for students to use technology, and connects students and schools with communities and the real world. Larsson [4], also highlighted that PBL encourage students to work at the higher levels of analysis, synthesis and evaluation of the Bloom's cognitive domain [19] when compared to traditional approaches that leave the students working at the two, or possibly three, lowest levels.

4. THE PBL MODEL FOR THIS STUDY

The model used in this study had seven phases. The phases are explained as follow.

Phase 1: Design the PBL curriculum- The instructor explained to the students what is required of them in the course. The students were informed that they would engage in group activities both within and without the class. And, the activities included conducting a fieldwork research outside the school and reporting about their work and findings in English language. Lastly, students were made to understand that they would be evaluated and assessed for the course by their participation in group work, submitting reports and also conducting presentations in English.

Phase 2: Describe the project tasks and prepare students- this occurred after the students have finally enrolled for the course. They were informed about the scope of the projects, the resources available to aid their learning, and also how to choose a driving question or topic for their projects. Then, students were given one week to make their own groups. Those who could not make it by themselves after that time were helped by the teacher.

Phase 3: Selection of driving questions- this is one of the most important parts of the project. This is because the driving question is the one that allows students to function effectively in their learning if they are psychologically attached to it. Therefore, each group was given another week to decide their topic. The topics were to relate to products, services, leisure that were unique to Hokkaido that the students wished people all over the world know about.

Phase 4: Give students the required tools- Students were given Web 2.0 environments such as Moodle LMS and Google environment for learning and communication. They were asked to use Skype and LINE communication tools for voice and text chat among themselves. Additionally, they were given electronic devices that include mini Ipads connected to the Internet and digital cameras for information access, communication, and taking photographs or making movies outside the classroom. The use of technology, which was also to help students develop 21st century skills, will provide learners with regulation of their own learning process and easy access to information that the teacher may not be able to provide [20].

Phase 5: Build knowledge, understanding and presentation skills to address the driving question. In the classroom, students engaged in communicative tasks in a jigsaw format and presented their projects in phases using the vocabulary and grammar taught by the teacher and also those that they have learnt through their own efforts. Their peers used an online rubric and forum to give

feedback. In this phase, the situational language teaching methods such as TBLT and CBI methods were blended by the teacher in order to teach students some basic grammar and vocabulary that were relevant to their in and out class work. For example, students were taught *reported speech* because they had to report what a staff at the project site had told them. They were also taught the differences and appropriate use of “*made of*”, “*made from*” and “*made out of*” since the project focused on products and services in Hokkaido. Additionally, they also learnt *how to agree, disagree and express their opinions* because they have to express their feelings in terms of the differences between what they knew before the research and the firsthand information that they have learnt in their project work. Moreover, they learnt “*How to give direction*” and “*describe locations*” because they had to describe the locations of their project sites. These language skills including some relevant vocabulary like connecting and question words were learnt and applied appropriately in the classroom. Lastly, they learned presentation skills. This included how to structure their presentation and the use of body language during presentation.

Phase 6: Develop and revise presentations. Students built their presentations based on their findings to the driving question, and also continued to revise the language with the support of the teacher, feedback from their colleagues and also through their own efforts. A rubric was design to enable students to participate in reviewing and giving feedback to their peers. The rubric helped in rewarding points to the students. The points were based on body language, organization of presentation, comprehensibility, language use, etc. This activity was used to affectively encourage students to find the faults in their peers’ presentations so that they could avoid those faults.

Phase 7: Present final products or findings to the driving question. Students presented their final findings before the class and the best teams were selected to engage in a speech contest with their counterparts from other universities. In the contest, the students presented before guests and three external judges, who were linguistic professors, in order to select the best presentation.

4. DATA AND FINDINGS

Data was collected through questionnaire, students’ presentations and reports. The data is presented according to the purpose of this study. The students’ comments, in the inverted commas, are verbatim. The data is as follow.

How Students Learned English: Students were asked to indicate how they had learnt English during their project activities, and also for their presentations (see Appendix). Most of the students indicated that they learnt the language through in-class activities, and also with the support of their project partners, coursebook, dictionary and The Internet. For example, one student commented that “*Most of the phrases were from the class-work. The teacher gave us useful words and sentences, and that knowledge changed our English skills to be more formal and clear. And some of the words were from my partner.*” Another student gave this comment, “*I learned the English by watching presentations of my classmates and listening to the teacher’s talks.*” Some students also indicated that they learnt the English with the help of their family members and friends. This can be seen from this comment, “*After writing my script, I asked my father if he thought my script was okay.*” Some students also indicated that they had gone back to use the English textbooks that they had used in high school. This can be seen in the following comment, “*First, I used dictionary many times. Second, when I didn’t know the grammar, I used the textbook which I had used in my high school days. Third, I asked my partner some questions. When she didn’t understand either, we studied together by using the Internet.*”

It can be observed that students have used approaches, mostly learner-centered and learning-by-teaching, that they thought were suitable for their learning of the language.

Acquired Language Skills: Almost all the students have indicated that the project had helped them to acquire both the receptive and productive skills of the language. For example, one of the students stated that “*I have improved my ability in English. For example, writing skill, thinking skill, listening skill, and especially speaking skill.*” All the students were asked to write three new sentences that they have learnt through the project that were neither in the coursebook nor taught by the teacher (see Appendix). The following sentences are a few of the example sentences.

- *You can enjoy its addictive taste.*
- *I found some quite interesting coincidences.*
- *What’s legal is not the same as what’s ethical.*
- *Figure out some way to raise efficiency.*
- *I was brought up in a good environment.*
- *All our products are transported to outside of Hokkaido.*
- *This relationship of mutual trust with them guarantees the quality of Yoichi wine.*
- *It is a kind of food grilled on a hot plate.*
- *It is not sustainable as it stands.*
- *I would like to finish by thanking you all.*
- *He is someone who is open-minded and easy to talk to.*

Table 1: List of Students’ Words and their JACET Levels

Level	Total	Example
1	19	power, idea, space
2	11	philosophy, exportation, unique
3	14	mutual, generous, ingredient
4	16	guarantee, constraint, booming
5	5	popularity, ethical, manuscript
6	7	craftman, hospitality, alien
7	6	vineyard, loft, sustainable
8	2	prosper, contaminate
Not in JACET	31	abductive, depopulate, glutinous
Total	111 words	

Additionally, students were asked to write five new words that they have learnt during the project but were neither in their coursebook nor taught by the teacher (see Appendix). They reported a total of 111 words. Some of the words are shown in the example column of Table 1. The words were compared to the list of 8000 most frequently used vocabulary in East Asia, popularly known as JACET 8000 [21]. JACET had grouped the 8000 words in eight levels according to words’ usage and characteristics. Each level contains 1000 words. A lower level contains words used with higher frequency than the upper level words. The “Total” column shows the total number of words used by students from each level. The table also shows that some students had learnt 31 words that were beyond the words categorizations made by JACET. Students were likely not to know, or learn the meanings or use, these sentences and words pragmatically if they were to be in the traditional situation. This is because they would have focused mainly on the content of the coursebook and teacher’s lectures for their examinations.

Effect of PBL on Willingness to Communicate (WTC): Students were asked to show how the project has helped them to improve their confidence(see Appendix). Almost all the students indicated that they had gained confidence to speak with their colleagues and also to present their ideas in English before others. This can be seen from the following comments made by

students. One student commented that, “After I’ve entered the university, I haven’t had the chance to speak in front of others. So, I was very tensed at first. However, I got used to speaking in front of others because I conducted a presentation 4 times in class.” And another student added that, “I think that I’ve obtained the confidence to speak in front of other people. At first, I didn’t have the confidence at all. But as I repeated my presentation in front of many people, I got accustomed to speak in that situation. And I think that it is very good for students to obtain the confidence.” These statements implied that the PBL has helped in allaying the anxieties of some of the students, which has improved their WTC. The improvement of the WTC could also be influenced by some skills acquired by students as can be seen in the following statements.

“We needed a lot of skills to complete this project. Translation skill, speaking skill and summarizing the contents of interviews etc. And I did the presentations three times. So I know my improvement.”

“Actually we haven’t thought how we can attract people or make them interested in what we talk about... So this is a good opportunity to learn about presentation for us...We didn’t have a big problem with language to explain the topic. However we considered which words should be more effective to attract people.”

“By this project, I felt that I improved my English skill. For example, writing intelligibly, Speaking to be easy to understand, and so on. This experience is very valuable for me. Last, I felt that it is a good opportunity to interact with other university students.”

Some students have also improved their interpersonal skills. This could be derived from the comments made by the student as in this example. “I think I can cooperate with more people now. I think I do like group work in a sense, but I want to be the one in charge (or secretly in charge). Hopefully now I can be nice with any kind of people. I think you have to be able to be nice to everyone not concerning what you personally think, in order to be a good leader. I had been okay with people, but I had always avoided people I thought were difficult to deal with. That must be why I had so much problem this time. I need to get used to working with various kind of people, and find their good points, and try to get to like them without prejudice.” And since students were evaluated and assessed through reports and presentations, most of them could also improve their presentation skills as shown in the following example. “I have learned how to speak in formal and clear English, react while giving a presentation. And, how to converse with someone who is totally different from me.”

Content Knowledge and Technological Skills:

Students have also acquired non-linguistic skills as indicated in the following comments. “Knowing about the company that I researched was a wonderful experience for me. I am impressed by how they use their brand power and also how they treat customers and the way that they try to communicate with guests and answer their requests strenuously. When I get a job in the future, I’d like to consider these things.”

Students have also learned how to use PowerPoint/ Keynote for their presentations, Ms Word for their reports, Ms Excel for analyzing data and also drawing of graphs or charts, and IPhoto for adding effects to photographs.

5. ENCOUNTERED DIFFICULTIES

Table 2 shows the difficulties encountered by the students during their projects. These problems have been inferred from the comments made by the students when they were asked to indicate the difficulties that they have encountered in the course (see Appendix). The comment number five, in particular, shows how difficult the entire course could be to a student. However, such students could still maintain their motivation to the end, and pass the course. Another problem with the PBL approach is lack of language accuracy as can be seen in the students’ comments. In spite of the grammatical errors, the students’ comments are comprehensible.

6. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the effect of Project-Based Language Learning on university students in English as a Foreign Language course. The study has focused on how students learned English during the course, what specific English skills they have acquired that were neither taught by the teacher nor found in the coursebook, and lastly the effect of the project-based language learning on students’ Willingness to Communicate in English.

The students indicated that even though the coursebook and teacher’s instructions have helped them to be more formal and clear in their presentations, they have also depended on project partners, peers, parents and the Internet to learn the English that was appropriate for reporting about their projects and findings. Some students have also relied on their high school textbooks in order to learn some grammar that they thought were more appropriate for the English that they have used for their reports and presentations. This implies that the PBL had encouraged students to independently use materials and learning methods that they deemed appropriate for the acquisition of the English skills.

Table 2: The Problems Encountered by the Students

No.	Students’ Comments	Inferred Problem
1	“I was confused about how to work with my partner because of our differences. She is kind of shy and introvert person, but I am an extrovert. So while doing this project, I was a little bit stressed with her personality, but she made good job more than I expected.”	Personality differences
2	“It was difficult for me to decide on a unique product or service that I had to talk about because I didn’t know much about Hokkaido.”	Driving question/ Topic selection
3	“As we were prohibited to use the downloaded pictures, it was difficult to take suitable photos for our presentation.”	Information access
4	“Before the interview, it was hard to make an appointment with the manager. Because, a popular restaurant is always busy. So we called many times, and at last we made an appointment. That was most hard for me.”	Contacts difficulties
5	“It was my first experience to make a presentation. I encountered some difficulties. Making a presentation of just 5 minutes was very difficult. Memorizing English sentences took a lot of time. I was a little nervous when I made a presentation in public. I had to talk while making body and hand gestures. (I usually don’t talk with my body and hand gestures.) Also, It was difficult to convey the unique point of my product because I am not good at speaking English and giving presentation. So, this project itself was difficult. Data collection was also difficult.”	Preparation, Presentation, and Confidence

In terms of the specific language production, students have been able to learn many sentences and vocabulary that were beyond their levels. These included learning more complex grammar structures and advanced words that were not in their coursebook. This outcome could be considered a great advantage over the conventional methods where students have to focus on the materials and lectures given by their teacher in order to prepare for exams.

The students also indicated that the project, in particular the opportunity to give presentations in and outside the classroom as well as conducting interviews and answering questions in English, had helped them in improving their Willingness to Communicate in English. This is because the students seldom had the opportunity to speak English in their daily lives because they are surrounded by their local language both within and outside the classrooms. Other important skills that students have acquired apart from the linguistic skills are cooperative attitude and negotiation skills. Some of the students reported in the questionnaire that they have had conflicts or disagreements with their partners but managed to resolve their problems by themselves. Additionally, students have acquired some technological skills that include using software for data analysis, adding effects to photographs, preparing presentations and also searching the Internet for appropriate information.

In conclusion, even though English lessons taught in PBL may cover less content than traditional lecture-based according to critiques, it is imperative to know that PBL gives students a better opportunity to learn the language that they can pragmatically use and also relate to since the main goal of language learning is communication. Furthermore, students have different learning styles, backgrounds, and interest levels in learning materials. PBL addresses these issues better than the conventional classes. Additionally, PBL has better prospect of preparing students for the 21st century business environments. This is because it gives students the opportunities to improve their interpersonal skills and also get familiar with the use of technologies for communication and information search and processing.

7. REFERENCES

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Appendix

End of Course Questionnaire

1. Which of the following electronic devices have you used during the project?
 Iphone Ipad Computer Digital Camera others _____ Why? _____
2. Which of the following software have you used during the project?
 Ms Word Ms Excel Ms PowerPoint Apple Keynote others _____ Why? _____
3. How did your project partner help you during the project? _____

4. Do you think you could have done the project only by yourself? Yes No Why? _____
5. What are some of the difficulties that you have encountered during the project? _____

6. How did your teacher help you during the project? _____
7. Write five new words that are not in your coursebook and you have learnt by yourself during the project.
 - i. _____
 - ii. _____
 - iii. _____
 - iv. _____
 - v. _____
8. Write three new sentences that are not in your coursebook and you have learnt by yourself during the project.
 - i. _____
 - ii. _____
 - iii. _____
9. How did you learn the English that you used for your presentation?

10. Has the project helped you to improve your confidence to speak English? Yes No
Why do you think so? _____
11. How did the project benefit you in general?

12. Write a one page essay in English about your project. Use MS Word, and your essay should focus on the following items.
 - i. Project topic
 - ii. Why you selected that topic
 - iii. Your project site
 - iv. How you did your project
 - v. What new information you found out