

Motivating Learning through Scaffolded Ethnographic Projects

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Creating authentic learning opportunities that motivate university students in EFL classrooms can be challenging. Cross-cultural ethnographic research projects meet this motivational challenge by promoting active student engagement in language learning through a teacher-facilitated process of inquiry that students design and implement. Students are motivated by the authentic and integrated use of English that emerges from their research and the autonomy to pursue a cognitively challenging topic of interest. Learners benefit by building skills to initiate interactions and carry on a “dialogue” with native speakers, gaining confidence through their use of English and the realization that they possess the ability to direct their own learning. In addition to discrete skill development, the integrated use of language through authentic interactions with native speakers, combined with an ethnographic approach to research develops an increased awareness of diverse viewpoints, and leads to improvements in students’ linguistic development, sociolinguistic awareness, and overall communicative competence.

EFL授業は、大学生のやる気や挑戦する意欲を高める絶好の機会だといえる。学生自身が研究を計画し、実行するという授業形態をとることによって、言語学習における学生

側の積極的な参加が促進されるため、異文化的、エスノグラフィックな研究から見ても重要な意味をもつと考えられる。EFL授業では、学生自身が、自主的に意欲を持って挑戦したいと思うような研究テーマを選び、それらについて英語を用いて研究を進めていくため、学生の言語学習に対する動機づけが高いといえる。したがって、学習する側は、自分が学んでいる実践能力を十分認識し、英語を実際に使うことを通して、ネイティブスピーカーと円滑な人間関係を保ったり、意見や情報交換をするためのスキルを獲得したり、信頼関係を築くといった多くの能力を獲得することができる。このようなネイティブスピーカーとの言語的なコミュニケーションは、単に学生の言語スキルを発達させることにつながるだけでなく、自分とネイティブスピーカーとの文化様式の違いに気づいたり、学生の言語能力を促し、社会言語学的な意識を高めるなど、学生の思考過程を促進し、コミュニケーションに必要なさまざまな能力を高めることにつながるといえる。

Creating authentic learning opportunities that motivate university students in EFL classrooms can be challenging. Cross-cultural ethnographic research projects meet this motivational challenge by promoting active student engagement in language learning through a teacher-facilitated process of inquiry that students design and implement. Students are motivated by the authentic and integrated use of English that emerges from their research and the autonomy to pursue a cognitively challenging topic of interest. Learners benefit by building skills to initiate interactions and carry on a “dialogue” with native speakers, gaining confidence through their use of

English and the realization that they possess the ability to direct their own learning. In addition to discrete skill development, the integrated use of language through authentic interactions with native speakers, combined with an ethnographic approach to research that develops an increased awareness of diverse viewpoints and which relies on metacognitive skills and thought processes that facilitate strategic competence, leads to an improvement in students’ linguistic development, sociolinguistic awareness and overall communicative competence.

In educational cultures such as Japan where students have not often been socialized to pursue such inquiry, the open-ended and unfolding nature of ethnographic research can initially be unsettling, though most students eventually find the process liberating once they more fully understand their role in the endeavor. To accommodate EFL learners’ need for structure, the research process is scaffolded through a step-by-step modular approach to research activity and language skills development. This modular approach also provides teachers the flexibility to offer the modules as a complete semester-length course or as supporting activities in a full year skills or content-based course. Worksheets and mini-lessons provide models that students practice orally in class prior to applying them to their own projects.

Initially conceived as a process syllabus, the course has become more structured as a result of our experiences using this approach in a diverse range of EFL classes,

and now incorporates a selection of materials that can be adapted to differing abilities, available resources, and research directions, as well as worksheet exercises for language support and development in anticipated problem areas. A typical syllabus incorporates the following modules: topic and group selection; background research; research design; observations; questionnaires and interviews; reports; analysis; charts, graphs and posters; and presentations. Within these modules, language and research skills are developed simultaneously. Scanning and skimming exercises facilitate background research. Practice in opening and closing discussions, sharing opinions and nominating new topics supports classroom discussion of research findings. Peer and teacher review helps the process of writing in-progress and final reports, and videotaped progress report presentations with simultaneous evaluation by classmates and subsequent viewing by presenters helps prepare students for the final presentation, which we have typically organized as a poster session.

Although ethnography has traditionally been within the domain of social science research, predominantly anthropology, ethnographic methods are particularly suitable for EFL students because this approach to research utilizes a range of techniques, not all of which (as with interviews, for instance) rely on linguistic ability. Observations can be conducted with limited

linguistic emphasis but yet develops metacognitive skills useful not only for research purposes but which also promote students' strategic language competence. With observations in particular, the challenge is to promote students' abilities to make inferences and comprehend various situations without dissecting each and every detail. This is a skill that ESL students learn to do rapidly out of necessity in unfamiliar surroundings, but which EFL students often have little impetus to develop, despite its importance for identifying cultural cues that lead to successful communication.

Students' real-life observation skills are developed first through a teacher-directed video observation activity in class. Students watch a scene with complex and bustling activity among numerous characters and take notes of what they see, recording information about the setting, the people, actions, relationships and recurring patterns. Pausing the video in 4-5 minute intervals and then prompting students to think and guess about what they have seen, the teacher facilitates an essential understanding about what students need to pay attention to during observations outside of class. This activity, moreover, begins the training process of note taking and information gathering. A suggested follow-up exercise is for students to venture out on the campus for approximately twenty minutes with instructions to observe styles of dress, behaviors, and patterns of interaction in the cafeteria, library, or other

busy locations. Later homework exercises can focus on observations (and recording of field notes) of a location relevant to students' own projects. From these observation exercises, students learn valuable lessons such as the considerable extent to which they can notice behavior when it is consciously observed and carefully recorded, and the choices that one must make in deciding which individuals and what interactions to record as field notes simply because all information present in the observation field cannot be written down.

Back in the classroom, students discuss not only what they observed and the associated difficulties in keeping field notes, but they also explore their own *situatedness* in recording the data. Questions such as: "What drew your attention to the individuals you recorded?" "How did it feel to keep notes while observing?" "How did you decide the location where you observed from?" and so forth are fodder for interesting, serious discussion. They encourage students to consider how their position as researchers necessarily influences the process and practice of inquiry.

Another important early step in the research process is helping students develop and shape their research topic, and find the most suitable ways to collect relevant information. This first involves narrowing the research focus to promote depth of learning beyond simplistic stereotypes and preconceptions students may already hold, as well as to ensure the project is manageable

within the given time frame available for research. It is equally important for students to choose feasible topics – ones that can be pursued locally and with minimal cost. Studying intercultural behavior at Tokyo Disneyland, for example, is an impractical choice for our students who reside in the Kansai region. Students may have to rework their topic and research design several times before it fits within these parameters.

Essential to this process is the development of research questions to be answered through interviews and/or surveys. Through mock interviews in class, students find that simple 'yes/no' type questions yield little information that is helpful for answering their research questions. Over time, by focusing on research objectives, students learn to develop questions that ask the information they are seeking as well as follow-up questions that probe more deeply. Language support activities provide students with strategies to manage their interviews by slowing down the interaction to a manageable level, directing the conversation, changing the topic and confirming information. These project skills clearly transfer to broader communication acts in general.

Data analysis is another aspect of the project that requires special attention and considerable teacher support. Students initially do not know where to begin with the data they have collected that seems overwhelming. Class time at this stage often involves

individual or small group consultation, first prompting students to read through their corpus of data, familiarizing themselves with the range of information, and then focusing on patterns in the answers they collected. We then direct them to look at the data according to age, gender, country, and so forth to determine whether factors such as these appear to have converging relationships. When categories begin to be identified, students are directed to begin thinking about the best ways to display and communicate their findings to others through graphs, charts, and other forms of summaries. Emphasis is on visual representations, as these will facilitate final poster presentations of the project.

Although analysis is not an easy task, encouragement and support help students through the process and once they begin to find patterns emerging from their data, their enthusiasm increases, motivating their continued efforts and enabling them to become more autonomous in their learning. Students are delighted when they discover that their research has indeed yielded “results” and as they alone know this information, they become an “expert” (in a limited capacity), and can share what they have learned with their classmates and the teacher.

These exercises, and ones for teaching other ethnographic methods and language skills, attempt not only to help students master the techniques but also to analyze each step of the process to improve their skills

and continually consider how the situation might have been approached differently as well as speculating on the results that a different approach might have yielded.

As may be inferred from the discussion above, teaching ethnography is demanding for teachers, not only because this form of activity is new to Japanese students, being absent from mainstream educational culture, but also because qualitative research has not been a major methodological technique used within the social science research community of Japan. One of the initial challenges is convincing students of the iterative, inductive and emergent nature of the research. It is important to help students understand that ethnographic research develops throughout the course of the research project, and data collected at one stage of the process often influences the direction of inquiry at later stages. This is difficult for students to initially grasp because they often begin the project with an anticipated “conclusion” in mind, and we have encountered progress reports typically written as traditional final summative reports. Then, as is often the case with any learning, overcompensation occurs and students then may state unashamedly that they could not complete work due to their own carelessness or not spending enough time on it. Effort must be made to impress upon students the idea that such research is not a 9am-5pm endeavor that begins in April and ends in July or January depending on the course length. Students tend to think that when

they have completed background research, a summative report based on this information is the culmination of the process. Teachers will need to instruct students that this is only the beginning stage of the project and that they are likely to “finish” their projects at the end of the term with more questions that they had to begin with. We tell our students that they will end their projects with a question: *What do you want to learn next?* This puzzles them at first, but they fully realize the meaning by the end of the course and have little difficulty expressing (as directed) in their conclusion how they would continue their research if there was more time.

Providing interim feedback and class discussion can help to mitigate students’ feelings of frustration and uncertainty during the research process. Most importantly, students need to learn that while their background research is important for yielding research questions, this information does not become a predetermined conclusion to their research, but rather, a hypothesis to be tested. One approach to facing this conceptual challenge incorporates activities encouraging multiple perspectives. Visual exercises of images that can be interpreted in more than one way include the well-known image of an old woman/young woman. Another image directing students to think about different perceptions based on cultural *situatedness* is a comparison of world maps drawn by people in different cultures (Hough, 2001). Maps drawn by Japanese students

portray a relatively larger and more distinct Japan in the center, while those drawn by American students make North America similarly prominent. Most recently, we have included a newspaper article about current mad cow disease concerns, relating its financial impact on a Japanese farmer and barbeque restaurant owner. Students are encouraged to brainstorm as many possible points of view about the issue, with further discussion leading to a recognition and appreciation for other ideas, and opinions. A breakthrough occurs when students are able to let go of one strongly held expectation, and subsequently can view the ethnographic research project as one of discovery.

The autonomy provided by ethnographic research projects typically energizes students to respond and learn in creative ways. A student asked to justify her decision to include “watching movies” in her research design for a project on preferred spatial proximity when conversing surprised us with her creativity. She decided to code and analyze the proximities of characters in five of her favorite movies in order to triangulate data she had collected from questionnaires she had administered to foreigners and Japanese regarding cultural differences in personal space when communicating. Not all project designs are so ambitious, but other student projects have included gender in advertising, manners, international marriages, cultural adjustment of homestay families and students, and cross-cultural analysis of fashion. One of

the most crucial by-products of the research process is the transference of responsibility that occurs. Students learn that they can direct their language learning according to their preferences, and that they can be successful in doing so.

Ethnographic research requires resourcefulness on the part of both teachers and students. All available opportunities need to be tapped, and for intercultural topics, obtaining foreign viewpoints is typically a challenge. In the Kansai region, we have identified several international exchange venues sponsored by cities or prefectures, as well as foreign study-abroad students at area universities who are often eager to exchange ideas and information with Japanese students similar in age. Internet communication has also proved successful in student projects and would be an invaluable resource to teachers who work in less urban areas. The best method for locating resources, however, has been our own students. Brainstorming activities identify locally available resources, and encourage students to collaborate and share resources, which simultaneously helps facilitate a classroom community of inquiry.

One of the most challenging aspects for both teachers and students is to fit the research project to the

available resources. Ryan (1997) provides suggestions for developing EFL students' abilities to identify and use potential language resources in their immediate proximity. We have found that for our students' projects, earlier discussions about multiple perspectives and the implicitly hermeneutic approach to knowledge helps facilitate creative approaches at this stage. When the window is opened wide, students may initially hesitate, but when they realize that they can leap forward, they do (sometimes with a little prodding). This is an essential part of the process. As Fried-Booth (1986, p.5) relates, with project work, "the motivation lies in the project itself. The student is – at last – offered an opportunity of using the language skills already acquired, in a situation which is new, challenging, and real. The project draws not only on the familiar and the predictable, but also on the unfamiliar and unpredictable. This is the incentive to 'go on' from the plateau to the next slope." With scaffolded student ethnographic projects, the ride is exhilarating, though getting out of the gate can be the hardest part.

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