Increasing motivation through poster presentation projects

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This article provides an innovative model which builds on literature stressing the benefits of active, student-centered and participative learning. The argument is made that one way to support L2 acquisition is by developing content-based projects where students can discover for themselves some of the needs of society and the strengths and weaknesses of the world in which they live. The thesis of this paper is that a poster presentation project centered on global issues will provide a platform for students to develop language ability and critical thinking skills, while simultaneously becoming better global citizens.

この記事でご紹介するのは、革新的で、総合的な教育モデルです。基礎となる資料は、これまでの受身的なものではなく、積極的で学び手中心・参加型のメリットを生かすことに重点を置いています。テーマはL2習得を教える一つの方法として、コンテントベースのプロジェクトを開発していくこと。そこで学び手は、社会が必要としていることや、自分たちが生きている世界の良い点や悪い点を、自ら発見していくことができます。この論文のテーマは持続可能な開発で、ポスタープレゼンテーション（ポスター発表）のプロジェクトは、学び手にコミュニケーション能力と批判的思考技術を高めると同時に、より良き世界市民になっていただく場を提供します。

Even the best programs and curricula can be improved upon. This paper will describe a task-based project that worked well, and go on to propose a number of modifications which make it adaptable to a number of ESL / EFL settings. In particular, this paper will provide a proposal for implementing sustainable development as the topic of content-based instruction. It is argued that this provides improved motivation and a wider variety of learning opportunities related to both language and global issues.

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This paper will begin with a brief review of relevant literature, before continuing to a case study. In the case study, the project as administered will be described before proposals for modifications are outlined. The paper will conclude with a brief discussion about relevant benefits and methods for overcoming potential difficulties with implementing this type of project.

Literature Review

This section reviews the relevant literature that leads to a proposal for introducing sustainable development as a topic of content-based instruction in an ESL setting. In particular, this review focuses on how the literature might be applied to a poster presentation project.

Content Based Instruction

To paraphrase Murphy (1997), in its most simplistic form Content Based Instruction (CBI) is nothing more than teaching language through a subject matter such as psychology, the environment, or business management. However, while Murphy (1997) equates subject matter and language education, Stoller (2004) expands on this dual commitment to language and content-learning objectives by defining CBI in terms of the diverse ways it is translated into practice. In doing so, she argues that the core objective of successful CBI is two-fold. Firstly, that L2 learners are able to understand new concepts, and secondly, that they are able to use their second language to convey these concepts (Stoller, 2004).

This argument is supported by Small (2003) who contends that the value of CBI lies in its focus on interpersonal communicative purpose rather than grammaticality. Moreover, Press (2007) contends that CBI provides an innovative, integrated pedagogical model which stresses the benefits of active, student-centered and participative learning over passive learning. Thus it seems that CBI is consistent with Herman's assertion that effective learning requires interactive and participatory strategies (Herman, 1996).

Task Based Learning

The follow-on from this is that CBI provides an ideal platform from which to develop Task-Based Learning (TBL) projects. TBL arguably provides a lot more exposure to a whole range of pedagogical learning experiences than the traditional Present Practice Produce (PPP) approach most teachers become familiar with in their teacher training courses (Frost, 2004). Moreover, as Nunan (2007) points out, TBL promotes analytical skills development (autonomous learning), over the more prevalent synthetic (memorization) syllabus approach so often encountered in ESL classrooms throughout the Asia Pacific region. It is widely believed that effective language learning occurs when students are fully engaged in solving problems through reasoning and self-reliance, rather than just learning about language (Prabhu, 1987). A strength of TBL is that it provides more opportunities for students to express themselves in the target language (Ruso, 2007), and perhaps even more importantly, it specifically addresses student needs to develop autonomous learning skills.

Sustainable Development

In its most simplistic form, Sustainable Development (SD) can be defined as a socio-economic process that satisfies human needs while preserving the quality of the natural environment.

One way to develop interactive and participatory strategies that motivate students is to introduce topics with opposing views (Press, 2007). Sustainable Development (SD) exposes students to environmental concerns versus economic development (e.g. environmentalists fighting with developers over building a hydro-electric dam to generate power for a developing country). Press contends that when structured with in-class mixed-media, this provides valuable learning opportunities for students to hear opposing arguments, as well as to learn how to shape their own arguments more effectively (2007).

This type of integrated approach not only exploits the benefits of Computer Assisted Language Learning by developing internet research skills, but moreover, it provides visual, verbal, and written images that, as Davis (1997) points out, add realism which both excites and motivates students. The literature thus suggests that SD could serve as the framework for developing autonomous learning skills in unison with critical analysis skills, with the secondary objective of developing more responsible global citizens in the process.

One key factor related to sustainable development is micro-finance, and the Grameen Bank (founded in 1976 by Nobel Laureate Mohammad Yunas) is widely credited as its originator (see appendix 1). In principle, micro-finance equates to modest loans that are dispersed to assist people in developing countries who would not otherwise have access to finance. Thus, micro-finance provides a viable platform for a project-based curriculum where students can actively participate in an autonomous learning environment and perhaps become better global citizens in the process.

Given this context, a poster presentation project consisting of several phases of group work as well as a practice and final presentation has been developed to demonstrate an effective mode of introducing SD into an ESL/EFL classroom. What makes this process so appealing is that the framework is easily modified in terms of proficiency level (e.g. from beginner to advanced), duration (e.g. from three lessons to a full semester unit), as well as in terms of applicable settings (e.g. JR/SR High Schools, Universities, Corporate classes). For example, in addition to the following case study which outlines a one-week corporate intensive class, the authors also have first hand experience employing variations of this project at a two-week high school intensive course (basic level), and at a two-day business seminar (advanced level). Moreover, it is currently being modified and introduced as a one semester curriculum for second-year bio-engineering students at Hiroshima International Academic University (beginner level). In order to facilitate beginner level students (TOEIC average 250-300), this project is being developed with short (sub-titled) video clips, simplified pre-reading and vocabulary lists, as well as by pre-selecting and providing a short-list of potential donor fund recipients.

Case Study

This section will detail an actual poster presentation project as it was implemented by the authors. The setting, methods

used, and results, will be summarized followed by a proposal for modifications to the program as taught.

Setting

The project took place in April of 2007, as the focus of a one week intensive English course at a large corporation in Nagoya, Japan. The students were all newly hired employees who were in training before commencing work. They were divided into classes of approximately 20 and scaled by TOEIC score. Each class met for 8 hours a day for 5 days, totaling 40 hours over the week.

The course objectives were to build practical communication skills, with daily tasks leading up to a large poster presentation fair on the final day. Specifically, students were divided into 4-5 small groups per class and given the task of designing and proposing a new and innovative product that the company could actually produce. Students were aware that management representatives would be watching the presentations, meaning there was a high level of motivation to do well.

Methods

The program was made up of three phases. Firstly, in the research phase, the class was exposed to a variety of information resources (video, texts, authentic examples of advertising, etc.). This provided exposure to the genre of advertising, which in turn aided the groups in creating their own new product and advertisement.

In the second phase, groups of 4-5 students discussed and agreed on a product, and then created a short poster presentation about it. The context was to pitch the new product, which had to be feasible and related to the company, to management. They then practiced their presentations in front of the class before going on to the final phase.

In the third and final phase, students participated in a poster presentation fair using the same posters as in the practice phase. Specifically, the classes were divided in half, with one half being allocated roles as 'new product buyers' (they held monopoly money). Their task was to spend their money on whichever new products they thought worthwhile. The other half of the class were allocated roles as 'marketing department sales people'. Their task was to present their new product to the buyers and sell as many as they could to as many buyers as they could. Negotiation was encouraged, and appropriate vocabulary had already been practiced in class. After 30 minutes, the buyers left the room, and worked out their own cost/numbers matrix, to determine which of the sellers they deemed the winners, with prizes being awarded for 1st, 2nd, and 3rd place. The groups then reversed roles, and the process was repeated so that students were able to participate in both roles.

Representatives of management attended the presentations in this phase, which increased motivation and pressure to do well. The students often used this fact to encourage other team-members to work harder.

Results

The program was well received overall, with positive feedback coming from both learners and administrators alike. In particular, by the time the students had reached the

third and final phase, there was notable excitement during 'negotiations' at the presentation fair. While none of the new products are known to have been put into development, management noted that many of them were actually quite viable. The students generally agreed that the experience was useful because it closely matched the type of English task they might have in their future work. Linguistically, the students showed a much better understanding of presentation language, comparatives, giving suggestions, and negotiation language as well as a general improvement in confidence speaking English.

Possible modifications

The inclusion of Sustainable Development (SD) does not change any of the three phases of the above project. However, an additional phase is recommended for inclusion.

Firstly, the research phase remains essentially unchanged, with the learners researching key concepts of sustainable development with a particular focus on micro-financing via provided textual, audio-visual, and on-line resources (see appendix 1).

Next however, a fundraising phase is added in which the learners collaborate as a class to design and implement a fundraising event. A raffle, walk-a-thon, Karaoke night, bake sale, or any other source of fundraising could be used. The goal is to raise funds in the range of $40 to $50. Although this phase can be skipped if alternate funding is used (see appendix 2), it is a valuable addition in that it provides opportunities for practical linguistic skills development (discussing, negotiating, deciding), and perhaps even more

importantly, it contributes immensely towards building intrinsic motivation as students take ownership of raising real money that they will compete for later.

In the next phase, groups of 4-5 students are formed, and each group chooses a worthy cause (e.g. micro-finance recipient, NPO, other charitable organization) to receive the funds collected in the fundraising phase. The groups then make and practice giving a short poster presentation to promote their potential funds recipient. Promoting their chosen funds recipient thus becomes the theme of the final phase, a poster presentation competition where the groups compete against each other to determine where (to whom) the funds will be donated or lent. Depending on time restraints and/or ability levels, the groups could be limited to choosing a worthy beneficiary of a microfinance loan (see appendix 1) or given more leeway to choose from within the wider arena of charitable causes.

In the final poster presentation competition, the class is divided in half, with one half presenting and the other half voting on the most convincing presentation. After reversing roles, the two winning groups' chosen causes become the recipients of the available funds.

Discussion

This section will discuss a proposed modification to the project implemented in the above case study. It will begin with an analysis of key benefits before summarizing some potential difficulties and ideas for overcoming them.

Advantages of this project proposal

The project as outlined above has several beneficial effects in the classroom. While the raising of learners' social consciousness and awareness of global issues is of great importance, the most immediate effect is on learner motivation. By shifting the focus away from English as a subject of study and towards English as a means of communication of meaning, this project-based proposal will increase the motivation of learners who have been subjected to years of non-communicative learning. For example, as noted in the previous case study, there was notable excitement (e.g. students were genuinely 'having fun') during the final 'negotiations' at the presentation fair. It is also worth noting however, that this kind of motivation doesn't 'just happen', it builds slowly as students become more confident and comfortable with an autonomous learning environment.

The proposed project also reduces splitting among the social sub-groups in a class by providing a bridge between learners in worlds as diverse as business, science, and humanities, by drawing the links to understanding underlying themes between developing economies and preserving the environment. Given that most research fields can be in some way related to SD, learners can build on SD as common ground and share ideas, using English as the medium of that exchange. For example, a similar project was introduced in an intermediate level university course. In this instance, during the research stage, the two different streams attending the class (business majors and environmental studies majors), researched relevant data, and then debated for and against building a hydro-electric dam in a developing country.

Possible drawbacks

Although this proposal is not without possible complications, even the largest of these can be overcome. Clearly, a lack of student motivation would derail the collaborative aspects of the project. If learners are not genuinely trying to win the competition, the point of introducing SD as a means of raising social awareness is lost (though perhaps not the pedagogical benefits). However, the inclusion of real causes, with real money to aid them, fosters a personal connection between the group and their chosen cause. This human connection should provide the necessary motivation to make the contest a true 'competition', and that is something that even de-motivated learners find to be worth giving their best effort to win.

On the other hand, the inclusion of real money might cause concern in some settings. For this reason, the proposed project must be modified to fit individual contexts, or alternative sources must be found (see appendix 2). If attempting to convince an academic dean to allow the use of real funds, it can be pointed out that not only is the amount needed low ($40 to $50), but moreover, the funds are recyclable if used as microfinance loans because they are paid back over time. If all else fails, this project can be financed by the teacher, in that it requires a relatively small amount of money, and must be provided only once.

Conclusion

This paper has described a task-based project which was quite successful. It went on to suggest modifications, principally the inclusion of global issues into the project.

Although Sustainable Development (SD) and micro-finance were proposed, arguably many other global issues would work just as well.

This proposal demonstrates that through the building of a human connection between groups of learners and beneficiaries of funding (worthy causes), intrinsic motivation is built in the learners. This motivation extends to a desire to learn more about, and advocate global citizenship and sustainable development while at the same time bolstering language learning. From the authors' experience with this and similar project-based activities, it could be said to be the best of both worlds. That is, this type of project serves as a bridge between autonomous linguistic development and global citizenship.

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Appendix 1

Online Resources for micro-finance
Websites:

<www.kiva.org> : Microfinance distributor

<www.VillageBanking.org> : Microfinance distributor

<www.GrameenFoundation.org> : Microfinance distributor

 <www.grameen-info.org> : Grameen Bank

: MicrofinanceGateway

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Microfinance> Wikipedia "Microfinance"

< www1.worldbank.org/sp/safetynets/Micro%20Finance.asp> World Bank:

Audio / Video:

Unitus Microfinance Microcredit Introduction Video <www.youtube.com/watch?v=JoEzDOguCAc>

Breaking Through Poverty with Microfinance : Grameen Foundation <www.youtube.com/watch?v=s3I9ThVww3k>

FRONTLINE (PBS broadcasting) story about Kiva.org <www.youtube.com/watch?v=MXk4GUGXNTQ>

Appendix 2

If the fund-raising phase of the proposed activity is not used, possible alternate sources of funds might be:

Recycled from the previous semester (if the money is loaned, not donated)

Teacher donated

Student club fee (If in a school setting)

Lab fee (If in a school setting)

Student donations

School donated

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