

The Creation of Documentaries Through Project-based Learning for English Education

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Abstract

This study looks at two ways of having students evidence project-based learning. Specifically, it compares PowerPoint presentations to documentary videos as artifacts of project-based learning to determine the most effective way to have students do project-based learning. Students' and teachers' voices were sought to examine factors related to English language education and to look at the effectiveness of both types of projects. The participants (N = 99) were students studying in an elective English as a foreign language (EFL) class at a four-year university in Japan. These data were collected via self-report surveys and reflective journals. The results showed that students viewed the act of creating video documentaries as beneficial to EFL learning as preparing for and doing PowerPoint presentations, but students and a teacher felt that watching documentaries was significantly more beneficial to learning than watching PowerPoint presentations, suggesting that EFL pedagogy in higher education could be improved by having students engage in project work that concluded with a video presentation.

KEYWORDS: project-based language learning (PBLL), English as a foreign language (EFL), video documentaries, PowerPoint presentations

1. Introduction

In higher education English classes in Japan, native English speaker teachers (NESTs) who have their students engage in project-based language learning are likely to require their students do PowerPoint presentations as a way to showcase their learning. Unfortunately, though, during presentations that can last from between two to five minutes per presenter, with individuals, pairs, and/or groups presenting consecutively, the attention span of a student audience is likely to be spotty at best. In fact, unless students have the stage presence and presentation prowess of the late Steve Jobs, it is more than likely that teachers will find their students easily distracted and learning constrained. And although the obvious reaction might be to abandon project-based

learning in favor of some other teaching methodology, doing so would negate the benefits found in the literature (see Smithers 2014, 2015) on project-based language learning (PBL).

Not wanting to abandon PBL, the authors of this paper sought alternatives to PowerPoint presentations as a way to promote English as a foreign language (EFL), improve syllabus design, and better equip students for the technical savvy that will be required of today's university graduates. Specifically, this paper looks to analyze the perceived benefits of having students evidence learning with the culmination of PowerPoint presentations versus video documentary presentations. The context is a contemporary EFL classroom in higher education in Japan. The voices presented are those of a NEST (second author, Scot) and both authors' students (Japanese university EFL students). The teacher's voice extols the benefit of video projects to spark in students a desire to own their language learning experience, while student voices speak of how they became more intrinsically motivated for EFL learning and gained confidence to interact with technology.

This paper begins with a brief description of the context in which the study is framed, and then analyzes and theorizes the various voices presented in this paper. Lastly, this paper concludes by echoing Swan and Hofer's (2013) call for teachers to have students try using video documentaries for a project so see how students can benefit from an authentic learning experience that not only equips them for the future, but also results in increased motivation and engagement.

2. Background

2.1 Overview of Project-based Language Learning

Project-based language learning, which began around the mid-1980s (Hedge, 1993), allows teachers who use this methodology to provide their students with opportunities for meaningful and comprehensible input and output. Additionally, project work is positioned within a socio-cultural context whereby language used by students becomes a resource or tool that facilitates the construction and completion of a project. The reported benefits include, "improved language skills, content learning, real-life skills, sustained motivation, and positive self-concepts" (Stoller, 2006, p. 20), to name a few. The scope of project work is rather diverse, but some examples of projects are dramatic performances, debates, presentations (poster, PowerPoint, or multimedia), e-portfolios, videos, song writing, and so forth. Due to the diversity of project types, coming up with a definition of what project-based language learning is is not easy. Suffice to say, teachers utilizing PBL in the classroom should strive to adhere to the following ten commandments for project work:

1. Focus on the process and product.
2. Allow students to define some of the parameters for their projects.
3. Require more than one class for completion.
4. Encourage multiple-skill integration.
5. Be committed to both language and content learning.

6. Have students work individually or in groups.
7. Get students to gather, process, and report information in the targeted second or foreign language.
8. Have students take on unfamiliar roles and responsibilities.
9. Conclude projects with a tangible product.
10. Wrap up by having students reflect on the process and product.

2.2 Concerns About Project-based Language Learning

As noted above, having students do project work in the EFL classroom is a noble endeavor that has the potential to exert a positive influence on learning, but considering that foreign and second language learning is a long-term process, and that classrooms can be comprised of students with varying degrees of proficiency, the quality of output from students will always be relative to current abilities. This has ramifications for the conclusion of projects if students are required to showcase their products to classmates. That is, classroom learning opportunities will be lessened or nullified if students become hostile or apathetic toward a presenter(s) and his/her product, like, for example, when there is a disparity in language proficiency levels between presenters and their classmates, or a lack of skill in articulation because of public speaking anxiety or inexperience. This, therefore, begs the question of whether all of the products that are produced at the conclusion of project work are of equal value. Obviously, this is a very complex and possibly impossible question to fully answer, but it would seem pertinent to know if some kinds of projects are more motivating than others in the eyes of all of the stakeholders: the teacher, producer(s), and recipients. Unfortunately, this is a void in the literature that has yet to be determined.

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Questions

With the above void in mind, this study seeks to determine if there are more beneficial ways to have students evidence foreign language learning. Specifically, it seeks to compare and contrast the merits and demerits of having one group of students do PowerPoint presentations while a second group produces a video documentary. Accordingly, the following three research questions were posed:

1. What do students perceive is more educational to create as a project, a PowerPoint presentation or a video documentary?
2. What kind of PBL product is viewed the most beneficial to students when in the role of observer?
3. What are the perceived merits and demerits of video documentaries as a project from the teacher's perspective?

To answer the above research questions, a counter-balanced study was proposed. That is, one teacher would have one class do PowerPoint presentations and another demographically similar

class construct video documentaries. Further to this, to try and eliminate bias of any kind, a second teacher would replicate the parameters above.

3.2 Participants and Context

The participants (N = 99) for this study are university students enrolled in elective EFL classes called Intensive English. The classes are held three days a week for 90 minutes each class and are comprised of students from various faculties and majors, but are grouped according to English proficiency levels. Two teachers, the authors of this study, each tasked one of their classes (n = 24 and n = 24) with PBL that resulted in the completion of two PowerPoint presentations in one semester (14 weeks). Their first presentation was to be completed individually, but the second presentation was to be done in groups of between two and four. In the following semester, these same classes were required to produce video documentaries in a likewise manner, first individually, and then in groups. These two classes are classified as Group 1 and were comprised of 48 students. The two classes (n = 25 and n = 26) that did video documentaries in the first semester and PowerPoint presentations in the second are classified as Group 2 (n = 51). The students, irrespective of which project they did, were given three weeks to complete their individual project, which was to be between four and five minutes long and presented in front of their class during week seven. The second round of presentations took place over the course of four weeks and resulted in presentations indicative of the number of members in each group. That is, each member of a group necessitated that the group produce four to five minutes of content per member and present their product to their class in week 13.

3.3 Data Collection

Data collection for this study involved having students fill out some self-report surveys, that were written and answered in English about the perceived benefits and/or detriments of their project-based learning experiences after their individual project work in the first and second semesters and again after their group project work at the end of the respective semesters. Due to space requirements, this paper will look at the surveys that are related to the students' opinions at the conclusion of their second semester of study, after they had been exposed to both approaches to PBL. In addition, data collection also consisted of one researcher-teacher's (second author, Scot) reflection diary, which will also be analyzed and discussed below. Finally, data from end-of-semester course evaluations conducted by the university will also be analyzed.

4. Results and Discussion

Again, because of space limitations, this section will focus on only three of seven self-report questions that students answered at the end of the second semester of PBL. They are:

- Does making English videos/PowerPoint presentation improve your English abilities? Why or why not?

- What did you learn from making your video documentary/PowerPoint presentation and what skills or abilities (besides English) did you get from making it?
- Are watching PowerPoint presentations better for learning English than watching video presentations? Why or why not?

In regard to the question about whether or not students felt that their English had improved, almost all of the students (96% for Group 1 and 95% for Group 2) perceived that they had gotten better at English as a result of PBL. Specifically, from Group 1, the most widely perceived benefits as a result of doing video projects were: improved speaking ability (39%), better pronunciation (26%), and greater grammar/translation skills (26%). From Group 2, the most commonly reported benefits as a result of doing PowerPoint presentations were: improved speaking ability (33%), reduced anxiety for speaking (19%), and better writing/grammar abilities (19%).

As for the perceived skills or abilities that were gained as a result of doing PowerPoint presentations, the three most commonly noted benefits were: improved confidence to speak in public (43%), the ability to make a presentation (24%), and the skill to use PowerPoint and make slides (14%). The students from Group 1 claimed that they gained the following as a result of making videos: video editing/construction skills (41%), confidence to speak/interview foreigners (27%), and group collaboration/cooperation abilities (14%).

In the matter of which type of project was viewed as the most beneficial for learning English when acting as an observer, 80% of students from Group 1 declared their preference for videos, while 11% thought both were equally beneficial, and 7% preferred PowerPoint presentations. As for Group 2, 19% declared a liking for PowerPoint presentations, 43% preferred documentaries, and 24% felt that both were valuable.

Referring back to the initial research question of what students perceive to be more educational to create as a project, a PowerPoint presentation or a video documentary, the data above shows that students value both projects equally, especially for helping them become better speakers, but it would seem that teachers wishing to focus on improving student pronunciation, video projects would be the way to go. Conversely, PowerPoint presentations seem to be better suited to helping reduce language learner anxiety, especially when it comes to speaking in front of peers.

Research question number two sought to determine what kind of PBL product is viewed the most beneficial to students when they have to be classroom observers. The data clearly points to a preference to learn passively from a video documentary, with 68% of all students in favor of this kind of project and 11% that prefer PowerPoint projects. To further validate these findings, the results from end-of-semester course evaluations revealed that students who produced informational documentaries were more satisfied with their English classes than the students whose project work resulted in PowerPoint presentations. Furthermore, these surveys also revealed that students who made documentaries were more satisfied with the quality of new

knowledge gained and the skills that they acquired. That is, they viewed the technological knowhow required to make a documentary to be more relevant to their futures. This was summed up well in a course evaluation comment by one student: “Because of Intensive English, I could learn how to do many things on a computer and I could learn to speak more.”

To better accentuate the students’ feelings about the preference for doing project work that involves the creation of documentaries to promote a better learning experience for students, the following student comments are relevant:

“Watching videos is better [than watching PowerPoint presentations] for learning English because they arouse our interest and concentration.”

“... I learned expressions in English. Also, what I got from this project are English pronunciation [skills]. I learned to be able to listen to English more than when I started this class.”

“[By making a documentary] I could get the ability that I give information in English. I think that it is a very important and useful ability.”

“In watching a video, we recognize [learn] through sight and hearing. In addition, we can remember useful, easy, and short expressions.”

As for the teacher’s voice, Scot very aptly sums up and confirms what students seem to be saying about video projects:

“As an instructor looking for ways to increase students’ intrinsic motivation, project-based language learning may be an avenue to unlocking untapped potential in students. Video projects measured students command of English in an interactive environment, as opposed to PowerPoint presentations which did not instill a spark of fascination for learning. Videos challenged the students, and they eagerly engaged in each other’s productions. Also, videos are dynamic and require more concentration to listen to as the information is not static as on a PowerPoint slide, but ever-changing and moving. A PowerPoint presentation is a performance in front of a live audience, which does have its pedagogical merits, but video productions can demand perfection as performances can be done over and edited until the creator is satisfied with the production. Furthermore, students that created videos interacted and had real dialogs with foreign exchange students and other interviewees in a second language in preparation for their videos, which they would not have for PowerPoint presentations. They were using English as a lingua franca and it became a communicative tool rather than just a subject to study.”

5. Conclusion

As Smithers (2014) has previously highlighted, today's students are very adept at using modern, digital technology. Unfortunately, though, as smart phones have become ubiquitous among university students, students seem to be abandoning computers in favor of smart phones, which will pose a problem for students when they leave their institutions of higher learning for careers in the business world. This becomes especially dire in light of the influence of the fourth industrial revolution and the demands this latest revolution places on higher education and EFL pedagogy. In fact, Smithers and Gray (2017) stress that now is the time to reinforce computer skills so that future graduates will not find themselves floundering in the ever changing and advancing Internet of Things (IoT). Of course, PowerPoint presentations necessitate that students navigate their way on a computer, but as Swan and Hofer (2013) point out and this study reveals, video documentaries may be a better way to impart in students greater computer prowess and improve student attentiveness, which for the EFL classroom could translate into greater language and content retention and improved motivation. So, if you are a teacher that does not want to simply teach English, try having students create a video project the next time you incorporate project-based language learning into your pedagogy. By doing so you will be building bridges between students, their community, and the world beyond, all of which contribute to a student's ability to more successfully function in the workplace and in society in general after graduating from university.

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