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Learning English Communication Through Project Work: Reactions of Japanese University Students

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Abstract

This article focuses on the effectiveness of project work in the second language university communication classroom. I outlined a project that engaged 68 Japanese university students in the research of the different phases of culture shock and its impact on foreign residents in Japan. The purpose of this study was to analyze students' reactions to learning communication in a project work setting. I briefly explain the philosophy of project work, give a framework for the actual project and then report on my observations and the results derived from student journals and a questionnaire given to the students at the end of their project. My observations and the questionnaire findings appear to confirm the view that project work is an instructional approach that can be successfully used to teach English communication to Japanese university students, but the findings also suggest that many students have reservations about the teacher's role as a guide or facilitator in it.

プロジェクトワークを通しての英語コミュニケーション学習：日本人大学生の反応

本稿では、大学の EFL コミュニケーションクラスにおけるプロジェクトワークの有効性を検討する。プロジェクトワークを通じた英語コミュニケーション学習への反応を分析する為、日本人大学生 68 名に、「在日外国人が経験したカルチャーショックの段階およびその影響を調査する」というプロジェクトを行ってもらった。本稿ではまず、プロジェクトワークの原理と実際に行ったプロジェクトについて説明した後、学生自身による記録と学生へのプロジェクト終了時アンケートに基づいて分析結果を述べる。本研究の結果は、プロジェクトワークが有効な教授方法であるという見方を支持するものといえるが、同時に多くの学生が、ガイド・進行役 (facilitator) としての教師の役割に戸惑いを感じていることも示唆している。

Background

Second language project work centers around the completion of a planned task, requires a substantial amount of independent work by a group of students, some of which takes place in the target language outside the classroom (Thorp, 1997). Project work requires students to use all of the four skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing in the second language in carrying out their project assignments (Fried-Booth, 2002). It reflects the principles of student-centered language teaching, which promotes the active role of students in learning, tries to give students more control over what and how they learn and encourages them to take more responsibility for their own learning (Legutke & Thomas, 1991). The project theme should be relevant to the students' interests and the materials should reflect a high degree of authenticity in the target language (Fried-Booth, 1997).

The Four Stages of Culture Shock

Setting and Participants

The study took place in two elective English communication courses. The participants in this study were sixty-eight female students majoring in English Literature in their third year at a women's university in Tokyo. They ranged from low - intermediate to high - intermediate in English ability.

Purpose and Aims

The overall purpose of this study was to analyze students' reactions to learn communication in a project work setting. The specific language aims were to develop the skills necessary to begin, maintain and finish a conversation and to learn basic presentation skills.

Description of Project

The project involved students working together in groups of four or five with each group given the task of interviewing five foreign residents in Japan on the topic of culture shock. I asked students to assess their interviewees' degree of cultural adjustment according to Kalvero Oberg's essay on the four stages of culture shock: honeymoon, hostility and aggressiveness, feelings of superiority and acceptance.

Students were responsible for researching their own reading materials, generating their own interview questions and finding foreigners to interview (Oberg, 1988). The in-class work was conducted entirely in English. The product of this project was a group presentation on the data the students collected from their interviews. The project lasted six weeks and followed the stages outlined by Legutke and Thomas (1991):

1. Opening. (Week 1) I arranged students into groups of four or five members each and instructed them to think about the following questions:

- Have you ever traveled to another country?
- If no, then which country would you like to visit and why?
- If yes, what are your thoughts on that country?
- What are some examples of culture shock?

I then instructed them to ask the same questions to their fellow group members. Next I assigned each group the task of creating a profile of a fictitious “foreign resident” in Japan. I directed the groups to work together to produce the names of 40 different countries and encouraged them to select them from different areas of the world so as to ensure diversity. Each group then drew a slip of paper on which a name of one of the countries was written and this became the country of origin of their “foreign resident”. Then I distributed copies of Oberg’s essay to the groups for out-of-class reading and instructed them to research background information on their “resident’s” country.

2. Topic Orientation. (Week 2) During the first half of class, group members discussed their research and completed their “foreign resident’s” profile. I then showed several video clips of various types of interviews and the groups discussed the techniques and vocabulary in each one. Students then conducted interviews of students from other groups, each one taking turns role-playing her “foreign resident.” Students critiqued each other’s interview skills. For homework, I had the groups think of suitable questions to ask foreigners in preparation for their actual interviews.

3. Research. (Week 3) Groups discussed the questions and thought of additional follow-up questions. They then brainstormed about how and where they could meet foreigners in Tokyo. I then lectured on techniques used in approaching strangers

which the students later practiced in class with each other. The students completed the out-of-class segment of this stage by interviewing foreigners off campus.

4. Preparation of Data Presentation. (Week 4) I began this stage with a short lesson on basic presentation techniques with the use of graphs and display cards. Each group then prepared a 10-minute presentation on their findings to be given to the rest of the class the following week. The groups looked over their interview notes/tapes and discussed how their collected data related to Oberg's four cultural adjustment stages.

5. Presentations and Evaluations. (Weeks 5 and 6) Each member of the group gave a short oral summary on one of the foreign residents her group interviewed and also gave an analysis of that resident's level of cultural adjustment. The presentation stage of the project spanned a course of two weeks. I distributed questionnaires to the students who completed them in class. I collected the questionnaires and journals at the end of the final day of the project. I evaluated each group on the strengths of their presentation contents and techniques.

Table 1 Percentage Results of Students' Questionnaire Answers

Questions + Answers	Percentages
1. What point did you like best about this project?	
a. I could do my own research.	6
b. I could work on the project with my group members.	63
c. I didn't have to use a textbook.	5
d. I could use real English in the interview.	18
e. I could spend a lot of time on the project.	8
2. Did you learn new things about English that you did not know before this project?	
a. A considerable amount.	64
b. A small amount.	7
c. A modest amount.	26
d. Nothing.	3

Questions + Answers	Percentages
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3. Did you study more because you worked in a group?	
a. A little more.	32
b. Much more.	62
c. The same amount as if I had studied alone.	6
4. Did you speak more English while doing this project than you have usually done in your other English communication classes?	
a. Yes.	93
b. No.	4
c. The same.	3
5. Would you have wanted your teacher to plan your communication activities or would you have wanted your teacher not to plan it?	
a. Want teacher to plan communication activity.	63
b. Do not want to teacher to plan communication activity.	37
6. Should the teacher have taught more than he did?	
a. Yes, he should have taught more.	54
b. No, his amount of teaching was ok.	46
7. Would you like to do another project like this one again?	
a. Yes.	84
b. No.	16

Note: Students were instructed to select only one answer to each question.

Journal Entries

I encouraged students to keep journals throughout the course of their projects. The journals offered students the opportunity to reflect on their participation in their projects and also gave me an insight into their thoughts about their experiences with project work. The entries were written in the last few minutes of every class and outside of class too. The journals were anonymous and were submitted to me on the

last day of the project lessons. Many of the students' comments were surprisingly similar to one another. Samples of some of their comments in no particular order are as follows:

- I could speak real English with foreigners.
- I could understand how foreigners feel about living in Japan.
- Some foreigners say Japanese discriminate against them.
- This project made me want to come to class.
- Culture shock is very difficult for everybody.
- Studying with friends is interesting.
- Japan is a difficult country sometimes.
- Some foreigners can speak Japanese well.
- I like to learn with my friends.
- It is difficult to meet all our group members after class.
- I could learn many new words in my research.
- Research is too difficult.
- Practicing the interviews helped my English.
- This project made me want to speak to foreigners again.
- I had to work hard in this class.
- I like to learn about culture shock.
- My group members helped me a lot.
- Some foreigners are very friendly.
- Some foreigners are not friendly.
- Some foreigners do not speak English well.

Discussion

As we can see in Table 1, the data collected from the questionnaires revealed that the students reacted positively to most elements of project work learning. The data shows that a majority of the students (63%) chose the group arrangement as the most preferable characteristic of project work, almost all of them (97%) believed they had learned new things about English and all but a few (94%) of them felt compelled to study harder than they had done in the past because of the importance of the group and their role in it. An overwhelming number of students (93%) believed that they spoke more English while participating in their projects than they have usually done in their other English communication classes.

However, they were not entirely satisfied with all aspects of project work learning in that the data also reveals that slightly more than half of the students (54%) maintained I should have given them more instruction and a majority (63%) preferred that I plan their communication rather than leave it up to them to engage in natural and spontaneous exchanges. This would indicate that there was a certain degree of reluctance among the students in accepting this shift to become more independent and responsible about their own language learning. Legutke and Thomas point out that this inability to share the burden of taking some of the initiatives may be due to factors such as physical and/or emotional over-involvement, rejection by the group, or dissatisfaction caused by working arrangements (Legutke and Thomas, 1991).

In fact, several groups approached me about situations with complaints that mirror Legutke and Thomas' factors. In two cases, groups voiced their concerns to me about members who were not doing their share of the work. In the other situation, one student openly disagreed with her group members on how they had been assigned the preparation work. When I talked to these groups, I did not attempt to resolve their problems for them but encouraged them to find solutions to their difficulties. In all three cases, the groups were able to overcome their differences and complete their projects together.

Project work can only be effective when teachers relax control of their students temporarily and assume the role of guide or facilitator (Sheppard and Stoller, 1995). In fact, I found my new role as guide/facilitator to my students as a rather enlightening experience. The opportunity to observe my students engage in free and meaningful communication with each other provided me with a wealth of information that was not evident in traditional communication lessons. Even those students who were generally more passive in past lessons participated more in the discussions of their projects, as they appeared intent on sharing their information with their fellow group members. The information I gathered served as a guide for future lessons.

During their in-class work on their projects, I observed that my students' oral exchanges with each other were much longer, more spontaneous and that they tended to use more complex phrases, sentences and vocabulary than in traditional communication lessons. However, in spite of this raised level of complex language usage, the students were more determined to focus on the content of their exchanges rather than on the form. I was never questioned on the grammatical accuracy of their utterances, nor did I note students asking each other grammar related questions. It

was clear to me that the exchange of research information was of paramount importance in their discussions.

Their efforts, however, also revealed specific weaknesses. I noted that most of the students made more errors in vocabulary and grammar usage, and a greater number of them also spoke haltingly at times and had more problems with word stress than in more traditional communication lessons. In addition, most of them displayed an awkward use of listening cues. I attribute most of the students' language deficits, as well as the increase in their use of more complex phrases, sentences, and vocabulary to their heightened willingness to take more risks. This openly verbal experimentation with their interlanguage was certainly not evident in traditional communication lessons in which the students were more concerned with focusing on the form and not the content of their exchanges. Willis (1996) states that an increase in errors is to be expected in project-work learning because mistakes are bound to occur when students test their hypotheses about language. The testing of hypotheses and the subsequent errors help promote the acquisition of language, and as students become more proficient in using the second language, the number of their mistakes will decrease.

The students also displayed an amazing capacity for implementing their own communication strategies. For example, I observed that most students engaged in paraphrasing their research so as to make the information more comprehensible to their listeners and also as a way to offer an abbreviated synopsis because of time constraints in the class. Paraphrasing was practically non-existent prior to their involvement in project work. The students were also quite natural in how they used gestures to emphasize their discussion points. I had instructed them on the use of gestures in traditional communication lessons, but the results were usually quite mechanical. Their use of gestures during their project discussions indicated to me that they already knew how and when to use them in natural communication settings. Brainstorming was perhaps the most notable strategy employed. I observed students cooperating with each other in ways I had never before witnessed. They accomplished this high level of cooperation through asking questions, posing suggestions, solving problems, sharing information and offering praise to one another.

I also noted an increased level in their verbal exchanges with me than in the past. Obviously, students felt less threatened to ask me questions as I circulated among the groups and talked to them individually, in pairs or to their groups. Their questions usually developed into conversations in which students often asked me to recount my

own experiences in dealing with culture shock. Such natural communication exchanges were very rare prior to their work on the projects, as most of the exchanges had taken place in contrived dialogues, such as in role-plays between students and sometimes between me and one or two students.

Conclusion

This study indicated that the students' reactions to their participation in project work were positive in several areas. Most of them revealed that the best point about participating in their projects was being able to work in groups and that the group arrangements had made them study harder, that they learned new things about English and had spoken more too. However, a greater number of them preferred that I plan their communication while more than half of them held that I should have instructed them more. These points of criticism can be attributed to the inherent pressures associated with project work in fostering students' independence and responsibility toward their own language learning. In spite of the reluctance of many students to accept their enhanced role in their own language learning, I observed them engage in longer and more complex exchanges, employ a variety of communication strategies, and noted that their increased willingness to take risks helped reveal their weaknesses. In the end, the students' sign of acceptance in learning communication through project work was evident in the overwhelming number of students who answered that they would like to participate in a similar project in the future.

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Appendix

The purpose of this questionnaire is to collect research information about your participation in the projects. Select only one answer to each question.

1. What point did you like best about this project?
 - a. I could do my own research.
 - b. I could work on the project with my group members.
 - c. I didn't have to use a textbook.
 - d. I could use real English in the interviews.
 - e. I could spend a lot of time on the project.

2. Did you learn new things about English that you did not know before this project?

a. A considerable amount	c. A modest amount
b. A small amount	d. Nothing

3. Did you study more because you worked in a group?
 - a. A little more.
 - b. Much more.
 - c. The same amount as if I had studied alone.

4. Did you speak more English while doing this project than you usually have done in your other English communication classes?

a. Yes	b. No	c. The same
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5. Would you have wanted your teacher to plan your communication activity (such as by acting out dialogues) or would you have wanted your teacher not to plan it (use

natural and spontaneous communication)?

- | | |
|---|--|
| a. Want teacher to plan
communication activity | b. Do not want teacher to
plan communication activity |
|---|--|

6. Should the teacher have taught more than he did?

- | | |
|------------------------------------|--|
| a. Yes, he should have taught more | b. No, his amount of teaching was
ok. |
|------------------------------------|--|

7. Would you like to do another project like this one again?

- | | |
|--------|-------|
| a. Yes | b. No |
|--------|-------|