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The Project Framework: A Tool for Language, Content, and Skills Integration

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Abstract

Project-based instruction is a valuable way to promote the simultaneous acquisition of language, content, and skills, provided that students in academic ESL classes can see the value of learning through projects, which the literature notes has not consistently been the case. This article introduces the Project Framework, describes the research which tested it in an undergraduate university ESL classroom, and suggests how it can be used as a cultural tool to help socialize students into a new way of thinking about language and language learning. The Framework allows ESL students to see the value of project-based instruction by making explicit the various components which work together to promote higher level academic literacy: language, thinking skills, and content knowledge.

Introduction

Project-based instruction was introduced into English as a second language (ESL) education as one way to reflect the principles of student-centered teaching (Hedge, 1993). Organizing projects is seen as an effective way to teach language and content simultaneously (Stoller, 1997), in that the use of projects “establishes a direct link between language learning and its application” (Legutke & Thomas, 1991, p. 214), as well as to create opportunities which allow ESL learners to develop their abilities in the target language by interacting and communicating with each other and with native English speakers (e.g., Fried-Booth, 2002). Beckett (1999) found that teachers reported having various goals for implementing projects in their ESL classrooms, such as

challenging students' creativity; fostering independence; enhancing cooperative learning skills; building decision-making, critical thinking, and learning skills; and facilitating the language socialization of ESL students into local academic and social cultures.

There is, however, a critical issue concerning the successful use of project-based instruction, and that is how students regard doing projects. Whereas opinions about project work in mainstream classes have generally been positive, ESL students' evaluations of projects in academic ESL classes have not been as consistent. For example, Wilhelm (1999) described an overall positive response in the project classes she described, yet Eyring (1989) offered a very different report from a study comparing a project class and two non-project classes. According to Eyring, the students from the project class planned their own projects, conducted library research, talked to native English speakers, synthesized their data, and presented their findings, but they appeared to be dissatisfied with the project approach to learning ESL because they did not seem to think that these tasks were worthwhile pursuits in ESL classes. A similar finding was uncovered in Beckett (1999) and Moulton and Holmes (2000). In her study of secondary school ESL students, Beckett found that fewer than one fifth of the 73 participants enjoyed project work or were in favor of project-based instruction. One quarter of the students had mixed feelings, and the remaining 57 percent perceived it negatively, stating that the activity distracted them from learning what they felt they needed to know to advance their education, particularly English grammar and vocabulary. In their report of a 16-week "Capstone Project," which focused on integrating the research, writing, and presentation skills needed for academic success with ESL language development, Moulton and Holmes (2000) observed that although the students who completed the course reported that they had benefited from project-based instruction, the completion rate for the course was low. According to the authors, the high drop-out rate existed because some students found the course too difficult, whereas others "withdrew because they

believed ESL classes should be limited to the study of language and they resented being asked to accomplish non-linguistic tasks” (p. 28). For a more comprehensive literature review on these issues, see Beckett (2002).

The reasons for student dissatisfaction with project-based instruction in ESL classes are complex, reflecting potentially different philosophical, cultural, and linguistic beliefs held by students and teachers (Beckett, 1999). One reason that may account for some ESL students’ dissatisfaction is a belief that an ESL class is for learning language components, such as vocabulary, grammar, speaking, and writing, rather than for building skills in such areas as research and cooperative work. The significance of the above discussion is that there is a need to realize that ESL teachers and students may have different beliefs about the purpose of ESL classes, and have different goals for student learning in general and for project-based instruction in particular. Teachers must be aware that such differences in goals and beliefs may cause conflicts and thus need to be managed before project work can be successful. Otherwise, despite the excellent tasks and methods teachers implement to achieve valuable educational goals, the ideas may fail because the learners do not see the value in the tasks.

In order to overcome these potential conflicts and differences, Beckett (1999) and Wilhelm (1999) advocated making explicit for students the goals and resources associated with project work in ESL classes. Whereas Wilhelm offered a list of collaborative dos and don’ts to help teachers foster self-directed learning, Beckett called for the development of a tool which would help teachers raise their students’ awareness of how language and skills develop through projects at the same time as content is learned. This tool has become known as “The Project Framework.”

The Project Framework

The Project Framework is a tool that addresses the simultaneous learning of language, content, and skills. It is influenced by Mohan's Knowledge Framework (Mohan, 1986), which provides a theoretical basis for the integration of language and content. Mohan's language and content integration theory recognizes that ESL students actively construct a unique understanding of both their second language learning and their second academic culture learning by drawing on prior knowledge. Such construction of knowledge may result in a mismatch of goals, which can cause frustrations and conflicts which can in turn jeopardize educational agendas if left unaddressed. Thus, Mohan's theory calls for the intentional language socialization of students into new ways of thinking about language and language learning. The Project Framework does this by serving as a mediation tool (Vygotsky, 1978), which provides a bridge to new ways for students to think about language learning and the new learning activities being carried out in the new institutional context.

The primary purpose of the Project Framework is to show students the language, content, and skill development which occurs through project work. It has two key components: the planning graphic and the project diary. Teachers can create the planning graphic alone, co-construct it with the students at the beginning of the project, or guide the students to appropriate their own project-specific graphics. The Framework's primary purpose is to show the students the language, content, and skill development which occurs through project work. A planning framework representing a wide variety of these components is presented in Figure 1.

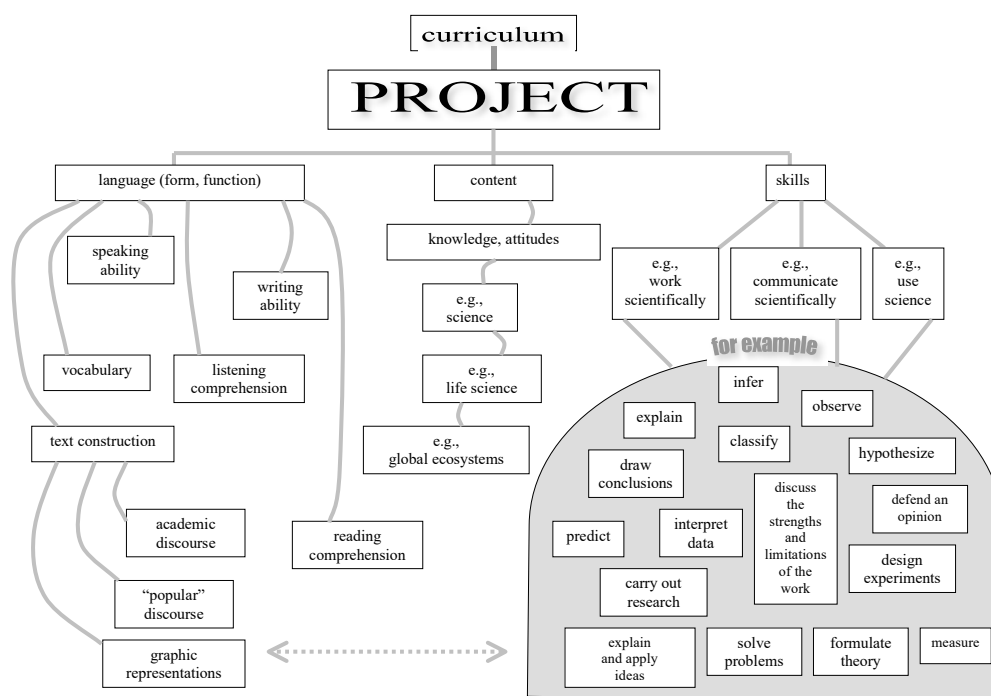


Figure 1: The Knowledge Framework

The graphic allows for the categorization of the target language, content, and skills. We have included a dotted line to signify that many of the skills presented in the planning framework can be captured in visuals such as flow charts, decision diagrams, tables, and classification trees, all of which involve the content being presented, and which have specific language for describing them (see Mohan, 1986). We recognize that the components we offer, such as *vocabulary*, *text construction*, and *predict*, are by no means exhaustive; nor do we insist that they must appear in the categories in which we have drawn them. Our intention was to capture the components that we felt were important in the projects we presented to the students, and to arrange them in a format which we believed students would understand. The planning graphic is meant to raise the students' awareness that all components of the project lead towards the goal of becoming academically literate in their new second language environment.

The project diary (see Figure 2) is an integral part of the Project Framework in that it provides students with a weekly summarization task. Unlike ESL project diaries which focus primarily on linguistic achievement (see, for example, Fried-Booth, 2002, p. 20), we have designed our diary to encourage students to make explicit not only the language, but also the content and the skills they have been using during the week. It also highlights what students have been able to accomplish, and what they were unable to complete as planned. This diary promotes note-taking skills, notes which can be used in tandem with a written summary of their progress.

Project Diary

Week _____ Name _____

Activity	Knowledge and skills		
Things I did this week.	Things I learned this week.		
... I spoke English to	Language (e.g., vocabulary expressions, grammar)	Content (new information about your topic)	Skills
_____
_____
... I talked English about
_____
_____
... I read
_____
_____
... I looked for and found
_____
_____
... I looked for and didn't find
_____
_____
... I wrote	Things I hoped to learn this week, but didn't. (State reasons for not learning.)		
_____
_____
... I observed
_____
_____
... I created a key visual about
_____
_____

Figure 2. The Project Diary

Teacher's Goals for the Project Framework

To explore the implementation of the Project Framework, we conducted a study that examined how one teacher's goals for integrating language, skills, and content through the Framework was received by her university-level ESL students in a course called *Language and Language Learning*. The teacher's goals for the course included using the course content to teach ESL and various skills which the students needed for successful completion of the course, and to help her students understand the content-based view of language learning. From initial interviews with the students, the teacher knew that content-based ESL learning was a new phenomenon for them, and she therefore believed it was necessary to help them adopt this new way of thinking about language learning.

Application of the Project Framework

The teacher used the Project Framework as a mediation tool to help students understand her goals and plans. She gave the students, as models, the planning framework graphic (Figure 1), the project diary (Figure 2), and an example of a project which could be undertaken on the topic of ecosystems, complete with suggested tasks. The teacher asked the students to form small groups and discuss potential topics for their three-month projects. Once each group had decided on a topic, the group members were asked to create their own planning graphics similar to the model, but which would capture the students' own goals for language, content, and skills development. The students were also given copies of the project diary to use, and were encouraged to draw diary graphics which they would find personally useful for making notes about their weekly project-related activities as well as for noting their unachieved plans as a reminder for the following week. The creation of both the planning graphic and the project diaries was accomplished under the teacher's guidance. The teacher's examination of the students' frameworks and project

diaries, which were submitted with short written proposals by the end of the third week, indicated that the students understood their tasks and were able to articulate their project plans and goals. They were therefore told to carry out their projects as homework outside class. The teacher checked students' project diaries in class every week, giving brief oral feedback, and collected their portfolios once a month to offer detailed written feedback on their progress.

Although an analysis of the students' work to determine the effectiveness of the Project Framework for teaching language and skills simultaneously would be interesting, the focus of our investigation was to explore the students' experiences using the Framework by examining their written reflections, interview comments, and project portfolios. The following sections will briefly describe this research and its findings.

Research Site and Participants

The research was carried out in three classes of a 14-week, content-based, undergraduate course called *Language and Language Learning*, offered in the second term of a ten-month exchange program at a Canadian University. The study involved 57 students and their teacher, who had an advanced degree in ESL education and a strong interest in the pedagogical and research aspects of language and content integration. The students' English proficiency was upper-intermediate with TOEFL scores ranging from 420 to 540. An interview conducted early in the program revealed that these students had been learning English in a context where language, content, and skills were seen as separate subjects, and were thus taught and learned separately.

Data Source and Analysis

The data source for the study included the course syllabus, lesson plans, the teacher's reflections, the students' weekly portfolios of their research projects, their end-of-term

reflections, and interviews with 22 students. All 57 students had expressed interest in volunteering to be interviewed for this study, but as it was the end of their program, many had arranged to leave Canada before we could schedule interviews with them. The researcher, who is one of the authors of this article, analyzed the syllabus, lesson plans, and project portfolios for content, and analyzed the reflection and interview data through constant comparison. Specifically, she examined all the data, looked for emerging patterns and themes by counting, clustering, ordering, and selecting representative pieces of data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For triangulation, the researcher checked her findings by comparing cases and data sources as well as discussing them with the second author.

Findings

Students' Experience Using the Project Framework

Analyses of the students' written reflections, interview data, and project portfolio (including their graphics, project diary notes, and final project reports) showed that the students successfully achieved the goals their teacher had for them and their own goals for the project assignment. For example, although 17 (30%) of the 57 students reported in their reflection that choosing topics was a challenging task, all 57 were able to appropriate and use the Project Framework, set their own goals, and show them graphically. All 57 were also able to create their own project diaries and use them to record their weekly learning. None of the 57 students reported having trouble carrying out their projects using their project frameworks and diaries. Rather, they wrote and talked about what they learned by doing their projects, and how the Project Framework helped them see how language, content, and skills could be learned simultaneously. Figure 3, created by Shoko and Aya (all names are pseudonyms), is an example of a student-created project framework. These students discussed specifically how they had developed their language abilities, and addressed each of the components they had included.

They recorded in their project diaries and wrote in their reflections that among other things, they had acquired new terms such as “hypothalamus,” “cerebellum,” “cerebral cortex,” and “brain cells.”

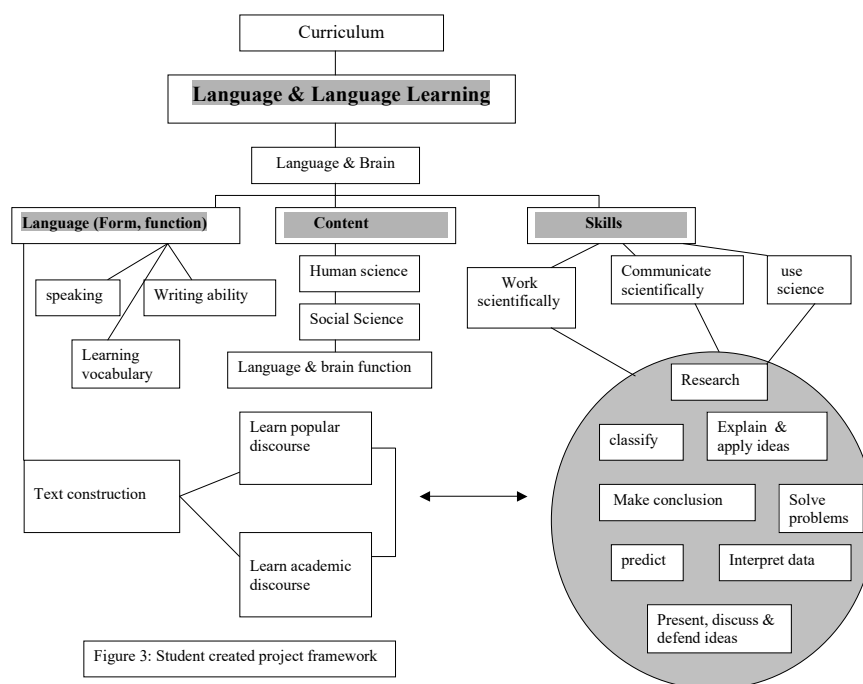


Figure 3: Student created project framework

In fact, all students felt that they had learned a considerable amount about their chosen topics as well as the language and skills needed to demonstrate their knowledge. This was evident from the 16 projects which were presented by the 57 students on topics ranging from “ESL education in Canada” to “Language and the brain.” These students planned, carried out, recorded the process of, and presented their projects orally and in writing. Out of the 57 students, 45 (79%) emphasized that the project graphic and the project diary helped them see what and how much they learned. For example, in her reflection, Kaya wrote:

In Japan, I never did so much for one course. For this course, I can’t believe I did so much. My binder (portfolio) is full. I think I have 300 page notes, research, and papers in it. I also created visual for my project, took some pictures for my presentation. I can’t believe I wrote my paper 15 pages. I never wrote a long paper

like this before. Not even in Japanese. Project Framework helped me plan what I need to do. From Project diary, I can see what I learned every week.

Kaya was proud of her accomplishments in this course, noting that she had not only presented a 15-page written product, but that she had taken extensive notes, drawn visuals, and taken pictures for her presentation, all evidence of the process she had gone through to build skills and language while learning content.

The rest of the students (21%) discussed their experience with the project assignment and the application of the project Framework at a more general, somewhat less enthusiastic level. Miki's comment below is a good representation of this group of students' attitude:

The project, lot of work. I had to do something everyday. I don't do that for my other courses. Yes, it's okay. The key visuals, project diary and the other stuff, the plan (the Framework), okay. Had to learn how to make it on the computer. It's okay.

It is clear from the above report that all students, despite their varying levels of enthusiasm, were able to appropriate the Project Framework and apply it effectively. But what did the students say about language and language learning through this approach?

Students' Understanding of the New Approach

Analyses of the interview and reflection data showed that the majority of the students (79%) clearly acknowledged an understanding of the content-based approach to ESL learning. That is, they saw how they learned language, subject matter content, and skills simultaneously. Miko wrote in her reflection that she learned she:

could study not only English, but also other subject. In other words, I could kill two birds with one stone. I understand that there is a connection between the two.

Tako's reflection shows how some students were skeptical of the new approach, but came to an understanding with the help of the teacher and the Framework:

I learned English by going to conversations class, essay writing, and... So, I didn't believe her [the teacher] when she said we can learn English this way, too. She explained it in class and showed it to us by the visual [the Framework]. She told us to learn to speak when talking to the librarian and presentation, learn to write when we take notes and write report. I did that and I understand she taught us the new way. Now, I know how to learn English another way.

Another student, Kimi, discussed how she learned about her chosen topic. She claimed she had developed her skills in data collection, analysis, and oral and written reports. She had also improved her writing, and reported learning important content-specific vocabulary:

I think it [the Framework] helped me to understand the connection between language, content, and skills, because visuals are easier to understand. For example, I got some information about advertisements; that was content. And how I got information is skills. Then, how I will explain is also skills. In the information, I learned some new vocabulary; that's language. Another example is I did a survey. I think how I analyze is skills and to write a summary is language writing ability.

Such reports from the students are testimonies to how the Project Framework was applied as a cultural tool to help students understand this new project-based way of viewing and learning language, and to raise their awareness about the interconnectedness of language, content, and skills learning.

Conclusion

The literature on project-based instruction in ESL contexts has suggested that not all students can see the value of this approach for language learning. This report has introduced the Project Framework and shown how it was used as a mediation tool to help socialize students into a new way of thinking about language and language learning in their new institutional setting. The Framework allowed the students to see the value of project-based instruction by making explicit the various components. It also promoted self-motivation by encouraging students to chart their own goals in a simple graphic format, then to use the graphic to navigate their way through the project

and address all the components they had included. As one student concluded, “this framework was useful because we can know what we do next time certainly by seeing it... I think it helps us not only with our presentations, but also with the other things we have in the future.” And after all, it is the ESL students’ futures that are at the very core of why ESL teachers teach.

Acknowledgement

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