【研究ノート】

Developing Practical English Skills through Project Based Language Learning

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Abstract

Project based language learning is an innovative learning method through which students learn practical language skills productively, by participating in and completing a group project in the target language. This paper offers a summary of a course built on this principle at Tohoku University in which students are tasked with making a short film in English. An explanation of the benefits of project based language learning is offered, the reasoning behind the project of choice (creation of a short film) is argued, preliminary observations on student success through the course is considered, and finally challenges and suggestions on addressing them are presented. This paper also points to areas that could be researched further in the future and suggests ways to go about doing so.

1．Introduction

Improving oral communication and listening skills can be particularly challenging for learners of a foreign language. Tohoku University is no exception, as indicated by the 2015 report of students' TOEFL ITP scores (Heisei 26 nendo TOEFL ITP Test Jisshi Houkokusho, 2015). According to the report, while Tohoku University students do relatively well at reading and structure type of questions (M=48.4 and M=49.9, respectively), they have significantly lower scores on listening questions (M=45.5). This indicates that while many of them possess a decent grasp of grammar and vocabulary, it is often difficult for them to translate these skills to listening and oral communication.

Helping foreign language learners to improve their listening and speaking skills is also vexing for instructors. One reason for this is the fact that learners have limited access to native speakers of their target language(s) and there is little opportunity to participate in practical speaking and listening activities that will help to develop the skills crucial to their oral communication abilities (Towndrow & Vallance, 2004). While class time can be dedicated to speaking and listening activities, there are often problems in that (i) the activities are not always practical for the learners, (ii) learners need a chance to practice speaking and listening with others who have higher language ability than their own (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992), (iii) group speaking activities can easily be disrupted by a single individual who constantly reverts to the native language, and (iv) it is very difficult to have students participate in speaking activities outside of the classroom.

The introduction of Practical English Skills classes and high level classes at Tohoku University has underscored the need and desire for opportunities for students to learn and use English in practical settings. Giving students new knowledge in English that is helpful in their studies or career paths redoubles the perceived need to use English, which is essential for learners to improve their second language skills (Ellis, 1985). However, while many Practical English Skills classes currently focus only on presentations and presenting skills, there is an opportunity to create a number of different classes

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that focus on various practical skills (not just presentations). While some students will go on to need English presentation skills in the future, not all students will necessarily give many presentations in their careers. Thus, if instructors were to create a number of Practical English Skills classes that would focus on developing different skills in English, it would provide a wider base of potential skill sets that students could chose to work on in English, and they could chose classes that they feel fit them best, while giving them a chance to improve their English abilities in a practical context at the same time.

As a way to address some of the issues raised above, this paper presents an argument for the implementation of project based language learning teaching methods at Tohoku University, and surveys an example of how this has been attempted by the author. In the second section of this paper, a review of previous literature is presented, outlining what would be essential in creating project based language learning classes and why they would be beneficial to students. In the third section, an outline of a project based language learning class conduced in 2015 and again in 2016 by the author at Tohoku University is presented. In the fourth section, indications of the success of the class introduced in section three are given, and in the final section, challenges, suggestions and ideas for future research are summarized.

2. Previous Studies

The benefits of project based learning have been widely noted (Fragoulis & Tsiplakides 2009, Silberman, 2007, etc.) and include increasing learners' confidence, promotion of independent thinking, enhanced autonomy, and increased social and cooperative skills. While project based learning was not initially created with language learning, specifically, in mind, a number of researchers have made strong claims of using it in the second language and EFL classroom with great success (Lee 2002, Brophy, 2004, etc.).

One of the reasons that project based learning is thought to be particularly appropriate for the foreign language learning classroom is that it provides experiential learning. Since most foreign language learning tends to take place through rote memorization and/or a limited number of activities, there is very little opportunity for learners to internalize the knowledge that they have memorized. Experiential learning allows learners to participate in activities that enable them to experience what they are learning about, reflect on their experiences, and consequentially internalize what they have learned, making it their own (Silberman, 2007). This seems to address the very problems experienced by many Japanese learners of English at Tohoku University (and in general) as introduced in section 1 of this paper.

Though project based language learning can be an incredibly beneficial tool for helping students to learn a foreign language in a practical context, it should be noted that there are guidelines that must be followed when creating a project based language learning class. If a project is not created with careful consideration, it could potentially fail to help students' language skills to progress at all. In order to ascertain what statutes must be adhered to for a successful project based language learning course, let us consider what it is, specifically, about a project based language learning task that helps to improve learners' language skills.

Project based language learning primarily works by providing opportunities for students to engage in purposeful communication to complete authentic activities (Haines, 1989). It is through these authentic activities that second language learners internalize knowledge related to their target language and truly acquire the related language skills. Thus, for the construction of a successful project based learning foreign language class, it is imperative that students are made to complete authentic activities, and it is equally important that we understand what they are.

Authentic activities are generally defined as tasks that have real world relevance and that integrate across curriculums, while allowing students to choose different levels of difficulty and complexity to match their needs (Jonassen, 1991). While this is a good basic outline for general learning, Barr & Tragg (1995) outline five points that are required for tasks to be considered authentic in a foreign/second language learning context. They argue that authentic tasks must require learners to (i) share what they are thinking, (ii) relate ideas to their own experiences and ideas, (iii) collaborate with peers, (iv) actively construct their own meaning, and (v) incorporate their ideas into the perspectives of others. Therefore, it can be argued that a successful project based foreign language learning class will provide a task that will make students undergo each of these processes.

3. Implementation of Project Based Language Learning at Tohoku University

In the spring semester of 2015, I created a project based English language learning class in an attempt to provide authentic tasks for students so that they could improve their English abilities – particularly their listening and speaking skills. The class became popular and was repeated in both semesters of 2016.

In order to assure that group work and the class in general would be conducted in the target language, English, I worked with the Global Learning Center to create an integrated class with both foreign students and native Japanese speaking students in the class. By incorporating students that do not speak Japanese into the course, all of the students involved are forced to use English as a lingua franca to complete the project, which also guarantees that work assigned out of the classroom will be primarily conducted in English. This was an essential step, as if the target language is not used predominantly, the class fails to be a project based English learning class, and simply becomes a project based learning class – which while potentially helpful to other skills, would not benefit the English skills of the students in the class.

The project chosen for students to complete was the creation of a short film for three reasons. First, making a short film meets all of the requirements for an authentic task, as outlined by Barr & Tragg (1995). Second, it is a rare and interesting project that generates a lot of natural motivation. Third, by teaching about a topic that most students know very little about, it allows both foreign and native Japanese students to not only learn to work in groups and improve their language skills, but also to gain knowledge in a completely new area.

Creating a short film is a project that provides a highly authentic task and meets all of the requirements given by Barr & Tragg (1995). First, the proper creation of a short film involves a number of independent tasks that must be brought together to collaboratively make a whole project. These tasks include: scriptwriting, story board creation, cinematographic planning, directing, acting, lighting, sound recording, editing, and crediting and other secretarial functions. Each member of the group was assigned one of these tasks, which lead to members constructing their own meanings and experiences. However, since all of the tasks are interrelated, it required students to relate and incorporate their tasks into those of others. Coordinating all of the individual tasks of the project and putting them together into a single entity also required collaboration with peers and sharing their thoughts with others. Furthermore, film in itself is a means of communication. As students learned about how to communicate their ideas through the medium of film, it offered them a chance to reflect on their own communicative skills and how they can become better at expressing themselves. Finally, the project is far too large and complicated to complete in a short amount of time, so it required that students engage with one another and have high exposure to meaningful interactions brought about by

the various tasks involved.

The idea of making a short film is a rare and interesting project that the students were very excited to participate in. This is important for a number of reasons. First, it creates a lot of motivation towards the topic, which extends towards the learning of English as well. The link between motivation and second language acquisition has been well documented (Wigfield & Wentzel 2007, Ellis 1985, amongst others) and an increase in motivation through an interesting project such as this one promotes the acquisition of English by the students involved. Second, since the students in the class have a general interest in making a film and want to make the best one that they can, they take great pride in the project. Since students in a group can only produce one film, much deliberation is needed to decide how best to proceed, what sort of film they should create, etc. This provides excellent opportunities for students to use their English skills practically to contribute to a group and debate issues that matter to them personally. Finally, since the prospect of making a short film is interesting for many students, it ensures that there will be enough interest and enrollment from foreign students, without whom the class would not be as effective.

As most students coming into Tohoku University have very little knowledge about film-making, a class that includes such a project provides an interesting opportunity for all students to gain knowledge and skills other than just English ability. This entices both native Japanese speaking students as well as foreign and high level students to participate in the class, which is especially beneficial for English language learners. Furthermore, it allows for an atmosphere in which everyone involved in the class can gain new knowledge and skills, and opportunities to practice them in real world situations. Offering new knowledge in other areas also improves student satisfaction, as everyone involved in the class can leave feeling that they have learned and applied a number of different skills, including but not limited to, English usage, knowledge of and various film-making skills, communicative abilities, and team-work skills.

For the reasons given above, it seemed to me that creating a short film in English would be a very good project to assign to ensure that students could develop practical English skills and have a number of opportunities to complete authentic tasks. Based on this, I created a combined class with Japanese students registering for a "Practical English Skills 1" class and foreign exchange students registering for a class named "International Project Building". I explained to students that Japanese students had joined the class hoping to improve their English skills, but that I expected everyone in the class to also learn (i) how to work on an international team to accomplish a common goal, (ii) to divide work, (iii) to integrate their own ideas and work with others to complete a project, and (iv) some basic knowledge about the film-making process.

Students were instructed to take one of several roles in the film making process (I.e. director, screen-writer, etc.) and were responsible for both completing their role, and integrating it into the final project. The roles were explained in detail during the introduction class, as well as what kind of skills would be specifically practiced for each role. For example, if a student takes the role of "actor/actress" he or she can expect to have a lot of extra practice with and instruction from others on speaking and pronunciation. Each class began with a short presentation from each group about the progress their group had made on their film. Different members from each group were required to present each time so that all students had an opportunity to present. Then, short lessons, about 45 minutes in length, were given on different aspects of the film making process. Topics included: story arc creation, writing dialogue, story boarding, cinematography, misé-en-scene, camera work, acting,

editing, sound, and crediting, amongst others. In the final 30 minutes of class, students held meetings, met with the instructor to discuss their group contribution, or practiced skills studied during the class. Students were also asked to meet at least once per week outside of class to discuss their projects.

4. Indications of success

After creating a new class, it is important to evaluate it. However, as this class was not run as a research project, it did not warrant a lot of hard data. The three places I was able to collect data from were (i) student reflection comments requested on the last day of class, (ii) Tohoku University course evaluations, and (iii) student TOEFL scores. While none of this data was taken very stringently, it can give some idea as to the successes and failures of the class. The data considered in this paper was only taken from the 2015 class, as other data was not made available yet at the time of writing this paper.

In general, students exhibited a positive outlook on the class. Most students noted in their reflection comments that they enjoyed the class and felt that they took away some knowledge from it. Students mentioned various things that they learned, but the most common things they mentioned were (i) having improved at English, (ii) having learned about films and film-making, and (iii) getting a deeper understanding of Japanese thinking (this was a common comment from foreign students who participated in the class). The Tohoku University course evaluation I received for this class also indicated that it ranked much higher than the average for other English courses in almost every area. The only two areas that were lacking were (i) in how often students reported that they came to class and (ii) my explanation of the grading system. Furthermore, though some students mentioned that the project was difficult or that they sometimes had trouble interacting with foreign or Japanese students, I believe this to be an indication that students were actively participating in the projecting and getting the experiences out of the class that they were supposed to be.

However, the most significant finding of this study comes from the students' TOEFL scores. Students registered for the class as Practical English Skills 1 were required to take the TOEFL test in July, towards the end of the semester. While there were many merits and benefits to creating a project based language learning class, as argued in section 2, arguably the most important and desirable results would be an indication that English proficiency, particularly students' aural abilities, improved. Though I do not possess pre- and post-test to show clear improvement, one striking discovery that I made in checking the TOEFL scores of native Japanese speaking students in this class was that on average (and for almost every student individually), listening scores were much closer to other sections, as shown in table 1, below.

Table 1. Native Japanese Speaking Students' Average TOEFL scores

	Listening	Structure	Reading	Overall
Class Average	52.9	54.5	54.9	538.7
University Average	45.5	49.9	48.4	479.4

As table 1 shows, though there was a 4.4 point difference in the average scores for structure and listening amongst the entire student body, participants in this class showed only a 1.8 point difference in the average scores of structure and listening. For a student body that is notorious for having listening scores much lower than reading and structure scores, this is a result that deserves attention. Though students in Practical English Skills courses tend to have better TOEFL scores in general, I allowed students into my class with lower scores, and even those with lower overall scores (below 500) exhibited

high listening scores, with all participants with a score less than 500 showing listening scores that were actually higher than their structure or reading scores. Thus, even though there was no pre- and post-test data to outright prove that student TOEFL scores were improved, the uncharacteristically high listening scores that students from the class obtained in relation to their structure and reading scores can suggest that it had an impact on their aural proficiencies.

5. Going forward

One of the most obvious shortcomings of this report is the lack of hard, empirical data to support the idea that the project based language learning class that I set up was truly successful in improving students' English abilities. However, despite the lack of decisive evidence, there is enough theoretical background and preliminary data to suggest that the class likely helped to improve students' aural English proficiencies and provided a number of other benefits. Thus, I believe that the mostly positive results from this initial attempt warrant further study, and I recommend that similar classes be conducted and evaluated with carefully taken data to examine the exact effects that the class has on students and their English abilities. Such a study could include measures of motivation, empirical measures of change in English proficiency through pre- and post-testing, and qualitative data to gauge students' feelings towards how well they were pushed to improve their communicative abilities.

Furthermore, based on the current findings presented in this paper, I believe that it would behoove Tohoku University to add more project based English language learning style classes. Ideally, such classes would combine Practical English Skills classes with other courses so as to offer environments in which students can truly learn English practically and also gain other skills that can aid in their communicative abilities. Finally, in the creation of other such project based English language learning style classes in the future, I recommend that they be constructed with close attention being paid to making authentic tasks that students can participate in for maximum benefit. In order to gauge the authenticity of the tasks in question, I recommend that other classes also be designed to meet the five requirements for authentic tasks that Barr & Tragg (1995) have laid out, as was used for the creation of the class reported in this paper. To this end, future project based English language learning classes should be sure to have a strong focus on students working in groups to complete a complex project in English.

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