

Community-Based Project: Taking Care of Our Environment

Proyecto Comunitario: cuidando nuestro entorno

Teresa Benitez

Universidad del Norte
(Baranquilla, Colombia)

Heidy Robles

Universidad del Norte
(Baranquilla, Colombia)

Abstract

The combination of language and content is the principal emphasis in the English teaching of International Relations program at Universidad del Norte. In order to maximize students' performance in this approach, project work is assigned. Project work enhances students' language skills (Stoller, 2006) and is a useful tool to help students develop different competences, such as research, collaborative, linguistic and cultural competence. "The Environmental campaign" is a community-based project that is carried out at Universidad del Norte with fifth semester students of International Relations in the Technology, Environment and Progress subject. The main objective of this project is to raise awareness of the importance of taking care of our environment. This project gives learners the opportunity to simultaneously get involved in social community projects and develop their language skills. For seven weeks, students plan, prepare, design, carry out and present their campaigns. The steps, follow-ups, process, constraints, and results are the main aspects to be shown in this paper.

Key Words: content-based instruction; environment; project-based learning; campaigns; collaborative; raise awareness; critical analysis.

Resumen

La mezcla entre lengua y contenido constituye el énfasis principal de la enseñanza de inglés en el Programa de Relaciones Internacionales de la Universidad del Norte. Con el fin de maximizar el desempeño de los estudiantes con este enfoque, se asigna un proyecto. El trabajo en un proyecto mejora las habilidades de lengua de los estudiantes (Stoller, 2006) y es una herramienta útil para ayudar a los estudiantes a desarrollar diferentes competencias investigativas, colaborativas, lingüísticas y culturales. "La campaña ambiental" es un proyecto comunitario desarrollado por la Universidad del Norte con estudiantes de quinto semestre de Relaciones Internacionales en los campos de la tecnología, el medio ambiente y el progreso. El principal objetivo de este proyecto es crear conciencia sobre la importancia de cuidar nuestro medio ambiente. Este proyecto les ofrece a los estudiantes la oportunidad de involucrarse en proyectos sociales con la comunidad y, simultáneamente, desarrollar sus habilidades con la lengua. Los estudiantes planean, preparan, diseñan, llevan a cabo sus campañas y las presentan. Este ensayo se enfoca en mostrar los pasos, el seguimiento del proyecto, sus limitaciones y resultados.

Palabras Claves: instrucción basada en contenidos; medio ambiente; aprendizaje basado en proyectos; campañas; colaborativo; crear conciencia; análisis crítico.

INTRODUCTION

It is absolutely necessary to achieve the most basic goal of education: preparing students for further learning and more effective functioning in their lives. (Perkins, 1993)

One of the main goals of education is to enhance students' learning while at the same time enjoying the teaching-learning experience. This aim becomes especially important in second language learning environments where the acquisition of language skills requires a relaxing atmosphere in which students are motivated to develop competencies that help them succeed in both their academic and professional lives. In relation to the previous point, it is necessary to find a way to engage students to both gain the language skills they need and apply them in practical and meaningful ways for which a single approach and/or methodological practice might not be sufficient to fulfill these requirements.

In the pursuit of this goal, the teachers of the fifth level of the International Relations Program at Universidad del Norte in Barranquilla, Colombia have incorporated a hybrid approach to language teaching that combines the structure of a content-based approach with the versatility of project-based instruction and the advantages of the teaching for understanding method. The idea emerged from our interest in maximizing students' learning and finding the way to engage them and play a more active role in their learning process. After regarding the multiple advantages that each of these approaches offer, we decided to amalgamate them into one that embodied all these positive aspects and served our educational purposes. On the one hand, the content-based approach bears the advantage that it incorporates language and content in one corpus making language learning more attractive for learners. As stated in Kasper (2000):

In a content-based course, ESL students use English to expand their existing knowledge bases (Kasper 1998), as they are presented with interdisciplinary materials in a meaningful, contextualized form in which the primary focus is on the acquisition of content area information (Brinton et al., 1989). The result of this type of instruction is that ESL students gradually acquire greater control of the English language, enabling them to participate more fully in an increasingly complex academic in social environment. (Kasper & Singer, 1997)

There are many advantages provided by content-based instruction (CBI) in Language teaching-learning settings. Among the most recognized are:

- It can make learning a language more interesting and motivating. Students can use the language to fulfill a real purpose, which can make students both more independent and confident.
- Students can also develop a much wider knowledge of the world through CBI which can feed into improving and supporting their general educational needs.
- CBI is very popular among EAP (English for Academic Purposes) teachers as it helps students to develop valuable study skills such as note taking, summarizing and extracting key information from texts.
- Taking information from different sources, re-evaluating and restructuring that information can help students to develop very valuable thinking skills that can then be transferred to other subjects.
- The inclusion of a group work element within the framework given above can also help students to develop their collaborative skills, which can have great social value. (Peachey, 2003)

Similarly, project-based instruction boosts students' creativity and imagination and fosters hands-on tasks that offer significant experience for language learners. Project work plays an important role since it provides a bridge between the genuine, natural, and real language. "It

takes the experience of the classroom out into the world and provides an opportunity for informal learning” (Fried, 2003). Besides, “it is a versatile vehicle for fully integrating language and content learning” (Stoller, 1997; cited in Becket and Chamnes, 2006). Among the many advantages of a project-based approach, Kraft (2000) highlights key aspects, ones that inspired us to consider using project-based learning:

1. Allows for a variety of learning styles.
2. "Real" world oriented-learning has value beyond the demonstrated competence of the learner.
3. Risk-free environment—provides positive feedback and allow choice.
4. Encourages the use of higher order thinking skills and learning concepts as well as basic facts.
5. Utilizes hands-on approaches.
6. Provides for in-depth understanding.
7. Accessible for all learners.
8. Utilizes various modes of communication.
9. Assessment is congruent with instruction (i.e. is performance-based).
10. Students are responsible for their own learning.
11. Students have ownership of their learning within the curriculum.
12. Projects promote meaningful learning, connecting new learning to students' past performances.
13. Learning utilizes real time data—investigating data and drawing conclusions.
14. The learning process is valued as well as the learning project.
15. Learning cuts across curricular areas—multidisciplinary in nature.
16. Teacher is a facilitator of learning.
17. Student self-assessment of learning is encouraged.

On the other hand, the teaching for understanding method (TFU) revolves around generative topics that “are central to one or more disciplines or domains; they are interesting and accessible to students (there are lots of resources available to help students pursue the topic), and they have multiple connections to students' experiences both in and out of school” (ALP, Harvard University, 2003). Besides, “It asks students to perform, to exhibit what they know and what they can do with what they know in a real time dimension (understanding performances that foster the transfer of knowledge), and enables teachers to believe in the capacity of students to create, to construct knowledge and to assign meaning to what they have learned and experienced” (Kickbusch, 1996). “Transfer is a matter of fact when teaching for understanding occurs” (Graffam, 2003).

Ongoing assessment is central in TFU. To learn for understanding, students need criteria, feedback, and opportunities for reflection from the beginning of and throughout any sequence of instruction (ALP, Harvard University, 2003), which is one of our main goals in the course.

Subsequently, we will provide a more detailed description of the method we are following in this course, the activities that students perform, and the evaluation rubrics that we use during the process.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

Students at the fifth level, “Technology, Environment, and Progress” acquire the language skills through the content of this module, thus developing knowledge on environmental and technological issues as well. The program’s main goal is to strengthen the students’ critical

analysis skills that they have begun to acquire in the previous levels. Likewise, students develop skills to engage in cooperative work, and negotiate viewpoints about controversial topics. The texts that students analyze are taken from authentic sources such as textbooks, newspapers, specialized magazines, television, films, and the Internet. Among the competences that we aim at helping students develop are:

- Communicative competence, which is the capacity to analyze critically and to produce expository texts.
- Linguistic competence, which is the capacity to understand and apply grammatical, syntactic and semantic structures to express their ideas coherently both orally and in writing.
- Investigative competence, which is the capacity to search systematically pertinent sources of information to pursue new knowledge.
- Cultural competence, or the capacity to approach different topics and situations from different viewpoints according to the cultural contexts of the participants and adopting the role of a citizen.
- Cooperative competency, which involves the capacity to organize and participate in group work, respecting turns and others' viewpoints.
- Negotiation competency, which means the capacity to listen and evaluate different viewpoints in order to make assertive decisions based on solidarity and democratic coexistence.

Regarding our program's characteristics, and analyzing previous experiences of teaching and learning, the researchers thought it was necessary to find a way to achieve the objectives by allowing more active participation for students. In this way, the hybrid approach was conceived combining the characteristics that were considered the most suitable from the above mentioned approaches to achieve our purposes. The core of the program is an environment project work, a long-term project that students build throughout the semester and present at the end of the course in which they apply all the knowledge and skills that they have gained during the level, spread their creativity, and develop awareness on the importance of taking care of our environment (Project-Based Instruction plus Teaching for Understanding). Figure 1 is an example of the guidelines given to the students to carry out the project.

Eco-activity

PREPARATION SESSION

1. Choose **TWO** activities from the following list :
 - a) Clean a beach, a lake, or a river.
 - b) Reduce the electricity or water consumption in your building or neighborhood.
 - c) Organize a youth environmental group in your neighborhood or at the university and carry out eco-activities.
 - d) Plant trees on a deforested area in your city.
 - e) Organize an environmental meeting at a school to raise children's awareness on the importance of preserving the environment.
 - f) Get attention from local governor, mayor, or council on an environmental issue.

2. Research about different ways of campaigning. Choose and prepare the way you will campaign for your activity.
3. Research about previous campaigns on the issues that you chose: Who? When? Where? Why? How? And the impact of these campaigns on the places they were carried out.
4. Choose the place where you will carry out your activity. Run your campaign to get more people involved.
5. Carry out your eco-activity with the people you gathered with your campaign. Make sure you save evidences of what you did both in the campaign and the activity itself (pictures, videos, letters, recordings, etc).

Figure 1. Eco-Activity Guidelines

Teachers introduce concepts and strategies through which students develop the skills proposed for the level and strengthen previous ones, and monitor students' understanding and progress on intermediate performances of understanding in which students apply the partial knowledge they have gained and build on their final project they need to present. In these introductory performances, the critical analysis of authentic texts and the acquisition of critical thinking skills are central for the development of the process (CBI+TFU). Their progress is assessed through evaluation rubrics that serve the purpose of both guiding the students on what is expected from them, and the teacher on what is to be evaluated. These assessment rubrics allow for permanent feedback, which helps the students to monitor and improve their performance. Figures 2 and 3 are example rubrics applied to evaluate both process and product in the evaluation campaign.

Environmental Campaign Follow up				
Date : _____				
Stop and Check				
Group names	Chosen Activities	Reasons	How?	Who? Audience involved

Figure 2. Ongoing Assessment Rubric

ENVIRONMENTAL CAMPAIGN PRESENTATION EVALUATION	
CRITERIA NAMES:	
I. PROCESS	
Delivered work on due dates	
Action plan	
Research on types of campaign	
Presentation outline	

II. ORAL PRESENTATION			
Mastery of the topic			
Fluency (not reading or reciting from memory)			
Accuracy in grammar and pronunciation			
Appropriate tone of voice, intonation, body language, visual contact			
III: CAMPAIGN			
Relevant			
Involved members of the community			
Produced an impact on the surrounding environment			
Support			
I. OVERALL ORGANIZATION			
Punctuality and time management			
Material availability			
Creative and effective design of visual aids			

Figure 3. Evaluation Rubric

However, it is necessary to keep building this process, which requires organization and preparation. For this reason, we are studying a possible format that embraces all the planning to guide both teachers and students in the project and that shows the main components of the process. This format could serve as a leading route for a better understanding and management of the course.

RESULTS

The results we have obtained with this approach have been very positive and rewarding both for teachers and students. Students were observed using the language in a more confident and independent way. The oral and written skills that they have gained allow most of them at this point to communicate their ideas and to access and negotiate knowledge. They have developed research skills, language awareness, citizenship and a sense of belonging toward their city and country. Besides, they realize the benefits of well-developed cooperative work and apply their talents and creativity in the pursuit of a common goal. Moreover, we teachers have been able to achieve our objectives and have had the opportunity to make cross-curricular connections with other areas of the students' career.

Our fifth level hybrid approach has proved to be efficient in the way that it has allowed for a greater and more active participation of the students in their language learning process. It has also been possible to achieve the objectives of the course in a more integral way since all topics, concepts, and skills are incorporated into the project work, which is the central part of the process. Furthermore, students are exposed to the language through authentic texts dealing with topics that are pertinent to their careers and provided the opportunity to learn for understanding and improve their critical thinking skills, which are of basic importance at this and the subsequent levels in the subject. Although it needs to be refined, the integration of three different approaches in our language program gave us the possibility to enhance our practice and implement in the same course teaching methodologies that we had favored but that we were not

able to apply as we wanted because of lack of time. We hope our experience can be found positive and enriching for other teachers in this field.

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BIODATA

Teresa Benitez Velasquez has an M.A. in Education with emphasis on English Language teaching from Universidad del Norte. She has teaching experience in preschool, elementary, high school, university levels, and teacher training in ELT methodology. She is currently a language and science teacher at Marymount School, where she is also the Elementary School Language Department Head. She also works as an English teacher in the International Relations English program in Universidad del Norte's Language Department.

Heidy Robles Noriega has an M.A. in Education with emphasis in English language teaching from Universidad del Norte. She is currently a language teacher in the Language Department at Universidad del Norte. She also works as a tutor in the Diploma in English Language Teaching and the Masters in Education programs.