

論文

Projects in the ESL Classroom

—An Example Using the Grimm Brothers’ “The Three Little Pigs”—

Zane Ritchie

要 旨

本論文では、一年生の英語コミュニケーション授業にて使用した教科書の *Talk A Lot: Book One* の第六章の追加として実施したグリム兄弟の「三匹の子ぶた」という民話のプロジェクト例の内容について述べる。プロジェクトの主な目的は、学生のコミュニケーション能力を高め、教科書で学んだ言語構造の機能を積極的に彼らに自己学習させ、また自信を付けさせ、グループの団結を促進することであった。副目標は、学生中心の学習に向かって移行し身についた言語やスキルを自分なりのペースで使えるように促すことであった。

キーワード：task-based learning (タスクベース学習), project-based learning (プロジェクトベース学習), theme-based instruction (テーマベース指導), content-based instruction (コンテンツベース指導), folk-tales (民族)

Abstract

This paper presents an example of a project for first year English communication students based upon the Grimm Brothers’ folktale, “The Three Little Pigs”, that was used to supplement a chapter from the textbook, *Talk A Lot: Book One*. The main objectives of the project were to increase communicative competence among students

and to give them motivation to use the materials and theory presented in the textbook in ways which would promote self-learning, self-confidence and peer solidarity. An additional goal was to encourage a move toward student-centered learning, whereby students were given more of an opportunity to use the language and skills they had acquired, on their own terms.

Keywords: task-based learning, project-based learning, theme-based instruction, content-based instruction, folk-tales

1. Introduction

In recent years content-based learning has been in vogue at all levels, slowly replacing the traditional bottom-up approach to teaching, whereby students were expected to concentrate on grammatical and sentence structures. There are, however, still certain challenges such as striking the right balance between language-based learning and content, while providing students with ample opportunities to interpret and employ the content. Many texts are still simply not adequate enough, or fail to solve specific challenges of how to successfully present the material to students in ways which allow them to maximize the presented learning opportunity. Texts should be flexible enough to allow for a certain level of autonomy within the classroom, while encouraging students to think and act for themselves.

The paper will firstly present a short overview of the methodology of content-based learning and task-based learning, before moving onto the example of a practical supplementary lesson plan to a text-book in which students were assigned the Grimm Brothers' folk tale, "The Three Little Pigs" and asked to re-create the story. The reasons for choosing the "The Three Little Pigs" were threefold: It is a well known folktale, it is engaging and it incorporates the past-tense that was covered in the text-book chapter, as well as other repetitious patterns that are perfect for lower-intermediate/false beginner learners of English.

2. Background

Brinton, Snow and Wesche (1989) define three categories of content-based learning. In theme-based learning, the topics or themes form the background of the curriculum; in sheltered content learning, courses are taught in the second language to a segregated group of learners by a content area specialist; and in adjunct language learning students study both the language and content, concurrently, in two separate courses. Content-based learning differs from traditional language courses in that topics tend to be restricted to a single activity or reading or listening exercise. Stryker and Leaver (1997) also note that content-based learning further differs from traditional methods of instruction in that language proficiency is achieved by shifting the focus from learning the language itself to learning through the study of subject matter and that it promotes total integration of both the language and content.

In their model, Brinton, Snow and Wesche (1989) place theme-based learning at the bottom end of the scale, the content being nearer to what might be taught in a traditional language class, with sheltered learning somewhere in the middle, and adjunct at the higher end, aimed more at advanced learners. (See Figure 1)



Figure 1: A Content-based Continuum reproduced from Brinton, Snow and Wesche, 1989, p. 2

Content-based textbook courses aimed at the lower end of the English learning spectrum have become more popular at the tertiary level in recent years, and as Stryker and Leaver state, they “encourage the student to learn a new language by playing real pieces—actually using that language, as a real means of communication.” (1997). Furthermore, content-based teaching is especially suitable for facilitating the development of all four language skills while simultaneously focusing on the functional use of language in authentic settings (Stryker & Leaver, 1997). And although there has been much discussion regarding the instruction of grammar (especially in content-based learning), when dealing with grammar within the

context of understanding content, many of the original criticisms of grammatical syllabi are satisfied: students no longer deal with decontextualized sentences, or spend or waste time learning isolated rules that inhibit their spoken fluency. (Master, 2000, p94)

The Talk A Lot series takes a weak thematic-based approach to instruction with the theme itself composing each chapter, instead of being relegated to an add-on to the course, solely based upon the study of grammar or other language structure. However, although it loosely attempts to provide topics as well as the scaffolding to enable students to “play with the pieces”, it fails to adequately provide learners with enough fluency practice, and offers little or no chance at creativity or meaningful stimulus, which meant that in the context of the course, it had to be heavily supplemented.

3. Course Outline

The course consisted of ten classes of between 30–40 freshmen and was taught once a week for 90 minutes per class during the second semester of 2011 at Aichi University, Toyohashi Campus. The students were unstreamed. The text/lesson structure was exactly the same for all the classes.

The syllabus was introduced to students as comprising of a basic listening and speaking content-based course examining simple everyday situations, aiming to stimulate and increase their interest in English through the study of simple everyday topics, including discussion and group projects to supplement the main text. The course keeps within the bounds of thematic-based instruction as defined above, yet introduces a task-project-based component. Although content-based learning should be a standard component of discourse-learning instruction courses, without a heavy emphasis on task-based learning (Stryker and Leaver, 2007), this course placed more or less equal emphasis on the tasks or projects to provide students with ample opportunity to actually process, practice and improve their language fluency, as well as to enable them freedom of creativity using the structures and techniques that were covered in the textbook.

Projects in the ESL Classroom

The aims of the course may also sound familiar to those of the school of task-based learning advocates who define task-based learning as activities in which learners might have to perform no instructional purposes as opportunities for language learning. Indeed, in the purist sense of task-based learning, language is not taught, but is learned as needed for the completion of the task (Stryker & Leaver, 1997). However, as Ellis (2003) illustrates, it is extremely difficult to define exactly what a task is. How does it differ from an “activity” or an “exercise” or a “drill”? He defines the critical features of a task as being a work plan for a learning activity and something that involves a primary focus on meaning; that is proficiency through communicating; a task involves real-world use of language, can involve any of the four language skills, engages cognitive processes, and has a clearly defined communicative outcome, that is non-linguistic based.

In the context of this course then, a task is defined as an activity that has a clear performance objective and focuses on meaningful exchange with the goal to reproduce some of the language and ideas that the students have gained within the theme. Thus, the attainment objectives are to develop effective speaking and listening skills through the study of various topical issues, based upon certain tasks. Gains in overall language proficiency are expected, along with higher levels of conversational skill.

The teaching methodology employed in the course relies heavily upon group work and establishing a trusting and cooperative relationship (Moss, 1998) in order to be successful. Furthermore, the course is also designed to stimulate learner motivation, self-confidence, and learner centeredness in which students are given more control over their learning and granted choice in defining the processes and characteristics and, as a result, hopefully the gap between teaching and learning can be narrowed (Stoller, 2006). What one could define as term project-based-task learning is therefore an activity based upon group work, whereby the students are given a project or task requiring several component tasks in order to be completed within an allotted time frame, with as much autonomy as possible.

For much of the course, the students worked in groups, even when they were not necessarily carrying out assigned supplementary task-projects, per se. With

students split into groups of four or five, based upon their own preferences, a group bond developed which they would be able to carry over to the later assigned projects. There is no doubt much debate on how to group students, but in this case, since they were mostly native Japanese freshmen students with similar levels of aptitude and proficiency, the organizational structure of the groups did not seem to affect the motivation of the individual members. However, special consideration might be given to certain types of classes, such as sophomore students or above, because students may already have certain circles of friends and placing them in groups not to their liking might thereby inhibit overall group performance. Additionally, similar consideration might also be given to classes of mixed ethnicities, because cultural and other sensitive issues could also affect overall group solidarity, thereby reducing the potential effectiveness of the task-project. Anecdotally, a co-teacher often runs a survey at the end of her courses. She nearly always asks if the students prefer groups being made randomly or if they prefer to make their own groups. A large number respond positively to random assignment, as they say they meet new people, and are more likely to use English, which is one of the purposes of the projects in the first place. (2012, Correspondence with Susan Sullivan).

4. Sample Lesson

Firstly, the term lesson here was used loosely and actually indicates several lessons of 90 minutes each. It is comprised of three parts: Part One covered the thematic material from the textbook, Part Two introduced the project, and in Part Three the students completed it. A Fourth and final part brought the class together to listen to each others' projects, as well as to provoke critical thinking skills through questions. (See Table 1)

Table 1: Lesson Plan

Part One	Textbook theme
Part Two	Project introduction
Part Three	Project recording
Part Four	Class Listening, questions

Projects in the ESL Classroom

In Part One, the students begin with Chapter 6 from the textbook. This opens with typical thematic approach: *Work with a partner and tell each other what you did last weekend. Try to talk for a few minutes.* In groups, after soliciting answers from the book, which included changing the tense from present to past, based upon a series of pictures, and a series of pronunciation drills, we did the “How was your vacation” exercise, which involved a basic task where students had to unscramble a conversation about vacations between two people, before practicing talking about their own vacations in the past tense.

The point is to get students thinking of the past-tense and to practice it. Here, if the instructor is astute, he or she will notice a few short-comings: The textbook necessitates supplementation due to its very nature: it is too short. It also fails to adequately provide learners with the opportunity to improve fluency, and remains a simple collection of loosely related topics, each focusing upon a particular grammatical point within the confines of the content, thereby being of rather limited value regarding student-centered learning/autonomy. It also fails to give the students a chance to increase their analytical or critical thinking skills; neither does it promote group or peer solidarity.

Part Two introduces the students to the project, which hopefully addresses some of the above issues, as well as giving the students a sense of success as they complete the given task.

The students in their groups had to create their own version of the Grimm Brothers’ “The Three Little Pigs”. As it shall become clear, even though the story may seem simple, it still incorporates certain repetition and includes enough “new” phrases to make it perfect for false beginners of English. This agrees with the model proposed by Stoller (2006), in which students are engaged in a complex set of manageable yet challenging tasks. More importantly, it is vital that each member of the group have the opportunity to contribute in a meaningful way. In the classes, since groups consisted of four or five members, each student takes up a role: either narrator, one of the three pigs, the wolf or the mother (if she is required). Stoller (2006) also stresses that in project-based teaching each member should be given the

opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the aims of the project and understand the roles they are supposed to play.

First, the instructor introduced the the story to the students beforehand, using a PowerPoint presentation in which the content was presented to the students in picture form. As each slide progressed, information was elicited from the students and some of the more difficult forms were outlined on the board, while they took notes. Figure 2 shows a few examples of the patterns that were discussed. Note that it was still necessary to go over getting the simple-past grammatical structures correct, yet the trick was to remind the students of the forms, without overly drilling them. Furthermore, it was an opportunity to point out potential errors and enforce upon them that such simple mistakes can detract from the flow of the story.

Vocabulary	Comments
Straw, sticks, bricks, wolf, chimney, cauldron	core vocabulary
Phrases/grammar	
The first little pig, the second little pig, the third little pig The big bad wolf vs a big bad wolf.	some common mistakes were: pig number 1, a second pig, pig three, etc. difference explained
“Let me in little pig, let me in”	meaning explained
... and he said, “I’ll huff and I’ll puff, and I’ll blow your house down”	common phrase
“No, No, not by the hair of my chinny chin, chin”	common phrase (difference also explained for plural patterns for two or more pigs)
The wolf climbed down the chimney	emphasis: how to use and position chimney.
And he fell into the boiling cauldron.	emphasis on falling into the cauldron

Figure 2: Common Vocabulary, Phrases and Patterns in “The Three Little Pigs”

Projects in the ESL Classroom

With students now having a basic framework from which to work, they were told to use their notes to write their stories (no downloading versions from the Internet) and then record them, with one major difference: Each group would add their own unique ending—the purpose being to give students the opportunity to insert their own creativity into the stories, as well to provide them with a challenge, and to make it more interesting to write, recite, and listen for all concerned.

The students (in their groups) came to the next class at assigned times to record their stories onto the instructor's iPhone. The instructor was not present when the recording took place, in order to make the students feel relaxed. Instructions were of course provided on how to actually record/save their data and there were no problems. Each group had 15 minutes to record their story which was to be 5–6 minutes long (they were told this in advance). The reasoning behind this was that if students did make a mistake in recording, they could have a second chance. In fact, what happened was that a few groups even recorded their stories twice, informing the instructor which one they thought was more suitable.

Along with the instruction that they modify the ending, the only other instructions they were given was that each member of the group had to speak. Of course, even though the narrator's job could be thought as being the most important and some might say that the overall outcome of the story will depend on the performance of the student assigned that role, it should also be stressed that it is a team effort and that the other characters all play vital roles toward making the overall story a success. Students should be reminded of this beforehand and each member should feel they are contributing positively to the project.

Here it is important to note that this task-project does take a few classes to allow students to adequately prepare, and some teachers may be uncomfortable with allocating precious class time to do this. However, to the contrary, if one desires results, it is imperative to allow students plenty of time in and out of the class to prepare, and studies do confirm that providing adequate time to rehearse leads to more accuracy in grammatical output, greater fluency and complexity (Ellis, 2003).

In the final class (Part 4) the entire class listened to each group's stories and answered two simple questions:

- 1) Which story was the best? Why?
- 2) Which stories ending did you like best? Why?

Students enviably chose stories that were clear, followed instructions, and that incorporated the correct use of the past-tense. The overall standard of the stories was extremely high, with few noticeable tense errors, which shows that given a particular project to do, as long as the students are given adequate time to prepare and have a systematic framework from which to prepare, that outstanding results are often possible.

5. Evaluation

Evaluation of the task was carried out according to the rubric in Figure 3.

Category	Aims	Score (1=low; 5=high)	%
Fluency and pronunciation	-Speech/hesitancy of speech -comprehensibility of pronunciation	1 2 3 4 5	20%
Content	-how well the story followed the original -the changed ending	1 2 3 4 5	40%
Grammar & vocabulary (Particularly past-tense)	-precision and accuracy	1 2 3 4 5	40%

Figure 3: Evaluation Rubric¹

¹ Since this project was based upon having students try to successfully render a version of “The Three Little Pigs”, which, in turn, was based upon successfully using the past-tense as we practiced in the textbook, the grade was slightly weighted toward the the correct form. Also note that since this was a group project, marks were given for the group as a whole, and not for individual performances, although if there was one or two outstanding performances within the group, that students' grade was marked up with a ‘plus’ to reflect the extra effort.

6. Conclusion

Content-based teaching, and indeed, thematic based learning, toward the lower end of the level spectrum need not focus too much on grammatical expressions or pronunciation in order for students to get the most out of a particular theme. Within the classroom it is entirely possible, provided one introduces the right framework, to have students imitate successfully the techniques that were covered within a particular chapter of the text and to apply and adapt them successfully in the implementation of a task-based project. *Talk A lot: Book One*, through several fundamental flaws, such as a lack of scaffolding, being too short and vague, provides the ideal opportunity for teachers to successfully implement task-projects for students. However, these task-projects need not be based strictly upon task-based learning models but rather, can be based upon the material covered previously within the contextual framework of the textbook, which can provide the students with the initiative to actually use and implement the language and concepts in meaningful, interesting, and creative ways, such as outlined in the “The Three Little Pigs” task-project.

References

- Brinton, D. M., Snow, M. N., & Wesche, M. B. (1989). *Content-based Second Language Instruction*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle
- Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based Language Learning and Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Master, P. (2002). Grammar in Content-Based Instruction. In Kasper, L. F. (ed.), *Content-based college ESL instruction* (pp. 93–107). Philadelphia: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates
- Moss, D. (1998). *Project-Based Learning for Adult English Language Learners*. Retrieved May 19, 2009, from Center for Adult English Language Acquisition (CAELA)
- Stryker, S. B. & Leaver, B. L. (eds.) (1997). *Content-based Instruction in Foreign Language Education*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press
- Rivers, W. (1992). *Teaching Languages in College*, Illinois: National Textbook Company
- Stoller, F. (2006). Establishing a Theoretical Foundation for Project-based Learning in Second and Foreign Language Contexts in Gulbahar H. B. & Miller, P. H. (eds). *Project-based second and foreign language education: past, present and future*. (p. 19–41) North Carolina: Information Age Publishing
- Willis, J. (1998). *Task-based Learning: What Kind of Adventure?* Retrieved December, 2012 from The Language Teacher (JALT) Web Site: <http://www.jalt-publications.org/tlt/files/98/jul/willis.html>