Language input through Project-Based Learning: Why and How

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Overview

**Why**
- Mismatches between practice and theory in ELT
- Project-Based Learning: an alternative

**How**
- Language input within a Project-Based Syllabus
- Devising projects for specific contexts
- Conclusions
Common features of an ESOL Programme

- Pre-determined syllabus
- Materials are decided in advance (coursebook, teaching pack etc.)
- Linear, lock-step approach
- Language is broken down and presented item by item
- Pre-selected lesson aims, decided by the teacher
- Neutral, uncontroversial topics
Assumptions underlying these features

- Pre-determined syllabus content
- Materials are decided in advance (coursebook, teaching pack etc.)
- Linear, lock-step approach
- Language is broken down and presented item by item
- Pre-selected lesson aims, decided by the teacher
- Neutral, uncontroversial topics

- Content is best selected by the institution
- Students learn what we teach them, when we teach it
- Once students have acquired a piece of language, they don’t need to study it again
- The teacher dictates what the students learn
- Lack of controversy is engaging and motivating
However...
Some quotes about language learning

“Content selection…[involves]…making explicit the content objectives of a course and, eventually,…training learners to set their own objectives”.

Some quotes about language learning

“Of the scores of detailed studies of naturalistic and classroom language learning reported over the last thirty years, none suggest…that presentation of discrete points of grammar one at a time…bears any resemblance except an accidental one to either the order or the manner in which naturalistic or classroom acquirers learn those items.”

Some quotes about language learning

“Learning linguistic items is not a linear process – learners do not master one item and then move on to another.”

Some quotes about language learning

“Spending twenty minutes on presenting and practising one single structure to perfection is likely to benefit only the very few learners who happen to be ready to use it. Some may know it already and it might be beyond the grasp of the rest. For these students, such practice is largely a waste of time.”

Some quotes about language learning

“A learner’s mastery of a particular language item is unstable, appearing to increase and decrease at different times during the learning process.”

Some quotes about language learning

“…classroom events incorporate not one lesson, but many lessons – one which the teacher plans and administers, and one for each student taking part. The significance of [this] is that the teacher’s and students’ lessons are inevitably different, and are very likely to be in conflict. The students want one thing out of the classroom process, and the teacher something else.”

Some quotes about language learning

“Economies of scale mean that most coursebooks published in the UK are rolled out across the globe with all the grim determination and air-brushed anonymity of a new Mariah Carey album. If you've ever wondered why coursebooks can seem so anodyne, it's because they are designed to be.”

We try to teach like this...

http://humboldtsentinel.com/2012/01/20/weekly-roundup-for-january-20-2012/
...when learning is actually like this.

Principles that **should** be informing our practice

- Students acquire language when they are ready to acquire it, not when the teacher decides to teach it.
- Different students learn different language within the same lesson. And that’s OK.
- Students are more likely to acquire language when they need to use it.
- Learning experiences are more motivating if they are authentic and meaningful for students. This includes topics that challenge beliefs and perceptions.
- Any overt language focus is more likely to be effective if it ties in with the learner’s own individual “learning agenda”.
Project-Based Learning: An Alternative

“Project-based learning is a dynamic classroom approach in which students actively explore real-world problems and challenges and acquire a deeper knowledge.”

Edutopia Website, available from: [http://www.edutopia.org/project-based-learning](http://www.edutopia.org/project-based-learning) [last accessed 21/05/16]
Key Drivers in Scottish FE

- Accredited Qualifications
- Democratic Voice
- Curriculum for Excellence
- Employability
- EDI
- Environment and sustainability
- Citizenship
- Learner Input
Content for a Project-Based Syllabus

Project Topics
- Citizenship Topics
- Health & Wellbeing
- Employability
- Equality, Diversity & Inclusion
- Environment and Sustainability

Accredited Qualifications
- ESOL
- ICT
- Working With Others
- Problem Solving
- Event Organisation
- Local Investigations
- Preparing to Work
- Researching and preparing presentations

Learner Input
- Democratic Voice
- Effective Contributors
- Responsible Citizens
- Confident Individuals
- Successful Learners
Some of our projects

“Plan and organise an event that will benefit other college students or potential students.

Event Organisation Level 5
Some of our projects

“Research two different types of education and present your ideas in a PowerPoint document.”

ICT Level 3
Some of our projects

“Identify an aspect of your health or well-being that you want to improve. Plan and organise a way of doing this.”

Problem Solving Level 3
Some of our projects

“Complete an activity to help you learn more about Scottish culture.”

Working With Others Level 2
Other Achievements: 2015-16

- International food-tasting day
- College open day
- Various booklets and brochures (tips for living in Scotland, learning strategies etc.)
- Presentations on local places of interest
- Various fundraising activities (over £1500 raised)
- Employability portfolios
- Study trips and in-class events
That’s all very nice…

Image taken by @ShellTerrell from http://flickr.com/elpics, used under a CC Attribution Non-Commercial license, http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/
...but when does the actual language teaching happen?

Principles in practice

- Students acquire language when they are ready to acquire it, not when the teacher decides to teach it.

- Different students learn different language within the same lesson. And that’s OK.

- Students are more likely to acquire language when they need to use it.

- Learning experiences are more motivating if they are authentic and meaningful for students.

- Any overt language focus is more likely to be effective if it ties in with the learner’s own individual “learning agenda”.
Pre-task: Language Selection

Select
• Teacher identifies language that students are likely to need.

Plan
• Teacher plans lessons that focus on these areas of language.

Practice
• Students use language to complete tasks.
Mid-task: Language Feed

- Set tasks that lead towards project completion.
- Monitor carefully as students work on tasks.
- Feed language to individual students as required.
Post-task: “NU Language”

**Identify**
- Students identify NU language used in task completion

**Preflect**
- Students identify authentic scenarios where they will use this language

**Use**
- Students use NU language outside the classroom
Group task

Consider the context provided and do the following:

1. Identify some real-world tasks that the students need to be able to perform successfully.

2. Identify language and skills that the students would benefit from knowing in order to complete these tasks.

3. Identify a single project that entails:
   - the completion of (some of) the tasks.
   - the use of (some of) the language and skills that you have identified.
Project-Based Learning: Scenario A

You are working with a large group of part-time adult students from various countries, studying at Elementary level. They are mostly asylum-seekers and refugees and none of them have jobs. Their priorities at the moment are to deal with home office and/or jobcentre bureaucracy, as well as to cope with the challenges of everyday life in Scotland. A key outcome of their course is the attainment of National 2 ESOL units, which require students to demonstrate their language skills by performing everyday tasks.
Project-Based Learning: Scenario B

You are working on a full-time Intermediate-level course that is attended mostly by European students aged between 25 and 40. Most of them work in low-income jobs but many have post-secondary qualifications and professional work experience from their own countries. Most aspire to finding jobs that more closely match their previous training and experience. Your responsibility is to deliver an SQA unit called Working With Others, which requires students to demonstrate their team-working skills in the planning, delivery and evaluation of some kind of activity.
Project-Based Learning: Scenario C

You are delivering a community-based course to a mixed-level group of 6 female students from Pakistan, India and Iran. They have all been in Scotland for at least 10 years but, for most of them, attending this course is a rare opportunity to practise English as they tend to stay within their own cultural group. Some have little or no literacy in their first language. While none of them have previous work experience, the possibility of pursuing a career is starting to appeal, now that their children are growing up.
Project-Based Learning: Scenario D

You are teaching on a short intensive programme for a group of Italian teenagers aged between 16 and 18. They are in Scotland for 4 weeks and are mostly at Upper-Intermediate level, though their speaking and listening skills are considerably lower than their reading and writing. As well as developing their English, there is an expectation that the students will learn about Scottish culture and customs. Most of these students are preparing for university, where English is a mandatory component of many courses.
You are delivering a short course entitled “ESOL for Employability” to a group of jobseekers from various countries and of varying ages. They are roughly Pre-Intermediate level though their profiles are quite jagged. The main focus of the course is to develop employability skills, though the students are also interested in interacting with Scottish people. They have said they find the Scottish accent particularly hard to understand.
Project-Based Learning: Scenario F

You are working with a group of low intermediate level students from diverse backgrounds, mostly from the Middle East and China. They are studying English in order to get access to various courses at university, so they will benefit from any language and skills that are used in academic contexts. While most have reasonably good IT skills, they are unfamiliar with the importance of avoiding plagiarism when conducting research and presenting findings.
Conclusions

- Language learners are motivated by non-language focused tasks.

- Project-Based Learning doesn’t (and shouldn’t) mean that there is no overt language focus.

- Students value opportunities to follow their own individual language learning agendas.

- Unlike other approaches to language teaching, PBL is congruent with widely accepted views of language acquisition.
Questions?

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