Reflective Writing Through Project Based Learning

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Abstract

Although project based learning（PBL）has been successfully introduced in the wider filed of education, little is known about how language learners perceive and learn through the method, particularly to teach writing. This paper reports on a project-based college English writing course carried out experimentally with first-year business students at a private university in Japan. Based on learner-produced reflective writing samples, their understanding of the course as well as its actual impact on language learning were examined. Results indicated that gradually learners seemed to produce meaningful interactions as well as opportunities to develop life-long skills throughout the course. Also, it supports the idea that topic familiarity of learners is important when implementing PBL. Lastly, learners' attention shift from their attitude towards English to the use of English implies some positive impact of PBL in a language course. Considering the study's limitation, further improvements in the study of a PBL-driven language course are suggested.

Keywords

project based learning (PBL), reflective writing, English as a foreign language, Asia, topic familiarity

I. Introduction

A traditional way of teaching writing in an English as a foreign language course often relies upon and uses available published textbooks or workbooks. With systematically structured exercises accompanied with ready-to-go supplemental materials such as audio, video, and online exercise, the use of such books in a pure writing course will be undoubtfully successful. Nevertheless, in our changing world, the main objective of language education is not just solely attaining such general English language abilities. Rather, the objective should be cultivating more life-long learning skills or raising awareness toward using English as a vehicle.

Although alternative learning methods such as project based learning（PBL）have been introduced in the field of education as a whole, little is known about how language learners perceive such untraditional methods, as well as how they conceptualize the process of learning English （Grant, 2017; Ueda, 2016; Widodo, 2016）. In addition, little research has been undertaken to

investigate the potential benefits of PBL to teach writing. To fill these gaps, the following questions guide this exploratory study:

  1.   What are common characteristics in learners reflective writing in the PBL course?

  2.   Do learners ever pay attention to English learning in the PBL course?

These research questions aim to capture both language learners' understanding of the PBL course as well as its actual impact on language learning. This study can hopefully contribute to a better understanding of how PBL as instructional mediation helps language learners learn both English writing and life-long skills that are necessary to succeed in this changing world.

II. Project Based Learning (PBL) as a Tool for Learning English / Writing

Since the 1980s, project-based learning (PBL) has been integrated into second and foreign language instruction and studies around the world successfully (Ke, 2010). Some studies mention that PBL provides meaningful language interactions as well as opportunities to develop a range of life-long skills (Grant, 2017). Shahron (2008) also reported that developing communication competencies in a PBL course is key to the higher satisfaction and productivity within a course. In other words, for a PBL-driven language course to be successful, the consideration of developing communication skills is essential.

However, Grant (2017) also reported that PBL projects can sometimes encounter difficulties such as discrepancies between teacher and student perception potentially derived from the lack of language structure in the course, students without prior PBL experience, or the lack of access to authentic English sources. Thus, it is worth considering such factors when implementing PBL projects.

Implementation of PBL in Writing Course

Although limited, there are studies that have attempted to understand the effectiveness of PBL in an English writing course. Based on a student questionnaire and teacher reflection, Grant (2017) explored the implementation and student perception of a PBL project within an English for Academic Purpose (EAP) writing course in Macau. His findings indicated that the PBL course created opportunities for meaningful interactive language use, a comfortable and autonomous learning environment, and higher motivation among the students.

Moreover, realizing the importance of the reflective phase within a PBL course, Ueda (2016) investigated the content of students' individual reflective writing in terms of its characteristics and its potential impact within a PBL course. The researcher posited that there are four types of characteristics in student reflection: reporting, interpreting, planning, and applying. The report suggested that it is necessary for instructors to give specific guidance on reflection for

quality reflection. Ueda further noted that reflection on application, which is a form of higher-order thinking, tended to appear during a presentation phase in the PBL course.

Ke (2010) introduced primary characteristics of project works by Stroller (1997) as a guide to implement PBL in one's context:

> [f] irst, project work focuses on content learning through language learning. Second, it is student-centered with the teacher playing a role in offering support and guidance throughout the process. Third, it is cooperative rather than competitive; students can work on their own, in small groups, or as a class to compete a project. Fourth, it leads to the authentic integration of skills and processing of information from varied sources, mirroring real-life tasks. Fifth, it culminates in an end product that can be shared with others. Finally, it is potentially motivating, stimulating, empowering, and challenging; students can build up confidence, self-esteem, and autonomy as well as improve their language skills, content learning, and cognitive abilities (p.100).

Based on those findings, the current study attempted to examine learners' reflective writing in a PBL-driven writing course for freshmen at a private university in Japan. The PBL course was part of a pilot study conducted within the faculty for the first time in 2019. On principle, the course attempted as much as possible to follow Stroller's (1997) guidelines listed above.

Background of the Pilot PBL Course Design

In order to evaluate and improve an existing English curriculum, surveys were distributed to both low-intermediate freshmen majoring in business and their English teachers during the fall semester of 2017. In an effort to consider real voices of non-language professors in the business department and Career Center staff into this project, two focus group interviews were also conducted at the same time. Based on the findings, two types of college English courses were created for piloting: a presentation course and a project-based learning course. The unifying goal of these two courses was to teach skills and content that could be transferable to students' future careers. Namely, other language-related skills such as writing skills were considered a by-product of the courses. As this is a rather untraditional language learning concept for most freshmen in Japan, it was vital to investigate how the approach was perceived and conceptualized by the learners.

III. Methodology

In the spring of 2019, this 14-week PBL-driven writing course was piloted in a randomly assigned

writing course for first-year university students at a private university in Japan. The participants in this study were 24 students placed in one of the lowest proficiency levels: their level was A1 on CEFR-J and they scored below 300 on the TOEIC Listening & Reading Test prior to taking the course. All participants belonged to the Faculty of Business Administration. Although the course was compulsory for freshmen along with the other three main English language competencies (reading, speaking, and listening), the syllabi as well as the materials of those courses are selected by the instructor.

In this PBL course, students went through a project lifecycle in addition to two orientation days as follows: 1) Overview, 2) Research and Idea Generation, 3) Develop a Plan, 4) Develop a Product, 5) Evaluate a Product, and 6) Review and Evaluate a Project. Based on this core cycle, they explored two projects in the spring semester: 1) How can you introduce our university and surrounding areas to students at the partner university in the United States? and 2) How can you introduce the faculty of business administration and university life to high school students overseas?

Data were collected both digitally and physically through their weekly reflective timed free-writing assignments given at the end of the class. Due to the nature of the lesson, only 10 writing assignments were given and collected during the 14-week semester. There were two types of assignments: General Reflective Tasks and Mid-Term or Final-Term Evaluation Tasks as follows:

General Reflective Tasks

Description: 5 minutes were given for students to write reflectively in English. For brainstorming, students in groups worked on a KPT board (a reflection tool). The original prompts were: "What have you learned?", "What have you thought about?", and "What have you questioned about?". However, as the term progressed, such scaffolding was removed, and the prompt simply asked students to write what they learned as they were verbally asked to give reasons and/or examples to support their ideas. For example, a common prompt was: *For 5 minutes, referring to your KPT board, type up anything into the Learning Log. (K) What we should keep doing. (P) Where we are having ongoing problems. (T) What we want to try in the next time period.*

Mid-Term or Final-Term Evaluation Tasks

Description: As part of assessing their culminative writing skills, 10 minutes were given to answer guided questions along with a self-check list. Examples are shown below.

Guided Questions

1. What do you want to keep doing in the next project?

2. What do you think were your common problems?

3. What do you want to try in the next project?

4. What did you learn from Project One?

5. Do you have any questions or comments about this class?

Self-Check List

1. Did you include a space between words?

2. Did you put a comma at the end of each sentence?

3. Did you answer all the questions?

4. Did you give a reason when necessary?

5. Did you give an example when necessary?

6. Did you write as much as you can in the time allotted?

As the latter task limited what students could write, only eight weekly writing samples were used for this study. However, due to students' absence, as well as occasional system or student errors when saving documents, not all documents were valid for the analysis. Thus, only the readable 133 entries were used for the analysis.

Among the valid entries, the number of sentences divided by a period were counted among valid entries. Then, the number of topics mentioned in those sentences were counted. Replicating Ueda (2016)'s study, the thematic analysis was conducted among the emergent topics. These topics were then sorted into one of five categories: 1) Remarks on Working with Others, 2) Remarks on Skills Being Learned, 3) Topic-Related Remarks, 4) Remarks on English Learning, and 5) Other Private Remarks. Criteria for each category were as follows:

1) Remarks on Working with Others

Description: Any remarks that talk about teamwork and how to communicate with others including one's attitude towards communication.

Example: "*Today, I learned it is important to cooperate in a group.*"

2) Remarks on Skills Being Learned

Description: Any remarks that specify the skills needed to succeed in projects such as problem-solving skills, discussion skills, collaboration skills, and task execution skills.

Example: "*I want to be able to decide on my role a little more.*"

3) Topic-Related Remarks

Description: Any remarks that are related to the specific topic or contents being learned in the lesson.

Example: "*I learned how to make video. I want to take a good video.*"

4) Remarks on English Learning

Description: Any remarks that talk about one's English including attitudes or opinions towards English.

Example: "*I try to study English well. I think English is difficult, but I understand English more and more.*"

5) Other Private Remarks

Description: Any remarks that talk about one's tardiness or personal wishes for the future lessons

Example: "*I was sleepy couldn't concentrate. GW end oh my god.*" ("GW" is an abbreviation for the golden week holidays in Japan.)

All the entries were then counted and categorized and counted by week and the corresponding lesson. As the number of entries vary, the average entry per week was also shown (Table 1).

IV. Results

Table 1

The Number of Topics by Category and Week

	Lesson Topic	Entry	Topics Found	Ave Topic	1	2	3	4	5
1	Introduction to Team Building	16	24	1.5	12	11	0	6	1
2	Project One Overview	15	44	2.9	12	22	5	2	0
3	Research & Idea Generation	13	55	4.2	23	5	13	8	5
4	Develop Product	21	83	4.0	32	22	7	11	8
5	Finalize Product	13	54	4.2	14	18	6	8	11
6	Project Two Overview	16	61	3.8	11	14	18	12	16
7	Research & Idea Generation	21	70	3.3	33	8	22	2	4
8	Develop Product	18	66	3.7	9	12	34	3	6
Total		133	457	(3.4)	146	112	105	52	51
%					31	24	23	11	11
Ave					18.2	14	13.1	6.5	6.4

Ave, average

Most Common Characteristics among Referred Topics in Order

Out of 457 topics categorized, about 31% (146 entries) belong to Category 1 (Remarks on Working with Others). The second most frequent topics were Category 2 (Remarks on Skills Being Learned) with about 24% (112 entries) followed by Category 3 (Topic-Related Remarks) with about 23% (105 entries). With about 11% (52 entries) and 11% (51 entries), Category 4 (Remarks on English Learning) and Category 5 (Other Private Remarks) ranked next, respectively.

Increase in Topics

The average number of topics found increased from the first introductory lesson's 1.5 to up to 4.2 in the following lessons. Although the average number stayed more than 3.0 after the highest peak in the first project, it did not keep increasing after the second project was introduced.

In the first two lessons, most entries referred to Category 1 (Remarks on Working with Others) or 2 (Remarks on Skills Being Learned). Nevertheless, as the semester progressed, the entries started to spread and were found more in other Categories 3 (Topic-Related Remarks), 4 (Remarks on English learning), and 5 (Other Private Remarks) particularly Category 3.

V. Discussion

Common Characteristics in Learners Reflective Writing in a PBL Course

This exploratory study attempted to understand the effectiveness of a PBL-driven writing course from language learners' perspective. The results showed that most commonly mentioned topic (Remarks on Working with Others) was about their struggle or adjustment in learning how to collaborate or work with others. This finding echoes the suggestion by previous studies (Grant, 2017; Shahron, 2008). At the start of the semester, there were more remarks on the importance of teamwork or an approach to others such as, "I want to speak more actively/positively." Towards the end of the semester, however, there were more positively framed remarks such as, "We discussed together as a team." This finding is parallel to Grant's (2017) in that this course seemed to produce interactions as well as opportunities for students to develop such life-long and transferable skills.

Similarly, the second most common topic (Remarks on Skills Being Learned) at the beginning were about descriptive remarks on basic project management skills such as, "I learned how to solve a problem." and "I want to express my ideas more." Towards the end, however, more objective remarks were mentioned such as, "Our leader is learning to communicate now." and "I want to play my role." This finding is similar to what Ueda (2016) found in his study. In other words, it takes time and practice for learners to get accustomed to a new learning method if they did not have prior PBL experience, which accords with another finding by Grant (2017). Also, it is important for teachers to know that learners pay more attentions towards making their mental

learning environment comfortable than getting projects done. Namely, in order for productive learning to occur in PBL classrooms, teachers should first allot plenty of time for developing communication competencies to work with others (Shahron, 2008).

The Potential Impact of PBL Activities on Learning

At the beginning, learners were able to pay attention mainly on what they actually did or description of what they did ("I think a lot."), but towards the end, they were able to criticize ("I got in trouble because I did not know the purpose of the interview.) or set their own goals ("Next, I will get necessary information for the video."). In a sense, we could say that experience or practice of PBL-based activities is imperative for their engagement in deeper learning.

Also, the fact that learners produced more remarks on Category 3 (Topic-Related Remarks) towards the end of the semester may indicate the importance of setting up appropriate lesson themes in a course design. It is therefore recommended to consider topic familiarity of learners when selecting themes during course design and sequencing them thoughtfully instead of placing them at a particular time in the semester for the sake of the content or convenience for the instructor. The natural order of learning, known to unknown, should always be prioritized over other content considerations.

Learning English through PBL

With the introduction of various writing tasks such as free-writing or timed-writing into teaching English as a second or foreign language curricula, traditional focus on strictly form-focused writing tasks has shifted its attention to content-focused and process-focused writing (Leblanc & Fujieda, 2012).

This study adopted such a trend and focuses on deciphering language learners' perception reflected in a timed, free-writing task with Japanese learners of English. As shown in Table 1, writing samples from 3 to 6 had a higher number of remarks on English learning than others. The common three types of remarks were: positive ones ("I like English."), negative ones ("English is difficult."), and neutral ones ("I used English a lot."). Based on these remarks, it is difficult to surmise how they actually learned to write in this PBL-driven writing course. Nevertheless, the fact that learners were able to talk about the content or skills being learned rather than focusing on their attitude towards English implies how this PBL-driven course shifted language learners' attention from their attitude towards English to the use of English.

VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, teaching English writing through PBL brings about lots of challenges as it is a holistic

teaching method that requires various skills more than general language abilities. It demands that students become accustomed to working in a group, sharing ideas or roles, and learning about contents, for example. As a language educator, many would wonder what is more essential to focus on while teaching – those life long, transferable skills or language skills. Yet, we could also imagine how our future generation would interact with English in this globalizing world. That is to say, language educators should consciously teach both skills and language as they are integrated in the real world.

Although this study is exploratory and limited in terms of its sample size and context, it signals several opportunities for further research. Further research calls for investigating more about the instructional balance between skills and language in PBL language classrooms. Also, material development and sharing among language educators should be promoted for more case studies. Finally, the effectiveness of a PBL-driven language course can be understood by more studies concerning communicative competencies, learners' prior PBL experience, topic familiarity, project types, project tools, and other confounding variables.

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