

## *Practice Report*

# **Project-Based Learning in Practice: Student Organization of and Participation in an Academic Conference**

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In the last four decades, there has been a major pedagogical shift in both regular academic classes and language classes away from traditional teacher-centered approaches to a learner-centered, collaborative, and communicative approach (CA) to teaching. Part of this shift includes approaches that engage learners in real world activities or simulations of real world situations, such as Project-Based Learning (PJBL or PBL) and Tasked-Based Learning (TBL) / Tasked Based Language Teaching (TBLT). Hetty Roessighn and Wendy Chambers (2011) argue that a Project-Based Learning approach has “the potential to motivate and engage learners in tasks that support deep learning” (63). In contrast to more traditional approaches, they see PJBL as “valu[ing] inquiry, reflection, negotiation of meaning, case and problem-based learning (PJBL), discussion and collaboration, and self-directed learning” (60).

Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) shares some of the same principles as PJBL, but is more specifically applied to language teaching. The meaning of the term “task” is widely debated in this approach. Rod Ellis (2003) distinguishes two types of tasks: “meaning-focused” (participant acts as language user) and “form-focused” (participant acts as language learner) (3). David Nunan (2004) suggests a Tasked Based Approach (TBLT) to teaching in ESL and EFL classrooms. TBLT emphasizes pedagogical activities (inside the classroom) and target tasks (outside the classroom) as central to learning language. The pedagogical approaches above share some of the principals of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which is commonplace in TESL and TEFL classes. CLT focuses on “communicative competence” or knowing how to use language and maintain communication in various settings and purposes, as well as being able to produce a variety of texts (Richards 3). These approaches all argue for instructors to facilitate learning, while students are expected to take more responsibility for their own learning (student-centered or autonomous learning). A project-based or task-based approach in the classroom allows for the teaching of the four core English skills as well as the acquisition of specific content and skills.

This article reflects on a project-based learning approach<sup>1</sup> for a third-year Professional

English class in the major of British and American Studies at Chukyo University. The objectives of the course are two-fold: 1. Prepare second language learners for the workforce by introducing them to professional skills, and familiarizing them with professional language 2. Familiarize students with language skills used in Academic English classes. The class centered on a long-term project over the 15 weeks of the course that could incorporate both objectives: planning and hosting an actual Academic Conference. Five of the six students previously completed two years of language training in World Languages English program and one student was enrolled in a Global Language Studies major. The class met twice a week for 90 minutes. In addition to organizing and holding the conference, all of the students in the class prepared presentations for the conference, along with four students from a third-year seminar class in Canadian Literary and Cultural Studies.

### **Class Activity 1: Academic Presentation**

Firstly, the class project was introduced to the students, and it was explained that one class meeting per week would be devoted to the creation of an academic presentation while the other would be devoted to the planning of the conference. As the principals of Project Based Learning articulate, the learning objectives — to acquire and deepen their understanding as use of academic language and skills, and give them professional skills and language for the workforce — were shared with the students (Roessingh and Chambers 44).

The initial class was also devoted to a discussion of students' experiences with academic writing and presentations, as well as a discussion of their research interests. As mentioned above, all students came to the class with some experience in English for Academic Purposes (EAP), and thus preparation for the academic presentation included both traditional teacher-led activities, as well as “scaffolded” instruction (lending instruction when needed and encouraging student autonomy by building on their individual learning experiences). Students were free to choose research topic areas that reflected their own interests. Throughout the course, students were encouraged to discuss their research with each other, as well as any problems they were encountering. Students also practiced their presentations and received feedback from the instructor and students. Pedagogical tasks involved in creating the academic presentation included topic exploration, research, note-taking, organization, script writing, slide-making, presentation skills, and discussion of academic register and language. Students were also given instruction (including models) on how to write a short academic bios and an abstracts of their presentations for the conference.

## **Class Activity 2: Organization of an Academic Conference**

All students in the class were enrolled in seminars in their respective majors, and several students expressed interest in continuing their studies at the graduate level. Thus, all had some familiarity with an academic environment, academic language, and academic research, and the project was deemed appropriate for the students' level and relevant to their needs. Moreover, as was discussed with students, organizational skills and the ability to collaborate with peers are important skills for the professional world.

### **Materials**

An effort was made to use “authentic materials” (real-world sources of information) rather than those created for second-language learners. As Nunan argues, by using authentic materials “learners encounter target language items in the kinds of contexts in which they naturally occur, rather than in contexts that have been concocted by a textbook writer.” Various other scholars have noted the benefits in using authentic materials, including their naturalness, their importance in contextualizing language learning, and their ability to increase student motivation. Authentic materials can be many things, from brochures to YouTube videos. In the case of the project done in the professional English class, online print and graphic design materials from actual academic conferences were used.

### **Creating a Conference Committee**

Firstly, students were introduced to the academic conference and its importance in graduate studies, and its relevance to professional academic life. It was explained that conferences are often organized by universities, and that students and professional academics present at conferences to get feedback from their peers, to gain experience, to meet others in the same field, and to advance their careers. It was explained to the students that to create a conference, they would need to create an organizing committee that would work together to make decisions and execute plans.

Looking at authentic texts, students examined the individual roles and responsibilities that make up organizing committees both for business meetings and conference committees. It was agreed that four roles would be needed for the conference committee: a facilitator/leader or chair, a scribe or minute taker, a timekeeper, and a participant (s). It was explained that each week, students would hold a meeting, and that each would perform one of the roles (with three students taking the role of participant). Each student would assume a different role each week.

The chair of the meeting reviewed the decisions of the last meeting, asked for updates on previous meetings tasks, discussed current tasks that needed to be dealt with, assigned tasks to all members, and brought the meeting to a close. The scribe took minutes and, at the end of the meeting, sent the notes to all members by email. The timekeeper made sure the meeting allowed time for discussion and tasks. The participants asked questions and discussed actions that needed to be taken. During the weeks leading to the conference event, the organizing committee discussed/proposed what needed to be done, created a task list, and each week tried to accomplish these tasks. The meetings were held entirely in English.

Nunan differentiates between pedagogical tasks (in class) and target tasks (outside). However, some of the tasks done in preparation for the academic conference could be seen as hybrid (real-world tasks performed in class). Two tasks performed by the students within their organizing committee that I will call “hybrid tasks” are emailing and poster creation.

## **Hybrid Tasks**

### *Poster Creation*

To promote the academic conference, the student organizing committee had to first decide on a date, time, and place for the conference, and create two posters: a “Call for Papers” poster and a conference poster that included the names of guest lecturers and conference participants. After looking at several authentic examples of conference posters, the group was divided into two, and two different posters were created. Later, students and the instructor viewed both posters critically and decided on the best. Necessary changes were made to the poster that were chosen, and these were sent to conference participants.

### *Emailing*

Most of the students were unfamiliar with writing emails in English and with the basic functions of email. After a discussion of the importance of using a polite, professional register, an explanation of using the subject heading effectively and the “cc and bcc” function, along with several examples of how to start and end an email, students were required to write contact emails to two professors asking if they would be interested in being guest lectures for the conference. Several follow-up emails were also written. Students also emailed students in another class asking for the submission of abstracts and follow-up emails with details about the conference. Posters were also sent to student participants and guest speakers.

## **Target Tasks (Outside the classroom)**

### *Preparations for the Event*

After the student organization discussed and made decisions about what items were needed for the academic conference and decided on a budget, two students were asked to purchase the items needed, acquire receipts, and report to the organizing committee about what they had bought. They then wrote up a summary and shared it with the committee. Students also discussed where the event would take place and looked at several rooms in the school building to decide which would be the most appropriate. They then had to reserve the room with the office staff.

### *During the Event*

All students gave presentations at the academic conference, but they also had other responsibilities (target tasks). Two students were chosen to chair the two sessions (on two different days). They had to introduce the guest speakers with a short biography and introduce each presentation. They also had to field questions from the audience and end the sessions by thanking the guests and participants. Two students were tasked with summarizing each presentation and posing questions. Two students were tasked with greeting guests and participants, handing out name tags, making sure guests had water, setting up a sanitizing station, operating the sound and screen machinery, and cleaning microphones.

## **Outcomes and Evaluations**

### *Students*

Overall satisfaction with the academic conference project and the tasks within the classroom was positive. Students were able to organize an academic conference that closely followed an actual academic conference format and performed tasks and roles that would be done at a real conference. Working in a group allowed them to discuss problems, listen to the input of others, and make group decisions. They worked together and supported each other at the event as well. Although no survey data on how students felt about the conference project were collected, the students were very enthusiastic during the conference event, and most seemed to enjoy it. Students were asked to create a Conference Report, which acted as a summary of what they had done, and an assessment of the conference and their participation. Some students wrote that they enjoyed the project experience, indicating that it would be of use in the future. Others wrote that they worked well organizing the event in their group and performed their roles during the event successfully. Several students re-

marked that they found it a challenge to perform their roles, such as remembering what they needed to say. Students identified some problems with the conference, such as not managing the timing of the presentations well and presentations going over time. They also noted that some students were not well prepared for their roles. Several students commented on their own presentations at the conference. One student felt she prepared well for her presentation, but due to nerves, lost her focus. However, she felt she had learned from the experience.

### *Instructor*

In PJBL, completion of the project weighs heavily in assessment of the students. In this context, while the various tasks that led to the Academic conference resulted in the conference success, there were various issues in the class that should be addressed. The academic conference organized by the students succeeded in closely realizing an authentic conference. Most students performed their roles well, although at least two seemed unprepared. The majority of the students performed their roles at the conference with enthusiasm. However, during the 15 week period, a drop in enthusiasm for the project arose resulting in frustration for the instructor. Student lateness and absences made group work and completion of tasks difficult, and the instructor felt it necessary at times to take some control from the group to ensure that tasks were accomplished in a timely manner. Two students were consistently absent towards the later part of the course, and thus these students were the least prepared for the academic conference event. Students seemed to be more motivated with short-term tasks. However, it is possible that since they had never experienced an actual academic conference, they could not imagine how the preparation tasks they undertook related to the final conference event.

The assessment of the academic conference project in the Professional English class, seems consistent with the experiences of others instructors following a PJBL approach in second language classrooms. As noted by Gulbahar H. Beckett (2002), there is a paucity of research on how teachers and students view PBL and TBL in language classrooms. However, he cites several systematic research studies that focus on teacher and student evaluations of project based learning. These studies show both teacher and student experiences of PBL to be mixed. Two teachers were pleased with student creativity and unexpected outcomes, such as students' ability to identify their own strengths and weaknesses. However, some teachers felt that while some students embraced PBL, others seemed disinterested and even antagonistic to the class project. The teacher felt compelled to return to more traditional instruction when interest in the project waned, resulting in increased student lateness and absences. Student evaluation of PBL is also mixed. One study indicated that students felt that they improved their overall language skills and enjoyed the independence and interaction with other students. Students who evaluated their PBL experience negatively complained

that projects were too long, or too much work. Other studies have also indicated that students prefer traditional approaches, such as lectures and grammar lessons. Beckett offers that these discrepancies in teacher and student experiences with PBL could be explained by differences in learning culture (North American students may be used to “student centered approaches, while students in Asian countries may have more experience with teacher-centered approach”). Or it could simply be that students’ mixed feelings, as Beckett notes, are due to the fact “that project work, like everyday life, is complex and full of dilemmas.”

Project-Based Based Learning (PJBL) and Tasked-Based Learning (TBL) have great potential for the classroom. Both are flexible enough to be used at any level of teaching. Tasks and projects can be done in one class session, or a class project can done over the course of a semester. PJB and TBL ideally use authentic materials and allow students to encounter authentic language in context as a means to help transition students from the classroom to language use in the real world. A classroom project or task can motivate because students can see real outcomes. An email exchange in the target language, for example, allows the student to see that they are able to successfully convey meaning in the target language. However, PJBL and TBL can be difficult to apply within educational cultures that emphasize more traditional approaches. Students may not understand the value of a task or project in learning language and may struggle with taking responsibility for their own learning. As such, an awareness by the instructor of the educational experiences of students when choosing a PJBL or TBL learning approach in the classroom is necessary, and explicit discussions with students of the merits of the approach and its impact on their language acquisition needs to included when choosing these approaches.

## NOTES

1 This article uses the terms “project-based” and “tasked-based” learning to explain the approach taken in the Professional English class being examined. However, some of the activities might overlap with CLT (Communication Based Teaching) and ESP (English for Specific Purposes).

## References

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