

10 Enhancing students' potential: EBL projects in language teaching

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Abstract

This paper outlines the rationale behind L2 process writing and Enquiry-Based Learning (EBL) approaches adopted in order to design a course within a modern language degree to bridge the gap between language and culture elements of the programme. This was achieved by creating an environment that replicates that of a researcher and by placing feedback and student enquiry at the centre of the language classroom. The approach adopted allows students to engage with techniques of critical thinking and analysis that foster deep-level learning and encourage transferable skills that develop professional skills and increase employability.

Keywords: Enquiry-Based Learning, EBL, process writing, L2 writing, L2 pedagogy.

1. Introduction

Individual learner identity and the creation of an L2-self are fundamental to successful language acquisition in modern foreign languages degree programmes, enhancing intrinsic and extrinsic motivation towards the language. However, opportunities for genuine self-expression on a topic of personal interest in L2 teaching are rare.

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All too often, students reach university with a grade-centred attitude to learning that gives a central role to that all important percentage mark at the end of the course. This attitude inhibits the role of experiential learning, enquiry, self-assessment and reflection on the part of the learner.

Feedback at a formative stage that enables the students to re-engage with their work before the final submission is fundamental in shifting this grade-oriented attitude. To achieve a balance between formative and summative feedback, I created a learning environment that encourages students to reflect on their learning and engage with what they have achieved in order to improve. Through reflecting on research in language pedagogy and my own teaching practice, I adopted a process-driven EBL approach with an emphasis on feedback.

This paper discusses the pedagogical foundations I adopted to implement a communicative language course centred on the writing of individual extended L2 essays and outlines some of the outcomes.

2. Process writing in language teaching

In many language courses, writing is frequently relegated to a homework activity and is used as a form of consolidation of learning grammatical structures or vocabulary. Though this focus on sentence-level correction is useful in terms of allowing the teacher to diagnose problem areas, relegating writing skills to this position raises several issues. Firstly, the written product focuses on sentence-level accuracy rather than composition and communication. Secondly, students are not presented with a communicative purpose for writing. A process approach aims to address these issues. By bringing the process of composition into the classroom through discussion and collaborative learning, and by setting activities with a genuine readership in mind, writing becomes an integral part of a communicative language-learning environment (Hedge, 1988; Klapper, 2006). By teaching writing as a skill in itself, students are able to develop transferable skills and learning strategies that they can apply to other academic disciplines and to professional situations. Hedge (1988) emphasized the importance of

effective, reader-based writing as a core language skill – it requires “a high degree of organization in the development of ideas and information; a high degree of accuracy so that there is no ambiguity of meaning; the use of complex grammatical devices for focus and emphasis; and a careful choice of vocabulary, grammatical patterns, and sentence structures to create a style which is appropriate to the subject matter and the eventual readers” (Hedge, 1988, p. 5).

The process writing approach also encourages students to develop independent learning strategies, as its underlying principle is that students “work out their own solutions to the problems they set themselves” (White & Arndt, 1991, p. 5). White and Arndt (1991) detail the interrelated stages of the approach, such as generating ideas, evaluating, drafting, structuring, focusing, and reviewing. Students work collaboratively through each stage with an emphasis on reflecting on their own work and re-editing and redrafting before reaching the final version.

Process-writing projects can be introduced to language classrooms by presenting students with realistic scenarios or tasks; the facilitator then assists the collaborative generation of ideas and provides guidance as necessary throughout the process with feedback at various draft stages. The students are central to the learning process, whether the outcomes are assessed individually or as a group.

The benefits of a process approach to writing are not just based in language skills. Students further develop collaborative and teamwork skills by working together to generate ideas; these skills are transferable to other disciplines and to professional environments. Students develop the skills in a realistic context with a sense of writing for a purpose and for a specific readership which in turn encourages them to develop a sense of responsibility towards their final draft.

3. Enquiry-based learning

The methodological approaches informing EBL are very similar to, and indeed overlap significantly with, problem-based learning approaches. Both approaches

have their origins in professional training and are frequently employed in scientific disciplines. The semantic difference with EBL is the focus on enquiry rather than problem solving. EBL does not assume that there is one best way to approach a scenario – in fact, a good way to describe an EBL approach to teaching is that it mimics approaches undertaken in research. As with process writing, the emphasis is placed on collaborative learning and the generation of ideas, focusing on heuristic techniques to stimulate research and debate. Both approaches also focus on self-assessment and evaluation with different sources of feedback throughout the sequence. The key element of communality within the approaches is that the process by which the end product is created is as important as the end product itself.

4. Feedback and assessment

In combining the similar approaches offered by process writing and EBL, I felt it was crucial to create continuity with the forms of assessment. I therefore devised a formative feedback system that would allow students to receive feedback from peers and from the facilitator at regular intervals throughout the project and think critically and reflectively on their work using a self-assessment sheet. Students were asked to self- and peer-assess regularly as an intrinsic element of the class time. Students were formatively assessed on their written production – abstracts, overviews, posters and reviews – and oral production – poster presentations, conference papers and debates. The self-assessment elements enabled students to think about their language accuracy and also their clarity, structure, coherence, and delivery. The peer-assessment encouraged students to develop a genuine sense of readership/audience as they were out of the comfort zone of writing exclusively and privately for the marker. As a result, students tended to put greater emphasis on reader/audience knowledge because they were writing for a genuine purpose, creating reader-appropriate texts, and took greater care in terms of accuracy, syntax, and coherence. Students developed their skills as critical and independent thinkers in their analyses of each other's work and team-building skills when providing constructive and meaningful feedback to peers. The formative facilitator assessment, focused on constructive guidance

with an indication of performance but no percentage mark, again simulated the professional environment.

5. Language acquisition and language pedagogy

A project-based course provides the students with a realistic scenario for writing and gives the students a genuine sense of readership. The importance of setting tasks which are, or are similar to, authentic uses of writing for communication is a crucially important factor in this approach. Students feel that they are writing for a reason and not just to prove to their teacher that they have understood a particular part of the course or a particular grammar point. When going through the planning stages, students are encouraged to consider their readership, the culture, age, interest and knowledge the readership may have of the issues and therefore to consider the appropriate style, register, lexical range and complexity of the written work. The use of the combination of approaches I have adopted creates a non-linear strategy in which each student/author is responsible for reflecting on her/his own work and redrafting and reorganising as s/he thinks appropriate. This idea of returning to one's own work is essential as it helps instil in the students a sense of pride in their work. Word and sentence level language skills are not minimised but are crucial to successful written communication, and, at the same time, these skills are contextualised within a realistic scenario, thus preparing students for writing in the Target Language (TL) outside the academic environment. This approach assists students in establishing an L2 identity and style that is distinct from their L1 identity. It can also address issues of writer-anxiety by giving students the opportunity to experiment with text creation in the TL. As students experiment with and begin to create their L2 literary identity from within the safety of a system that provides feedback and guidance at formative stages, the barriers of apprehension and anxiety that may be present in a composition-based task, regardless of language, break down. Students therefore gain confidence and mastery of self-expression, analysis and research within the L2 writing process, and by experimenting with a variety of literary voices, the students arrive at an outcome that greatly exceeds the aims of the project; the creation of their L2 self. Furthermore, this approach,

which mirrors the process of research, with a focus on self-reflection, feedback, dissemination, and redrafting, enables students to locate the skills they gain on this extended writing project within a wider context of transferable, professional, and research skills. Through TL independent writing, critical analysis, and reflection, skills that are both desirable and relevant to communicating in the workplace, students are better equipped to interact using their language skills in professional environments by increasing self-assurance in both spoken and written communication.

6. Outcomes

The case study of this approach with Year 2 Advanced language learners (ten students), was implemented with a two hour fortnightly session over the 22 teaching weeks. The summative outcome was the submission of a 2,000-word independent research project in L2 and an oral examination in the form of a conference presentation of the research. Students agreed to be interviewed to provide qualitative data for the case study.

By analysing student responses together with their performance over the course of the module, I identified key factors in the success of this model. These factors were: student involvement in the learning process; language skill development; collaborative learning; transferable and professional skills' development perceived by the students; sense of personal achievement; and shifts in self-image and self-belief. I wanted to bring together the notion of 'threshold concepts' (Meyer & Land, 2003), with the shifts in self-perception and learner-identity described in Dornyei (2005). Threshold concepts lead to an irreversible shift in thinking. These concepts are transformative; students' perception of their subject is changed. A similar transformative shift is perceptible when students move from considering themselves as learners, to a concept of themselves as language practitioners able to interact proficiently with L1 speakers. The methodological approaches I adopted to create this experimental project were intended to challenge students' perceptions of language learning and avoid surface learning approaches (Ramsden, 2003).

The freedom of choice and methodology within the project allowed students to challenge themselves in different ways. The ‘threshold concepts’ elicited by the project have been individual rather than discipline-specific thresholds. The student-driven content of the project gave students the opportunity to challenge their prior knowledge and previous ideas about their own capacities and abilities. This transformative effect, though different in each student, empowered the students to grow and change their sense of identity and self-belief not just within the confines of language learning but on a wider, cognitive scale. It gave them the space to develop from L2 learners to L2 users and thinkers, confident to express themselves in a wide range of verbal and written contexts, and thus enhanced their preparedness for professional environments.

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