Project-based Learning (PBL) Assessment for EFL/ESL Instruction: The Philippine Experience and its Implications to Taiwan

Joseph Anthony Narciso Z. Tiangco
Cross-cultural Research and Development Center
Shu-Te University

Abstract

The paper argues that project-based learning (PBL) has important implications to EFL/ESL instruction in Taiwan. Learning the English language need not only focus on syntax accuracy and competence in communicative performance. More so, higher cognitive processing is equally important as reflected in problem-solving skills, creativity, and self-management. Developing the aforementioned skills can be undertaken through the integration of project-based learning with EFL/ESL instruction. Hence, corresponding assessment strategies need to be institutionalized in determining the extent to which students are able to exhibit the said skills that are not commonly associated to traditional English pedagogy in Taiwan. Drawing from experiences in ESL instruction in the Philippines, the paper argues that Taiwanese educational institutions that provide EFL/ESL instruction can benefit by re-directing the curriculum from the traditional emphasis on standardized language testing to approaches that attempt to evaluate skills such as creativity, problem-solving, self-management, and teamwork. The first part of the paper focuses on outlining the integration of PBL with EFL/ESL instruction. Within this context, a discussion on the Philippine experience is provided. The second part focuses on assessment strategies in evaluating higher-cognitive skills. Lastly, important implications to Taiwan are discussed to illustrate the importance of seeking assessment approaches other than the use of standardized language tests.

Introduction

What stands to be gained from the Philippine experience as far as English language learning is concerned? Addressing this question is provocatively important in Taiwan and other nations as well such as in Thailand, Korea, and Japan as the ravaging wave of English studies sweeps across Asia. Clearly, a
correlative relationship persists between Western globalization and the study of the English language (Toolan, 1999).

As the English fever is definitely evident in Taiwan (see Krashen, 2003), the effort to study English within the country is not free from lingering problems such as in the areas of curriculum development, instruction, and teacher competency (Oladejo, 2003), and issues in relation to the effects of English learning to self-identity (Tiangco, 2005). The paper argues that learning the English language need not only focus on syntax accuracy and competence in communicative performance. More so, higher cognitive processing is equally important as reflected in problem-solving skills, creativity, and self-management. Developing these skills can be achieved through the integration of Project-based Learning (PBL) as institutionalized in the EFL/ESL curriculum and actualized through teaching. Much can be shared based on the Philippine experience.

A Review of Related Literature

What is Project-based Learning?

PBL is an approach to instruction that shifts from traditional teaching practices characterized by short, isolated, and teacher-centered lessons. Instead, it emphasizes learning that can be derived from long-term activities, which are interdisciplinary, student-centered, and integrated with real world issues and practices (Solomon, 2003; Staff, 2001; Willie, 2001). Many of the skills learned through PBL are those desired by today's employers, including the ability to work well with others and handle interpersonal conflicts, make thoughtful decisions, practice initiative, and solve complex problems (Kloppenborg & Baucus, 2004).

Students are provided an interdisciplinary approach to learning and in the process made to develop several skills successively or at the same time as they work on a challenging project (Solomon, 2003).
Those who advocate for PBL do not necessarily assert that it is exclusively the most effective educational approach there is but Staff (2001) observes that it is a way to make students engaged in school work, cut absenteeism, boost cooperative learning skills, and improve test scores. The students were able to develop self-motivation, initiative, and teamwork. In the study of Brunetti, Petrell, and Sawada (2003), higher achievement awareness was evident among students in universities instituting PBL compared to those heavily entrenched in the practice of traditional teaching. The ability to exhibit creativity and analytical skills in solving problems were displayed by the students. The research of Kloppenborg and Baucus (2004) reports on the learning outcomes of students as manifested in their successful experiences gained in planning, managing, and accomplishing projects. Successful experiences include the ability to resolve conflicts through creative problem-solving approaches and the accomplishment of a project that made them more aware of real life problems and issues. Learning then was fruitful for the students involved and not just mere assimilation of content-based knowledge.
Whether Filipinos are aware of it or not, PBL has always been an integral component of the curriculum among educational institutions in the Philippines. Even as early as elementary, PBL is already consistently integrated across the curriculum. Therefore, the educational system at the very least aims to equip Filipinos with skills meant to prepare them for addressing real world concerns and even perhaps in making them desirable workers.

As far as English learning is concerned, projects have always had a significant role in the development of English as a second language among the Filipinos. Even in the early stages of schooling, students learning English are already exposed to creative projects such as performing a skit, classroom/stage drama production, group reading presentation, song writing and performance, mock/academic debate, writing a comic book, participation in a school newspaper club, teaching English to peers from less fortunate schools, etc. Filipino teachers have an array of projects that students have grown accustomed to through the years.

Interestingly, some would take notice of a Filipino’s peculiar English accent and even doubt the person’s English language ability given the penchant for gauging English proficiency through the use of standardized language tests and the knowledge that the use of such tests are not popular in the Philippines. Nevertheless, the Philippines take pride in Filipinos who had won English oratorical contests and debates in other countries such as Patricia Evangelista who earned the respect of the English-Speaking Union (ESU) in London for her piece, “Borderless World” (see http://www.inq7.net/nat/2004/may/23/nat_11-1.htm). Similarly, the Philippines has become a desirable place for outsourcing work coming from Europe and the United States because of the availability of inexpensive intellectual workers in the country. Industries involved are call centers, the preparation of medical transcriptions, accounting, project management, and editing and publishing (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Business_process_outsourcing_in_the_Philippines). In addition, there are more than 8 million Filipinos all over the world working as professionals and overseas contract workers.

The paper argues that Filipinos have become globally competitive not only because of their ability to use the English language; more importantly, it is largely due to their preparedness to immerse themselves in varying and often
difficult challenges and a similar preparedness in addressing real life issues and problems aided by their use of the English language as they cope with such challenges. Given all these, the influence of PBL in the educational system can be asserted as a factor contributing to the successful experiences of ‘Global Pinoys’.

**Re-thinking English Language Assessment: The PBL Approach**

In re-thinking the traditional English language assessment approaches that emphasizes standardized testing and even communicative competence, perhaps, it is about time to also consider skills such as creativity, problem-solving, teamwork, initiative, etc. as these can be cultivated through the application of PBL with EFL learning. In the first place, assessment largely hinges on what is perceived as most important in the curriculum. If the English language curriculum sees it fit to produce students who are good in taking tests or are able to cope with the test culture in Taiwan or the testing demands of the industrial and business sectors, then it is not surprising why standardized testing is deemed as of utmost importance even though communicate competence suffers in the process. On the other hand, if the curriculum sees it fit to produce Taiwanese students who are prepared to be globally competitive, then this curriculum should re-orient itself in emphasizing not only the communicative use of the language but a similar ability to think, solve-problems, and express one’s creativity as well using the English language as a means of being truly globally competitive. As mentioned before, an intricate relationship exists between Western globalization and English language learning. In a way, the English language curriculum should aim at equipping students to think global and prepare for challenges that arise due to the effects of globalization at a mass level. Assessment, thereon, follows.

**The Challenge for Assessment in Taiwan**

What then should be assessed? The paper argues that the proper integration of PBL with EFL acts as a stimulus and the assessment phase should focus on evaluating acts of creativity, problem-solving, self-management, and teamwork. Within this context is how the use of the English language is applied with accomplishing challenging projects meant to simulate real life/world issues and problems.
**Creativity.** Such acts can involve the ability to spontaneously express one’s ideas without reliance on rote memorization. It can also be an act of self-expression. This involves the free flow of ideas as evident in creative speeches, poetry writing, story telling, developing a home movie storyline, and the preparation of artistic materials for drama production sets, costume design, props, etc.

**Problem-solving.** Such acts involve the ability to exert patience and self-constraint when faced with a difficult or challenging experience. It can also reflect the ability to look and weigh options. It also involves making decisions and comparing scenarios or situations. Acts of resourcefulness are also good indicators of problem-solving skills and the ability to actually resolve the problem at hand.

**Self-management.** Such acts involve the ability to manage time and to always be appeasing to one’s self and others. It also involves the ability to manage stress by finding outlets for frustrations. Another good indicator of self-management is the ability to maintain grace under pressure.

**Teamwork.** Such acts involve the ability to work with a group. It involves being able to shift from leadership to follower roles with ease. It also involves the ability to handle group frustration and resolve interpersonal conflicts. The best indicator is the ability to motivate group members and feel comfortable in spite of individual differences.

Whether the actual assessment approach is quantitative or qualitative is not really important as long as there is a re-orientation in what is really being sought after in the assessment process. Therefore, English proficiency need not be limited to testing performance on the GEPT, LCCI, TOEIC, or TOEFL. It can be enriched by thinking in terms of, “what if a Taiwanese works in a multinational company?” and “what are the possible challenging scenarios that they can prepare for?” Within this context, the curriculum can focus on both English language use and in preparing for possible challenges meant to develop the students’ character. It can be argued that the Taiwanese should look at English language assessment within the broader spectrum of its relationship to preparing for globalization and global competitiveness. In other words, what should be assessed is how prepared and globally competitive are the Taiwanese alongside their use of the English language.
Conclusion: Lessons from the Philippine Experience

In conclusion, the Philippine experience teaches that there should be a clear vision in mind, an action implemented, and a means of assessing whether the output indeed reflects the vision. The Philippine vision is to produce globally competitive Filipinos who can uplift the current state of the economy. As argued, the PBL orientation of the educational system continuously prepares Filipinos to take up this vision. The dollar remittances of the 8 million Filipinos who work in different parts of the world provide enough evidence as to their significant contributions in uplifting the economy and perhaps proof of a certain degree of congruence between vision and realization.

Prior to assessment is the necessity of determining the end-goal of what the curriculum would like to achieve. Taiwan can do best by first and foremost determining what does it really like to achieve through its national English language vision and policies. Determining the vision for the near future shapes how the present begins. Possibly re-orienting the assessment approaches in Taiwan can bridge between the future and the present, the end with its beginning. PBL presents a viable approach that can largely influence the future of English language learning in Taiwan. Assessment will forever have its important place in determining whether this future can indeed be realized.

References:


