

# Content-based Instruction in the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language

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## Abstract

Content-based instruction has gained widespread popularity in second and foreign language teaching. However, despite its reported benefits, many English teachers do not fully exploit its content and language learning benefits. In addition, there are relatively few studies which provide a theoretical foundation for content-based instruction and offer practical suggestions for its integration in EFL settings.

This article aims to link theory to practice, and to help English teachers maximize the full potential of content-based instruction and project work. To accomplish this goal, we first present a short literature review on project-based instruction, followed by a summary of its benefits and the beneficial outcomes of using the World Wide Web to implement it. We then propose an eight-step process for the sequencing of project work. We finally showcase a real-world project designed for intermediate EFL students. The design and the activities suggested could easily be transferable to other settings.

**Keywords:** Content-based instruction, Project, World Wide Web

## 1. Introduction

Content-based instruction is becoming increasingly popular in general education as well as in second and foreign language teaching. It has a number of characteristics which make it particularly effective in language instruction. According to Stoller (1997), one of its most important benefits is that it lends itself to the natural teaching of the four language skills. For example, within content-based instruction students are required to read authentic reading materials, to interpret and evaluate the information contained in them, to cooperate, so that they can respond either orally or in writing. Such an approach also takes it for granted that writing follows from listening and reading and thus “requires students to synthesize facts and ideas from multiple sources as preparation for writing” (Stoller, 1997: 29). The findings of empirical research show that students find it easier to learn materials which are thematically organised (Singer, 1990), and that meaningful information, a principal feature of content-based instruction, can lead to deeper processing (Anderson, 1990). In addition, content-based classes usually stimulate students’ interest and engagement, leading to enhanced motivation.

The integration of project-based learning into second and foreign language instruction is considered a natural extension of content-based instruction. It originates from Dewey and Kilpatrick’s work (Beckett, 2006), and has

often been heralded as an effective approach that promotes student-centred learning (Hedge, 1993). At the core of project-based learning lies a “wholehearted purposeful activity on the part of the learner” (Beckett, 2006:3), as it involves students dealing with real-life problems and engaging in purposeful, real-world tasks and activities in authentic contexts (Dionne & Horth, 1994). The underpinning philosophy behind project-based learning can be found in the concept of “experiential learning”, which is based on the close relationship between experience and learning. Experiential learning refers to “the sense-making process of active engagement between the inner world of the person and the outer world of the environment” (Beard & Wilson, 2006:19). In experiential learning the learner’s active involvement is important and the point of departure for the learning experience is the learner’s personal experience. As a result, experiential learning has been described as “a rubric that conveniently captures the active, experiential nature of the process is ‘learning by doing’”, which contrasts with “a ‘transmission’ approach to education in which the learner acquires knowledge passively from the teacher” (Nunan, 2009:12).

Despite the reported benefits of content-based learning that incorporates project work, however, many English language teachers hesitate to exploit its content and language learning benefits. In addition, there is a lack of studies which not only provide teachers with a theoretical foundation for project-based learning in the context of content-based instruction, but also offer practical suggestions for integrating project-based learning into their own curricula.

This article is practical in nature. Its aim is to link theory to practice, and to help English teachers maximize the full potential of project work. To accomplish this goal, we begin with an explanation of the term “project-based instruction”, followed by a summary of the benefits of project work reported in the relevant literature and a synopsis of the beneficial outcomes of using the World Wide Web to implement project work. We then propose an eight step process, based on the process advocated by Alan & Stoller (2005). We finally showcase a real-world project designed for intermediate EFL students.

## 2. What is project-based instruction

Projects are “assignments that incorporate student input, with content deriving from real second language use through extensive contact with native speakers and texts, integrating language skills, and extending over several weeks or more” (Eyring, 1997). In the relevant literature a number of labels have been given to classroom approaches that make use of projects. For example, Papandreou (1994) uses the label “project-based approach”, while Fried-Booth (2002) and Phillips, Burwood & Dunford (1999) prefer the term “project work”. Whatever the term used, however, project-based learning has the following characteristics:

- It involves multi-skill activities focusing on topics or themes, rather than on specific language targets. While students focus on solving a problem or reaching a goal, they have ample opportunities to “recycle known language and skills in a relatively natural context” (Haines, 1989:1)
- It does not have specific language aims, but what is important is the route to achieving the end product, since this promotes the development of student confidence and independence (Fried-Booth, 2002)
- It is an activity that “involves a variety of individual or cooperative tasks such as developing a research plan and questions, and implementing the plan through empirical or document research that includes collecting, analyzing, and reporting data orally and/or in writing” (Beckett, 2002:54)
- It is an approach “in which learners investigate a question, solve a problem, plan an event, or develop a product” (Weinstein, 2006:161)
- It emphasises content over form, promotes individualisation of activities, incorporates student input in goal setting and evaluation, and groupwork (Eyring, 2001)

According to Stoller (2006), for effective project-based learning to take place, educators need to make sure that project-based learning has a process and product orientation, requires student involvement in topic selection in order to encourage active participation and a sense of ownership in the project, extends over a period of time, is structured in such a way that integration of skills is natural, makes students work both in groups and on their own, requires learners to assume responsibility for their own learning through the process of selecting, gathering, processing and reporting of information acquired from a number of sources (e.g. the World Wide Web, library), results in a tangible end product (e.g. a theatrical performance or multimedia presentation), and concludes with an evaluation of the process and the end product.

### 3. The benefits of project-based instruction

A number of benefits for project-based instruction are listed in the literature. A review of the general education literature reveals that most researchers argue that project-based instruction provides opportunities “for intrinsically motivating students to learn, fostering problem-solving and developing independent and cooperative working skills” (Beckett, 2002:54). Project-based instruction has often been associated with beneficial outcomes such as improved critical thinking skills and decision-making skills, and also helps students “take ownership of their own learning” (Ladewski, Krajcik & Harvey, 1994:499). Another frequently reported benefit of project-based learning is authenticity of experience and language (Carter & Thomas, 1986; Padgett, 1994), since when students participate in project work, they “partake in authentic tasks for authentic purposes-both conditions sadly absent from many language classrooms” (Stoller, 2006:24).

Project-based learning is also said to be an effective way to promote the acquisition of language, content and skills simultaneously (Beckett & Slater, 2005; Stoller, 1997), because it “establishes a direct link between language learning and its application” (Legutke & Thomas 1991: 214). Another reported benefit is that when students work in cooperative learning groups they have more opportunities to develop their confidence, self-esteem and independence (Fried-Booth, 2002), and as a result, practitioners often report that students demonstrate increased motivation and engagement, less foreign language anxiety and positive attitudes toward language learning (Slavin, 1995; Lee, 2002; Brophy, 2004; Fragoulis & Tsiplakides, 2009). A further benefit relates to students’ increased social, cooperative skills, enhanced autonomy, and group cohesiveness (Skehan, 1998). Moreover, project work encourages motivation, fosters group cohesiveness, increases expectancy of success in the target language, reduces language anxiety and generally achieves “a rare synthesis of academic and social goals” (Dornyei, 2001:100-101).

Finally, by integrating project work into content-based classrooms, educators create vibrant learning environments that require active student involvement, stimulate higher level thinking skills, and give students responsibility for their own learning (Stoller, 1997). When incorporating project work into content-based classrooms, instructors distance themselves from teacher-dominated instruction and move towards creating a student community of inquiry involving authentic communication, cooperative learning, collaboration, and problem-solving.

### 4. Beneficial outcomes of using the World Wide Web to implement project work

There are numerous practical features of the World Wide Web that make it an appealing tool in the design of project work, which is now an “established medium for language learning and instruction” (Susser & Robb, 2004:279). The World Wide Web, together with email, can “be used to access resources, they may also be used to enable communication between individuals and groups” (Levy, 1997:96). As a result, the World Wide Web constitutes a rich useful and inexhaustible source of authentic materials, which presupposes the ability to interpret and critically evaluate its contents (Levy & Stockwell, 2006).

Moreover, in the relevant literature it has been argued that authentic materials help students to develop problem-solving and critical thinking skills, which are very important, since they are life-long, transferable skills to settings outside the classroom (Allen, 2004). In addition, World Wide Web based materials constitute a versatile vehicle for purposeful communication, due to their ability to provide access and interaction with the world beyond the classroom, which can promote language use in a relatively natural context. Such materials also promote participation in meaningful activities which require authentic language use and can lead to improved language skills (Levine, 2004; Haines, 1989), increased motivation, linguistic development and cultural understanding (Taylor & Gitsaki, 2004). Meaningful authentic materials and activities have real-world relevance, provide the chance for students to examine the task from diverse points of view, enhance cooperation and reflection, and provide learners with “access to a whole wealth of cultural material which can stimulate learning” (Cameron, 1999:2).

Furthermore, the process of gathering information from the World Wide Web is a potentially motivating and challenging process, which can result in enhancing student confidence, self-esteem, autonomy and cognitive abilities (Stoller, 1997). Finally, materials found on the Web deal with real-world concerns, so they allow activities to mirror real life tasks, which can lead to authentic integration of skills and student-centred teaching.

### 5. Developing a project

We propose the following eight-step process, which constitutes an adapted version of the process advocated by Alan and Stoller (2005). The following steps constitute a practical guide for the sequencing of project activities which teachers can use to maximize the potential benefits of project work.

*Step 1: The students and the teacher agree on a theme for the project*

This stage includes choosing the project topic, generating interest and helping students develop a sense of commitment, responsibility and ownership towards the project. Topic is chosen after a conversation and negotiation between the teacher and the students.

*Step 2: The students and the teacher determine the final outcome of the project*

The students and the teacher determine a) the final outcome of the project (e.g. board display, brochure, newspaper, theatrical performance), and b) the audience for the project (e.g. classmates, parents, wider community).

*Step 3: The students and the teacher structure the project*

The students and the teacher agree on information that needs to be gathered, compiled and analyzed, ways and sources of data collection, student roles, and timing for the project.

*Step 4: The teacher prepares the students for the demands of the information gathering*

The teacher determines the language demands of the information gathering stage, and structures instruction activities to prepare students for the data gathering tasks and the presentation of the final outcome (step 7). If, for example, the students will write formal letters to the local authorities to gather information, the teacher prepares activities about the format and language of such letters.

*Step 5: The students gather information*

After having practised the language needed for gathering information, the students collect the information (e.g. using sources such as the World Wide Web or the school library).

*Step 6: The students compile and analyse the information*

The students work in groups, identifying and organising the useful information for the completion of the project.

*Step 7: The students present the final outcome*

The students present the final project outcome, on the basis of what has been decided in step 2.

*Step 8: The students evaluate the project*

The students reflect on the language and the subject matter acquired during the process, and make recommendations regarding future projects. The teacher provides students with feedback concerning language and content learning.

**6. A sample project***6.1 Participants*

In this paper we present a real-world project, designed for upper intermediate students. It is a month long semi-structured project, designed and organised by both the teacher and the students. After completion of the project the students will improve their language skills, will enhance their critical thinking and synthesis abilities, will be more confident in using the English language, and will develop their data collection skills.

*6.2 Goals of project work*

The overarching aim is to implement project work in order to make students aware of the geography of the area in which they live, and use it as a mechanism for cross-curricular work, making use of new technologies. The specific aims were:

*6.2.1 Cognitive aims*

- To acquaint students with environmental problems.
- To help students realize the significance of the historical and natural environment in relation to the sustainable development of the area.
- To improve students' reading, writing, listening, speaking, vocabulary skills, and communicative competence.

*6.2.2 Emotional aims*

- To sensitize students about the environmental problems of their wider area.
- To foster respect about the collaborative efforts of people who live in the specific geographical area.

### 6.2.3 Psychomotor aims

- To acquaint students with observation and research methods.
- To promote the development of curiosity and collaborative skills.

### 6.3 Sequence of project activities

Drawing on Allan and Stoller (2005), the following eight steps can be followed.

The first step includes choosing the topic of the project. The project topic is “Fish of the Mediterranean which are in danger of becoming extinct”, the details of which will be determined by both the teacher and the students, since it is a semi-structured project. To this end, the teacher designs a lesson in order to raise students’ awareness and to elicit students’ attitudes towards the topic. Choice of topic for the project will be based on the following criteria: a) the topic is part of the immediate students’ experiences, b) it is connected to their interests and needs, and c) it creates the conditions necessary for investigating, interpreting and critically analysing the issue.

The second step involves agreeing on the final outcomes. The results will be reported through an oral presentation, a letter aiming at convincing authorities to take the necessary measures for the protection of the environment, and creation of a brochure about the importance of protecting the Mediterranean and its ecosystem.

The third step involves structuring the project. As far as data collection is concerned, it will be gathered through the World Wide Web and the school library. In addition, interviews will be conducted with members of a local environmental group in order to gather information about: a) the current condition of the Mediterranean, b) fish that live in it and are in danger of extinction, c) how pollution and global warming affect the quality of the water and the animals living in it. Roles will be assigned on the basis of student interests and abilities. In relation to group formation, each group and group member will be given specific responsibilities, and each group will have a specific goal and motivation to work toward it. As far as teacher role is concerned, s/he will monitor the progress of groups at regular intervals, providing help and feedback if necessary.

During the fourth step the teacher prepares the students for the demands of the information gathering. More specifically, the teacher designs a lesson in which s/he trains students to conduct interviews (e.g. level of language formality), while mock interviews can be conducted. For students who will collect information on the World Wide Web the teacher can design a lesson to familiarise students with techniques of making use of reliable Web information sources.

In the fifth step the students engage in the gathering of information, as designed in the previous steps. The teacher monitors the students and is ready to provide help and feedback if necessary.

During step six the students compile and analyse the information. After data has been collected, the students discuss the value of the information collected, discard inappropriate information, and organise that which is important.

In step seven, the students present the final outcome through a bulletin board display and an open discussion. The final stage involves evaluation of the project. Evaluation will be expressed positively and not negatively, since the aim is to reflect on language and content mastered, effectiveness of steps and activities used (Fragoulis, 2008).

## 7. Conclusion

The main aim of this article is to contribute to the project-based learning literature, and more specifically to address the paucity of empirical studies which focus on language learning settings and link theory to practice. To this end, we have not only presented a theoretical background for the integration of project work in the teaching of English as a second or foreign language, but we have also showcased a real-world project. The basic features of the project we propose are transferable to other settings, so the project design and the activities suggested can be adapted by teachers in accordance with their teaching setting and the language needs of their students. The transferable features of project-based instruction which can lead to an effective approach of project-based learning and maximize its positive outcomes include, but are not limited to, the following (Stoller, 2006; Alan & Stoller, 2005):

- Projects should be devised taking into consideration the students’ interests, preferences and language needs.
- Students should be provided with real choices in relation to all aspects of the project (e.g. selection of the project theme, presentation of the final outcome, group responsibilities).
- Students should be engaged in a number of tasks which are challenging and give them the opportunity to practice language skills in a natural context.

- Students need to be provided with feedback, both while completing the project and at its conclusion.

We hope that the above will provoke teachers into a fruitful investigation of the potential of using projects with the use of the World Wide Web in language learning settings.

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