PROJECT-BASED LEARNING IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSES FOR KOREAN STUDENTS

Abstract

Korean students and Brazilian professors in a foreign language classroom are bound for many culture shocks as the learning cultures and teaching cultures of each country differ in their cores. Teachers expect students to assume a protagonist role in their learning process and students expect teachers to be the primary source of the knowledge they hope to obtain. As both agents of the teaching-learning situation believe their counterpart is at fault when not assuming a primary role, unmet expectations give room to frustration. To avoid students from drifting further apart in the necessary relationship with teachers, some strategies need to be developed. In this study, I found that assigning well planned and clarified projects with a preparation-presentation-debate structure helps bringing foreign teachers and Korean students classroom cultures to a gathering point where expectations can finally meet.

Keywords: Korean students, learning culture, teaching culture, project-based learning.

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INTRODUCTION

Previous researchers have stated that Korean students have a tendency to be quiet and passive in the classroom [1, 2], and this is considered to be a positive trait for many East Asian students [2]. In Korea, students are accustomed to teacher-centered classes and assume a passive recipient role during lessons [3]. For foreign language teachers, this is often a challenge, especially when it comes to speaking activities and oral proficiency assessment.

That is the case for Brazilian language teachers working in South Korea. From language institute training workshops to university courses in Brazil, and other South American countries, teachers are often encouraged to conduct student-centered classes, as Baghin-Spinelli [4] and Torres [5] stated. Avoiding unnecessary interventions is also important, as excessive teacher interference during classroom activities undermines students’ protagonism in their learning process.

The Brazilian language teachers usually expect students to engage and assume a primary role in their learning process. On the other hand, Korean students expect teachers to provide knowledge and tell them what they are supposed to memorize for the exams because they are used to learning by listening, reading, observing and imitating [3]. When two different agents of the teaching-learning situation expect their counterpart to take the primary role, frustration can build up very easily on both sides.

Since the Brazilian teaching culture and the Korean learning culture differ in a profound manner, this work aims to demonstrate how projects can be a tool for teachers and students to meet their expectations.

PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

Project-based learning (PBL), according to Moss and Van Duzen [6], is an instructional approach in which students are given problems to solve or products to develop. A panoramic work on PBL was done by Krajick and Blumenfeld [7], and the authors cite Dewey’s work as one of the most important for the development of PBL approach. Dewey studied action, interaction and experiences in the classroom [8] and found that students benefit from activities that emulate real-world situations.

In this study, projects are classroom activities based on PBL approach with the objective of emulating a Portuguese language immersion context for Korean students. While projects in this study are based on the principles of the PBL approach, PBL was not the predominant approach for the language course. That means projects were not the only work students were graded for, other assessment methods were also used, such as oral exams and written exams, for instance.

In well-planned projects, students are given a clear objective to achieve, a standard structure to develop and clear criteria based on which they will be assessed. Projects have proven, in this study, to meet both teachers’ and students’ expectations.

On the teacher’s side, projects like selling a travel package, enrolling in political elections or interviewing someone for a talk-show, lead the student to engage in the learning process. Additionally, there is spontaneity and real-world emulation, so the teacher can assess more accurately if the students are indeed acquiring the desired level of proficiency.

On the students’ side, they will be given an opportunity to express themselves in the target-language without focusing solely on given grammar structures and yet they have a comfortable amount of instructions to follow. In this study, it was found that the instructions I gave and the structure I
These projects were developed based on Dewey’s views on experiences and actions in the classroom and its applications to foreign language teaching [8]. Thus, memorization was kept to a minimum in these exercises, since it contradicts the very point of a conversation class. Also, it creates an over-simulated environment that would be too far from a real-world emulation idealized by Dewey [7].

Results

In both projects, during students’ presentations, their focus was on providing their peers with the information in a clear manner to achieve the task objective. That significantly diminished excessive attention to grammar structures and allowed the teacher to better diagnose students’ mistakes and prepare a review lesson to help them overcome these mistakes. It also gave them the opportunity to practice many structures they had learned but not often found the chance to use in a conversation.

At the end of each presentation, there was a debate in which all students were required to ask questions to the presenter about the topic they had just been exposed to. That helped engage the whole group in the activity.

Asking questions was part of the project’s requirements and students were graded for asking questions to their peers. For this reason, the debate was not seen so much as a disrespectful behavior as it normally would among Korean classmates. Cho and Torres expose how Korean students may see questions in the classroom as disrespect [3], [5]. So, at the debate stage, repeated clarification was needed for students not to feel offended. That is because, despite being knowingly very respectful, Korean students are normally highly competitive and could possibly misinterpret each other’s questions. Because students who presented the project had already done considerable research on their topic, they were usually keen to show that they knew the answer to the questions asked by other students, so they replied confidently.

In the final exam, the first questions were inquiries about the project. I asked them what they thought was positive and negative about the experience and which project they felt more engaged with and why. From their responses, I found that giving them choices (date of presentation, topic, group) before the projects showed them that I respected their opinions. Consequently, they stated that they felt more comfortable to express themselves to me and to others whenever I asked them questions during lessons, debates and even the final oral exam.

Specifically about which project they believed was more successful, eight out of ten students replied that they preferred the Project 2. Some of them said it was because they enjoyed doing research about something they were more intimate with and were interested in, which was Korean society an culture.

One of the students said he preferred Project 2 because he did not have to work with a peer, and his answer concur with Torres’s findings [5]. Another student said she did not like Project 1 because she did not want to travel to Brazil, so “there was no point in doing it”, which shows that students need to relate and interact with what they are learning [7].

A Korean student who had studied abroad most of his life said he preferred Project 2 because he could “do whatever I wanted” and that he appreciated having autonomy to study in the university environment. Knowing that he studied in different South American countries during most of his primary school education, his response shows an interesting contrast between his mindset and his classmates’.
The three students who preferred Project 1 demonstrate that teachers need to take the diversity of students’ learning cultures and styles into account when planning activities for an apparently homogeneous group.

**Conclusion**

Developing projects was a bridge between my Korean students and me, their Brazilian professor, because we could explore aspects of both my teaching culture and students’ learning culture. During preparation, students had the opportunity of writing and memorizing some information, which in part kept them in their comfort zone regarding their learning culture. It also helped minimize their fear of making mistakes, which is a known issue to Torres and Cho [3, 5].

Projects were found on this study to be an effective way for students to be empowered by the opportunity of making choices and to perceive their progress in the language more genuinely. That is because they need to use various structures and vocabulary, often in an unplanned manner. Students are given an objective which is not purely language related and, by thinking about how to accomplish their task, their attention is shifted from drilling and memorizing a specific structure or a vocabulary list to the context in which they need these language resources for.

There are a few key aspects for a teacher to keep in mind when assigning and conducting a project in the classroom.

Choosing a comfortable and familiar topic to students’ reality helps motivate students to complete the given task and engage in the debate. It is also a powerful tool to promote critical thinking.

Furthermore, minimizing teacher intervention during presentation and debate also helps empowering students at the latter stage of the activity, however mediation is necessary to avoid conflict and animosity. In addition, teacher’s provocative short questions, when carefully formulated to not make students uncomfortable, are very effective in upholding the discussion during the debate.

As a language teacher for ten years now, I believe the debate is the high point of this project due to its necessary spontaneity. Students need to produce unplanned sentences when answering unpredicted questions about the work they developed.

This study also concluded that literature review of work done by other foreign [1], [5] and Korean professors [3] about Korean students’ behavior is very helpful for teachers to prepare themselves to develop projects in their classrooms. Nevertheless, attention should always be paid to the fast and constant changes in Korean society and Korean students’ diversity of experiences.

**Список литературы / References**


**Список литературы на английском / References in English**