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**Internet-based Projects for Language Learning –
A Student-Centered Approach**

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Abstract

This article presents a student-centered approach of teaching English by making use of internet based projects. Whereas many educators enthusiastically embrace the use of Internet-based reading materials, little theoretical and empirical research exists that demonstrates how to make use of such practices in a sound pedagogical way. This article provides guidance to teachers and curriculum developers to integrating Internet-based reading materials into a language learning class. Based on concrete sample lessons, this article also describes the strengths of this approach from a pedagogical, technological and designer's point of view.

Introduction

Learner-determined lessons follow an approach to integrate Internet-based resources that are entirely learner-centered. As seen from the examples in the section below titled **Samples of Learner-Determined Projects**, the learners determine the topics, reading materials, and the way they go about exploring the readings themselves. They decide on the process and the product, formulate the goals, identify Internet-based resources, and make a decision on how the outcomes should be evaluated. In this way, the students take on the roles of self-directed and autonomous learners, and take full charge and responsibility for their outcomes.

The teacher only gets involved in the role of a facilitator offering support and guidance throughout the process as much as necessary. Types of assessment may include teacher-, self-, or group-assessment.

Assessment of learner outcomes may be teacher-directed or student-determined. Examples are short writing assignments, essays, or mini-projects or presentations that show the students' analytical and interpretative skills of cultural readings and texts. Students may also document the process and stages of their projects through diaries or maintaining a portfolio.

Some Pre-requisites

Learner-determined projects are better done only where good to excellent connectivity is available. Perseverance and motivation are very important both for the students and teachers. As most of these projects may involve only writing as of now, focus is on reading and writing, and broader skills of communication through these two skills. So, it is necessary that the teachers continue to emphasize and get their students involved in face-to-face interaction in their

classrooms. Along with the skills relating to the use of computers and the Internet, quick referencing skill to use a dictionary, especially to identify the correct grammatical usage of the term/s and phrases must also be developed. Perhaps, as high speed internet is available, students may be first introduced to the sites that offer dictionary meanings for terms, phrases, idioms, etc. For example, a website such as www.dictionary.com would help in this regard. I'd also suggest that websites that deal with grammatical usage also be introduced to the students as help with their learner-centered learning of English.

I do recognize that these facilities are not readily available in most schools in India, but there are many schools in metropolitan cities of India which do have these facilities. In addition, the engineering colleges that have sprung up all over the country would greatly benefit by this approach as their connectivity is much better, comparatively speaking. I'd also highly commend this approach to the students of medical colleges as well in India.

The Internet-based Projects of Learning

Internet-based projects can be carried out intensively over a short period of time or extended over a few weeks. Generally speaking, this approach of integrating Internet-based materials lends itself to long-term assignments with intermediate and advanced language learners in the target language.

This approach is based on the theory of project-based learning. Its benefits have been described at various places. For example, Stoller (1997) summarizes some of the pedagogical advantages in the following way:

- 1) Project work focuses on content learning rather than on specific language targets. Real-world subject matter and topics of interest to students can become central to projects.
- 2) Project work is student-centered, though the teacher plays a major role in offering support and guidance throughout the process.
- 3) Project work is cooperative rather than competitive. Students can work on their own, in small groups, or as a class to complete a project, sharing resources, ideas, and expertise along the way.
- 4) Project work leads to the authentic integration of skills and processing of information from varied sources, mirroring real-life tasks.
- 5) Project work culminates in an end product (e.g., an oral presentation, a poster session, a bulletin board display, a report, or a stage performance) that can be shared with others, giving the project a real purpose. The value of the project, however, lies not just in the final product but also in the process of working towards the end point. Thus, project work has both a process and product orientation, and provides students with opportunities to focus on fluency and accuracy at different project-work stages.

6) Project work is potentially motivating, stimulating, empowering, and challenging. It usually results in building student confidence, self-esteem, and autonomy as well as improving students' language skills, content learning, and cognitive abilities.

Project-oriented Work

Project-oriented work embraces principles of learning that are promoted by various theories, approaches, and philosophies of learning. For example, project learning is in accordance with the principles of communicative language learning (Omaggio-Hadley, 2001).

Students apply their knowledge in real-life situations by exploring authentic materials. The learning activities resemble real-world tasks. The students strive for an end product, whose goal they accomplish by collaborating with their peers in order to ultimately share what they have achieved with others.

Project-oriented work also lies at the heart of autonomy in language learning. As Holec (1981) claims, autonomy is the "ability to take charge of one's learning" which is a skill "to be acquired by 'natural' means or in a systematic, deliberate way."

According to Holec, learners alone are responsible for deciding what is to be learned, when, how, in what order, and by what means. It is also their responsibility to set their own goals and measure the degree to which they have been effective in attaining them. In other words, a project-oriented approach provides the passage towards these goals. The students learn about the decision-making process about topics and content, about learning and the management of it (Legutke & Thomas, 1991).

A Constructivist Approach

The major strength of this approach lies in its constructivist approach to learning. According to Chun & Plass (2000), "Constructivist approaches to learning advocate allowing learners not only to interact directly with information to be learned, but also to add their own information and construct their own relationships" (p. 160).

Learning is seen as a process in which the learner is cognitively involved in seeking answers, making generalizations, and testing the hypotheses they have generated. By taking a major role in planning and negotiating course content, the students become active contributors to their language learning rather than being passive recipients of knowledge.

Teaching Specific Skills

An Internet-based approach to project learning also lends itself well to the teaching of specific skills required to conduct research. For example, Gaspar (1998) used McKenzie's (1995)

"Iterative Research Cycle" consisting of the different stages of the research process with her advanced language students. These stages are

- Questioning -- Decide what information is lacking or what problem needs solving.
- Planning -- Develop a strategy to efficiently locate valid information.
- Gathering -- Locate the best sources, Internet and other, and collect needed information.
- Sifting -- Select from what was found that information most pertinent to the research question.
- Synthesizing -- Sort the information into a meaningful pattern.
- Evaluating -- Assess progress in answering the research question, and if needed, return to the first step in this cycle (cited in Gaspar, 1998, p. 72).

Helping Higher Order Thinking

Such an instructional practice underscores and supports the development of higher-order thinking skills like "synthesizing" and "evaluating" which students need when conducting research.

As Gaspar (1998) notes, students must be able to sort through the myriad of information available seeking out only that, which is pertinent to the project at hand.

Searching Skills are Needed

The use of the Internet for research purposes requires a variety of searching skills.

It asks for knowledge of different search engines and how they work, such as whether they are case sensitive or not. Furthermore, it assumes the user has some information-seeking skills. Nahl (1996) showed that being somewhat knowledgeable of the topic being searched is necessary for learning how to search the Web, and that being somewhat knowledgeable about Web searching is necessary for exploring new topics.

It is often assumed that, because most adolescent learners are familiar with searching the Internet, they know how to do so effectively. Several studies which have investigated students' searching behavior have found that students are often lacking searching skills (Nahl & Harada, 1996; Neuman, 1993).

In conclusion of their findings, most of these researchers agree and recommend the need for formal training in Web searching, for teachers and students alike. They point to the need for training beyond the technical competencies required for Web searching, and thus emphasize the importance of integrating information-seeking skills into the curriculum.

Language Proficiency Skills – An Important Pre-requisite

The open-ended approach to exploring Internet-based resources requires language learners to have a solid foundation in their language proficiency skills. This makes the project-based approach most appropriate for intermediate and advanced language learners. The exploration of such Internet-based materials or readings is best assigned in stages on a long-term basis. Similar to a teacher-facilitated approach, the open-ended structure of a student's product makes the assessment process subjective and time consuming. Therefore, assessment rubrics are recommended to indicate how a student's product is evaluated.

Technological Considerations

The technological skills required to implement this approach are minimal. If the teacher is to provide guidance to his/her students on searching the Internet, then knowledge about Web browsers, search engines and their effective use are indispensable.

Instructional Guidelines

In the section above, I have provided a pedagogical rationale of this approach to using an online environment to explore Internet-based resources. I have discussed pedagogical issues such as the degree of teacher-centeredness, learner control of contents and learning processes, level of proficiency, the scope of Internet resources, and text types that need to guide the design of Internet-based reading lessons and task design (see Table 1 for overview).

Table 1. Overview of Pedagogical and Instructional Design Issues

<i>STUDENT -CENTERED APPROACH</i>			
<i>Pedagogical issues</i>	High	Medium	Low
Instructor's control of contents, learning tasks, and processes			X
Potential anticipation of student answers by instructor			X
Learner autonomy (contents, Web environment and process)	X		
Potential use for cooperative learning	X		
Degree of teacher- centeredness			
<i>Development</i>			
Degree of pedagogical expertise (development of reading tasks, e.g., comprehension and text management strategies)			X
Preparation time (e.g., choice of materials, pre-screening materials)			X
Degree of technological expertise (e.g., HTML programming, Web design)			X
<i>Preparation of students</i>			
Need for students' level of proficiency in using the Internet (e.g., doing Internet search)	X		

Samples of Learner-Determined Projects

Example 1

Following the principles of project-oriented learning, students make their own choices of the end product. Thus, the examples of student projects demonstrate the exploration of Internet-based resources including text-based and multimedia information.

Groups of students prepared News bulletins of about 20 minutes each spiced with images, Video clippings and includes

Headlines

Breaking News

Cover stories

Weather reports

Bollywood Blockbuster

Techno mantra

Example 2

The subsequent 7-minute presentations (with 3 minutes allowed for questions) were as diverse as the students themselves and ranged from

- a report on the political platforms of prominent Indian politicians;
- a presentation of Indian sportspersons in the Olympics 2008;
- a description of the any geographical region of India;
- a multi-media extravaganza treating the life and music of the Canadian singer, Céline Dion; or a leading singer or artist of India;
- A simulated tour of the Hotel or banking Industry of India.

The incorporation of multi-media accompaniments elicited much enthusiasm on the part of both the presenters and their audience. For instance, in the presentation of News Bulletin, students learned, performed and enjoyed very much. The gathering of information, collection of data, organization of pictures and video clips instilled a feeling of great responsibility and autonomy in them.

With regard to the presentation on the singer, Céline Dion, the class was treated to a Powerpoint demonstration that assembled -- in a visually appealing manner -- information including the life of the singer, a discography, and a vocabulary list of musical terms (which was followed by a short in-class quiz!). Nevertheless, even though sound files of Dion's songs were in fact available on the Net, the presenters chose instead to work from a tape player for better volume.

In another advanced-level course, the members of the class tracked the daily developments in the 2007 presidential election campaign. Students successfully assembled and presented biographical information and sketches of each candidate's professional life, and the latest statistical data and interpretations gleaned from the various media, including daily satellite viewings of news broadcasts. Much valuable information came from the Internet and included textual and visual materials.

Conclusion

Therefore, it can be concluded that internet is a powerful tool to be used in the language class. So, why not to enjoy the high swings on this web ride and become tech-savvy teachers and prepare students for the digital classes.

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