Using Project-Based Instruction to Meet Foreign Language Standards

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Abstract: A challenge that language teachers face is meeting state and national standards while implementing sound methods and techniques. The authors addressed this challenge in a qualitative study of an eighth-grade exploratory French class where students were engaged in a variety of projects to enhance the learning of francophone language and culture. This article addresses how the projects helped students meet the five core national standards established by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages.

Keywords: project-based instruction, language, culture, standards

With increased pressure to meet increasingly stringent state and national standards, teachers must strive to find the means for incorporating these standards into their curriculum. At the same time, teachers must also implement effective methods and techniques that promote learning. There is no exception for language teachers, whose standards are developed under the auspices of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). Despite ACTFL’s efforts to standardize foreign language curriculum, they also note that the Standards for Foreign Language Learning do not represent what is currently occurring in language classrooms across the United States, and that “while they [the standards] reflect the best instructional practice, they do not describe what is being attained by the majority of foreign language students” (ACTFL 1996, 24).

As language teachers ponder the issues surrounding standards-based teaching, they must consider how to design their curriculum to meet the standards. While there are many approaches and methods to help language teachers achieve the standards in their language classrooms (see, e.g., Blaz 2002), one way to do so is by using project-based instruction (PBI). As this article will describe, PBI lends itself to meeting many of the standards set forth by ACTFL, especially promoting communication and the functionality of language, both of which are key elements in contemporary language instruction (Miller 2006).

What Is Project-Based Instruction?

Stoller (2006) defines PBI as: (1) having a process and product; (2) giving students (partial) ownership of the project; (3) extending over a period of time (several days, weeks, or months); (4) integrating skills; (5) developing students’ understanding of a topic through the integration of language and content; (6) collaborating with other students and working on their own; (7) holding students responsible for their own learning through the gathering, processing, and reporting of information from target language resources; (8) assigning new roles and responsibilities to students and teacher; (9) providing a tangible final product; and (10) reflecting on both the process and the product. Stoller also maintains, however, that PBI is more than merely engaging students in projects; PBI takes on a variety of forms, depending on the teacher, the students, and the situation. In addition to the projects themselves, students engage in many types of learning, including experiential and negotiated learning, problem solving, and research. Projects often elicit collaboration among students; they can be simple assignments or very intricate, multiphase tasks that take weeks or even months to complete. Although models of what projects might look like abound (see, e.g., Blumenfeld et al. 1991; Boss and Krauss 2007; Katz and Chard 2000; Mitchell et al. 2009), Stoller’s model is centered around communicative and functional forms of language learning, which we describe in the following section.

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Language Learning: A Communicative and Functional Approach

Linked to the ideas that support notions of communicative and functional language learning, most language instructors believe that learning in general is best achieved through meaningful instruction. This is in contrast to rote learning, which is merely memorization and regurgitation of information with no connection to prior knowledge. Specifically, Brown (2002) notes that “meaningful learning will lead toward better long-term retention than rote learning” (13), especially in the context of content-based learning.

One method of providing meaningful instruction in the language classroom is through the communicative approach. When one learns about the language (e.g., through methods such as grammar translation or audiolingual instruction), one learns for reasons such as passing an exam. However, when one learns through the communicative approach, one learns to use the language (Lightbown and Spada 1999). Richards and Rodgers (1986) also maintain that in order for learning to occur, it is important for language learners to engage in meaningful tasks where they use language for real purposes. For example, instead of students completing meaningless drills composed of random sentences, students might work in pairs where one student gives clues in the target language describing an object, and the other partner must guess what the object is. Another example is to ask students to bring in a picture from a family vacation. Each student describes, either in written or oral form, what was going on when the picture was taken. In both of these situations the learner must use language for a real, meaningful purpose.

Language instruction has focused for many years on the so-called four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), and helping students achieve proficiency in these skills is still central to foreign language education (Hadley 2001). It is important, however, to note that these four skills are not separate; rather, they are developed interdependently in order for language learners to attain communicative competence (Phillips and Draper 1999). Along with these four skills, culture plays a central role in establishing communicative competence (Berns 1990). In fact, many language pedagogues argue that is impossible to separate language and culture (Buttjes 1990), and Higgs (1990) even exhorts language instructors with the commandment: “Thou shalt not teach language without also teaching culture” (74). The result is that state standards reflect the idea of language learning as a tapestry where culture is woven together with the many other elements of language (Scarcella and Oxford 1992).

What Are the ACTFL Standards?

The primary purpose of standards is to articulate “what students should know and be able to do as a result of their study of world languages” (Phillips 1997, 1–2, as cited in Hadley 2001). ACTFL (1996) cautions, however, that standards should not be used as a curriculum guide nor should they dictate what content a course will contain. The national standards established by ACTFL have been influential in the development of standards in most individual states’ foreign language programs.

The standards developed by ACTFL (1996) are based on what is commonly known as the five Cs: communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities. At the center of language learning is communication, regardless of its form. This standard focuses on engaging students in the exchange of information, opinions, ideas, and so forth, in both written and oral form. Communicative competence is not fully achieved without gaining the knowledge and understanding of the cultures that use the target language (see Lee and VanPatten 2003). The culture standard places emphasis on understanding how a society’s perspectives influence the practices and products of that culture. Knowledge of other languages and cultures affords individuals with connections that a monolingual individual does not have. This includes understanding how another language and culture is connected to other disciplines, as well as how one’s culture affects one’s worldview. Students are able to recognize that there are many ways to view the world through comparisons and contrasts between the target and native languages and cultures. Last, studying another language provides the student with ways to establish multilingual communities both locally and around the world. The idea behind this standard is that the learner will develop lifelong appreciation of the language and culture studied as well as understand that learning another language is meant to extend beyond the four walls of the classroom into the world at large. Table 1 presents the standards for each of the five Cs. With a clearer understanding of the ACTFL standards, the next section will demonstrate how PBI can help learners meet the standards effectively with an example from a real-life classroom setting.

Integrating Project-Based Instruction with ACTFL Standards

Setting, Background Information, and Participants

Based on Stoller’s (2006) definition of PBI, there are several ways that projects can help language teachers address the ACTFL national standards. To facilitate the discussion in this section, examples will be provided based on a cultural learning project that was used with eighth graders during a nine-week exploratory French course. The purpose of the project was twofold. First of all, given that the class only lasted for nine weeks, the students’ knowledge of French language was limited to the few basic units that had been covered. Therefore,
one of the goals of the project was to expose students to various aspects of life in France as a means of linking language to culture. The second goal of the program was to encourage a continued interest in French language and culture that would hopefully lead students to choose to study French when they reached high school the following year. Therefore, the possible components of the project were designed with students’ individual interests in mind, allowing them to choose topics that were of personal relevance to each of them.

Students received the project guidelines during the second week of the class and were instructed to select 5 of 20 possible artifacts to create over the course of the quarter, which they would then include in a portfolio at the end of the term to demonstrate what they had learned in the course. Some of the artifacts from which students could choose included preparing and serving a French recipe, reporting on current events, researching different sports played in France, drawing and describing various landmarks throughout France, and teaching French to a family member or friend. Students could also elect to create a trivia game based on facts about France or create a travel log as they took an imaginary trip through the country. The projects were graded on completeness of each artifact according to the guidelines provided, writing conventions, and overall presentation.

Meeting the Standards

To consider how PBI might be used to meet language standards, we will address each of the five Cs previously described (see Table 1) and how each of these Cs was addressed through this project.

**Communication** is central to language learning (see Finocchiaro and Brumfit 1983; Richards and Rodgers 1986; Savignon 1983), and the project implemented in this eighth-grade setting demonstrated that projects have the potential to promote communication in its various forms. To address the first communication standard, which focuses on engaging in conversation and exchanging information and opinions, as a technique for activating students’ background knowledge about culture, students began their French project by discussing how they would describe American culture to a French student visiting the United States. To address the second standard of interpreting written and spoken language, students investigated French words that are used in English and the different situations in which they are used. To promote interpretation, students interviewed parents, friends, and teachers about their knowledge of French words and phrases used in English. The students then wrote a short essay where they discussed how cultures can influence one another. To address the third standard of presenting information to an audience, the students presented their essays to the class. Obviously,
this type of project could be adapted to fit a variety of themes or topics (e.g., hobbies and interests, plans for future careers, what they would do if they inherited a large sum of money), as well as a variety of linguistic levels or foci (e.g., specific verb tenses). Given the nature of the exploratory class, the focus in this particular instance was on identifying what students already knew about French language.

Language and culture are integrated (see Galloway 1985; Lafayette and Strasheim 1981; Seeley 1993). Because the students were only in French class for nine weeks, they studied only a few units of language. In order to maximize their exposure to both language and culture, the students were engaged in various cultural learning activities. To address the first standard of understanding the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture, students chose from 20 options for creating artifacts as part of their portfolio. One of the options was to find a recipe for a French dish, to prepare it and share it with their family, and finally to write a summary of this experience and research they had done about eating customs in France. Another option was to maintain a diary of current events taking place in France over the course of the nine weeks. Students were encouraged to follow the same news story, when possible, in order to reflect on the story’s continued development. To address the second standard—where students are expected to make connections between products (i.e., literature, film, and other products) and the culture—students could locate authentic poetry, music, literature, films, art, or other artifacts that relate to the practices and perspectives of the culture. To address this standard, students could choose to make their own drawing of a French landmark and its historical significance. Students could also choose a style of painting (impressionism was very popular) and create their own painting using that particular style.

As we know, the individual components of the language-learning process are developed interdependently of each other (see Hadley 2001; Phillips and Draper 1999), which is linked to the third of the ACTFL goals, connections. The first connections standard emphasizes the integration of language and content. Students could choose from several options in the portfolio project that not only would help develop their skills in the target language and their knowledge of the target culture but also help reinforce their knowledge of other content areas. One particular project that would emphasize this connection asked students to research the social customs and etiquette of France. Students investigated socially acceptable and unacceptable behaviors such as what to do when invited to someone’s home. Along with learning about manners and customs, students also learned accompanying words and phrases that might be used in such situations. Students also had the option of creating a timeline of historical events that took place in France and comparing these events to events taking place in the United States at the same time. In this way, students developed their knowledge of U.S. history while also learning about French history. Finally, students could choose to research the various regions of France and search for information on language, weather, traditional costumes and music, and activities enjoyed in each region. Along with learning about regional differences within France, students began making connections in geography. In discussing the climates of the different regions, students worked to convert temperatures from Fahrenheit to Celsius and tracked the weather of each region, which served to reinforce their knowledge of science. The second connections standard emphasizes the connection between information in the target language and how that information portrays the unique viewpoints of the target culture and its language(s). By completing the tasks on the various topics proposed here, along with exposure to authentic materials and the final products of these projects, students may begin to make connections between the acquired information and the language and culture studied.

Making comparisons was also achieved through this project. The emphasis of the first standard is on making comparisons between the students’ native and foreign language in order to understand the nature of language. This standard was addressed by nearly every option in the project. For example, when discussing the weather in France, students noted the linguistic differences in weather expressions such as “it’s hot” in English versus “il fait chaud” in French. The activities at the onset of the portfolio project (i.e., discussing French words used in English) also address this standard. These same projects could also be used to help students make comparisons of interaction patterns between one’s native and target culture. By engaging the students in a task where they research language use in various social situations, as discussed previously (e.g., learning about customs and manners), the students have opportunities to demonstrate their ability to apply their knowledge of the differences in interaction between their first and second language through the learning activities themselves and the written and oral presentations made at the conclusion of the nine weeks. The second comparisons standard, where students demonstrate understanding of the concept of culture through comparisons of the cultures studied and their own, was easily addressed in this project by several of the artifact options. One of the most popular among the students was comparing and contrasting the educational systems in the United States and France. Students were very interested in the difference in scheduling and grading. Many students also chose to compare and contrast holidays celebrated in the United States and France, especially the celebration of the feast of St. Nicholas in December. Another popular option
was to research the role of sports, particularly soccer, in French and American cultures. These activities allowed students to learn about both the differences and similarities between French and American life, thereby making the learning of French seem less daunting.

Last, communities were also addressed through PBI. As previously discussed, establishing communities encourages meaningful interaction (see Brown 2002; Lee and VanPatten 2003; Lightbown and Spada 1999; Richards and Rodgers 1986). One emphasis of this aspect of language learning is that in addition to using the language in the classroom, the student must also demonstrate the ability to use the language outside of the classroom. In the exploratory French class, students could have also selected a portfolio component that required them to learn about French influences in their own community. For example, students could research historic battles that had taken place in their areas. Another option was for students to take a meal in a local French restaurant or interview someone from France who was studying at the local university. This project could also be taken further to address the second standard, which focuses on using the language for personal enjoyment and enrichment. The nature of PBI, especially considering that it is very student-centered, would help meet this standard. Giving students autonomy in selecting topics and determining how to complete a project would also encourage enjoyment. Designing a unit around a theme that interests students also promotes personal enjoyment, especially when tasks make connections to students’ personal ideas, opinions, and interests. For example, one student who had chosen to complete a task with French music, reported that she had spent time at the local bookstore listening to sample tracks of French music.

**Conclusion**

In light of the potential that projects have for helping students meet the standards for language learning, which we have demonstrated in the previous section, it is important to consider how language teachers can achieve a connection between the standards and PBI. For example, in this eighth-grade classroom, PBI helped the French teacher achieve important instructional goals, such as promoting communication, integrating the study of culture with language, making connections between language and content, making comparisons between the students’ first and second languages, and establishing communities both inside and outside the school walls.

It is also important to remember that projects are not a magical fix to instructional difficulties. PBI has the potential of serving as a significantly beneficial approach to language instruction, but like any other approach (or method), it requires careful planning. The instructor must determine the goals and objectives of the course and decide how projects may help achieve these goals. Then language instructors must continually act as guides, ensuring that students are communicating in the target language and working on the tasks at hand, as well as answering questions and helping students be successful learners. Furthermore, the tasks presented must be of some interest to the students. In this particular course, the portfolio project was a success because of the total number of options that students had to choose from when completing the tasks. What’s more, the initial 20 options included a variety of activities designed to appeal to different learning styles—from the artistic to more hands-on.

It is also important to note here the challenges that may arise when dealing with projects and the standards. To consider the challenges, we once again turn to the exploratory French portfolio project. The ACTFL standards (see Table 1) encourage the understanding of various cultures. The examples provided here are very specific and focus on one particular culture; to develop an understanding of other cultures, several projects that focus on other cultures would be required. In the foreign language setting it is also challenging to encourage the use of the target language outside of the classroom, and in some settings (e.g., rural middle America) it is virtually impossible. The Internet and other current technology, however, have made access to target languages and cultures more feasible outside of the classroom. Nonetheless, care must also be taken to ensure that all students have appropriate levels of access to the resources needed to complete the tasks they choose, which is why it is crucial that class time be provided for working on the project. Additionally, students must be able to use such time efficiently. In order to do this, the French teacher found that clear, explicit instructions and structure for the tasks were essential. For example, it was very easy for one particular student who loved art to want to devote the entire class time to his drawing of the Eiffel Tower while ignoring his other tasks. In this sense, a system of reporting progress to the teacher by the students helped keep everyone on task.

Another significant challenge pertains to the linguistic level of the students. Novice language learners have little linguistic knowledge, which makes achieving the goals of the standards more difficult. This was illustrated in this exploratory French class. However, despite this challenge, the standards can still be met in a variety of ways, as we presented here. Furthermore, projects can play an integral part in the development of a sound language program. Although the primary goal in the case described here was to pique students’ interest in French, similar portfolio projects could easily be adapted to other linguistic levels that would encourage the use of language. For example, in the beginning levels, tasks might include descriptions of self
and family or simple poems. At the intermediate level, tasks might include narrations, dialogues or written responses to current events in the target culture. Finally, at the more advanced levels of language study, tasks might include creative writing and mini-dramas. However, regardless of level, instruction should be based on pedagogically sound curriculum that is grounded in second language acquisition theories and is in alignment with state and/or national standards. As the examples presented here have demonstrated, PBI is one approach for achieving these goals.

REFERENCES


