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Student Documentaries: A Language Learning Tool

Motivation or, more accurately, the lack of it is a consistent problem for teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL). It is common knowledge that for second language learning to occur, a certain degree of motivation should be in place. Otherwise, all efforts to teach students to speak, write, and read simply go down the drain. Littlewood (1984, 53) explains that "motivation is the critical force which determines whether a learner embarks on a task, how much energy he devotes to it, and how long he perseveres." Nevertheless, students in ESL classrooms are often there because they have to be, not because they want to be.

When the students in my ESL oral communication class seemed unmotivated, I noticed that most of the task-based activities in the textbook left them frustrated and bored. Although they conducted oral presentations, listened to taped passages, and practiced language skills, these activities did not represent real life or elicit authentic communication. In other words, the course content was not related to who they really were and what they really wanted to do. At this point, I turned to project-based learning as a means to motivate students and let them take charge of their learning.

This article will describe the rationale for project-based learning and explain how it increases interest and participation in the ESL classroom. I will also describe a multimedia documentary film project that I carried out in a high intermediate ESL class at Dar Al Hekma College in Saudi Arabia. This project can be a model for teachers who wish to try project-based learning in their own classrooms.

Rationale for project-based learning

Project-based learning is a teaching method based on the *communicative approach*, a language acquisition theory that supports the use of natural communication and real-world activities in the classroom. Decades of research in cognitive science and in the classroom have produced many hypotheses that explain why this

approach works. One of these is the acquisition-learning hypothesis. This hypothesis asserts that we have two independent ways of developing language ability:

1. *Language learning* is a conscious process, commonly associated with formal classroom instruction, that relies on the direct study of grammar and error correction.
2. *Language acquisition* is a subconscious process, commonly used to describe the innate ability of children to acquire their first language, with no direct instruction but with lots of authentic input. According to Krashen (2003), people acquire their second language in a similar fashion, making acquisition more important than learning when the goal is to become fluent and accurate.

The acquisition-learning hypothesis suggests that in practice teachers should create a dynamic environment that is full of meaningful input and opportunities for authentic interactions. With relevant and interesting tasks, students will be motivated to use a large amount of natural language, paving the way for the acquisition process.

There are many types of projects that can be done in the classroom, and the more they relate to the real world and interesting current events, the more they will result in the use of authentic language to accomplish a task. This type of teaching requires knowing about student needs and interests and applying that knowledge to activities and tasks. This leads students to realize that learning has a purpose, and learning with a purpose is bound to be exciting. According to Eisner (2005), we should recognize that students have many different interconnected parts, and when we teach, design curriculum, and assess, we need to recognize the whole student. "Attention to such complex matters will not simplify our tasks as teachers, but it will bring education closer to the heart of what really matters" (Eisner 2005, 14).

Benefits of project work

In addition to promoting lots of excellent language input, project work has other benefits:

- Projects in the classroom are a welcome alternative to the dreary study and practice of specific language skills. They add variety to the curriculum, which reawakens students' involvement in the course and improves their motivation (Chastain 1976). In fact, "project based learning redefines the boundaries of the classroom. No longer are students confined to learning within four walls" (Simkins et al. 2002).
- In addition to acquiring English, students will also learn other skills as they design, plan, and produce a project like a multimedia presentation (Simkins et al. 2002). Learning how to interview, edit, and operate computers and audio-visual equipment are important skills for students who are thinking about vocations in a rapidly changing world.
- Project based learning also leads to autonomy, as students take more responsibility for learning, and even tutor each other (Simkins et al. 2002). This responsibility gives students a much-needed sense of satisfaction in the learning process.

Deciding on a documentary project

According to Fleischer (2004, 5), "once teachers have a strategy in mind that they would like to investigate further, it's time for them to turn to their students—and see what happens in the classroom when they put that strategy in place." As I contemplated the benefits of project-based learning, I got an idea from a television documentary on *boot camps*, which are rehabilitation centers that often use physical labor and punishment to change the behavior of troubled teens. I decided that a good project would be to have my students produce informative documentaries about important issues for a particular audience. I knew that implementing the idea would not be easy, but I also felt that it was worth the effort to motivate my students.

Most importantly, I knew that a multimedia project would have the real-world connection to the students' lives necessary to whet their intellectual appetite and spark their enthusiasm. They would have a reason to do the project, other than the fact that the teacher assigned it and they needed a grade.

Implementing a multimedia documentary project

Following is a description of a multimedia documentary project where several groups of four or five students each produced a taped documentary that ran from 10 to 15 minutes. The main objective was to inform the audience about an issue of current popular interest. Students were encouraged to use the language skills and structures that had been introduced in class before the project. The table below provides an overview of the nine stages and suggested times for the project.

Overview of a Multimedia Documentary Project

Stage	Estimated Time (1 session = 2.5 hours)
1. Pre-project considerations	Depends on students' needs
2. Introducing the documentary project	1–2 sessions
3. Background research	3 sessions
4. Planning	1 session
5. Storyboarding	1–2 sessions
6. Actual production	3–4 sessions (mostly outside of class)
7. Editing and revision	2 sessions
8. Showing and assessing	2 sessions (depends on class time)
9. Post-documentary presentations	1 session

Stage 1: Pre-project considerations

Before introducing the project, it is important for the teacher to define the instructional goals and objectives. For example, our class had been working on language functions to express disagreement and on speaking topics about adolescent crime. This influenced the project topics and type of language used in the documentary.

Another important pre-project consideration is making sure that students will work at a suitable degree of difficulty. Motivation is decreased when tasks are consistently too difficult or too easy for learners (Tomlinson and McTighe 2006). When tasks are too easy for students, they become bored and do not learn, even though they might earn high grades. If tasks are too difficult, students will become non-responsive.

Finally, when teachers are considering a project, it is helpful for them to ask four questions based on Keller's (1987) ARCS model of motivational design:

1. Does the project get students' **A**ttention?
2. Is it **R**elevant to their needs, interests, or motives?
3. Does the project inspire learners' **C**onfidence in achieving success?
4. Would completing the project leave students with a sense of **S**atisfaction in their accomplishment?

Stage 2: Introducing the project

At this stage, the teacher acts as a coach to help students understand the rationale behind the project and have a bird's eye view of what they will be producing. Students need to understand who their audience is and the expected learning outcome. I usually show my students a short professional documentary, and we discuss the different parts together. We talk about various purposes of documentaries—to inform, to entertain, and to persuade. After that, we brainstorm for possible topics. It is important to get every student's feedback in the choice of topic with suggestions for interviews, points of view, and audience. (See Appendix 1 for an introductory handout and some topics my students chose after a brainstorming session.)

A great advantage to project-based learning is the opportunity for collaborative teamwork. In order to complete a task, students must work together and interact in English. This is most easily done in classrooms where students speak different first languages. In classrooms where students speak the same first language, the teacher can give incentives for students to communicate only in English.

Assigning groups can be challenging, and only after many projects did I discover my ideal method. I first pick team leaders. (Since I usually have several projects each term, every student eventually gets the chance to be a team leader.) After leaders are picked, a short campaign takes place during which each student is given a minute or two to talk about the qualities he or she has to offer to the group project. Students try to "sell themselves" to the class, which helps them identify

their own strengths. They volunteer points such as: "I enjoy research," "I have good computer skills," "I am a good speaker," "I have good interviewing skills," or "I am dedicated and a good planner." After that, each team leader picks one of the students based on the advertised skills. This continues until all the students are picked.

If students come to my office and do not want to work with a particular group because they do not like the other members or feel the need to be with friends, I explain that, in the future, it will not be possible to choose colleagues, a mother-in-law, a sister-in-law, or a neighbor, but they will still have to interact with those people, so they might as well start practicing interactions in my classroom. After all, the classroom helps students cope with real life situations.

Stage 3: Background research

During this stage students require a lot of guidance from the teacher. As they research material for their documentaries, they will need encouragement to get quotes and, if possible, taped interviews to add value to the information they provide to their audience. For example, a group working on a documentary about crime interviewed the parents of a teenager who had been charged with robbery. Other students interviewed a psychologist, who explained some causes of adolescent crime. Students also search for pictures, downloadable multimedia videos, music, and sound effects that they can insert in their documentaries. I usually encourage students to find out certain things on their own because an essential element in promoting students' academic achievement is helping them become autonomous, self-regulated learners.

Stage 4: Planning

In the planning stage, students learn time-management and delegation skills. I help students answer the following essential questions:

- Who will do what?
- How long will it take to tape an interview?
- How much time must be set aside for troubleshooting?

At this stage, students narrow the focus of their research by generating questions for specific interviews and making decisions on the

sequencing of their ideas. I am always there in the background giving advice, answering questions, and guiding students.

Stage 5: Storyboarding

Storyboarding is the stage when students put the project down on paper. It is the blueprint, or the outline of the final project. I expect students to develop at least eight slides portraying the major parts of the project. The slides are usually little cartoon drawings with a sentence at the bottom of each page that clearly explains what that part of the documentary will deal with. Teachers should encourage students to use their creativity to come up with a blueprint that will be a good guide for the rest of the project, even though they will still have an opportunity to change their minds as they work. It is up to the teacher and students to decide on how this storyboard will be presented. I personally leave it up to the students, and some of them decide to display it on a huge poster, while others prefer to put it all in a PowerPoint presentation. Students usually enjoy this phase because it helps them form a good idea of what they will actually produce.

Stage 6: Actual production

This phase is the longest and takes place mostly outside of the classroom as interviews are recorded, clippings and pictures are put in order, and sound effects are added. Teachers will certainly need some kind of technical support at this point. For example, I have the support of the information and technology department at my university.

Stage 7: Editing and revision

At this point, it is time to do the final editing of the documentary project. Some interviews might be shortened or revised, or some sounds may be added. The teacher has the option of either leaving this stage as a student activity done during class with no input, or helping students by previewing certain problematic or difficult segments. I find that students typically do not require my input at this stage, and they actually do not like me to see what their documentaries look like. They usually insist that I will spoil the surprise if I see the whole documentary before the premiere!

Stage 8: Showing and assessing

Needless to say, this is the best stage! It is the time when my students and I have the chance to sit back and enjoy the fruits of our creation.

Students can decide on the prospective audience for each particular part of the project. The audience may be classmates of the same class, students from other sections, parents, or students from other schools. For the purpose of our projects, we usually invite the whole college and have three sections of the same class competing for the best production.

Stage 9: Post-documentary presentations

Post-documentary presentations are short individual oral presentations that give the teacher more feedback on the kind of effort individual students have put into the project and what they have learned. At this stage, students prepare five-minute presentations to answer the following questions:

- What role did I play in this documentary?
- What was the experience like for me?
- What are some of the things that I have learned that I did not know before?

These presentations allow students to describe their involvement in the project and give the teacher an additional basis for assessment.

Judging project effectiveness

To judge the effectiveness of this project, I referred to the seven key dimensions for a successful multimedia project described by Simkins et al. (2002):

1. **Core curriculum.** A successful multimedia project should have clear learning objectives taken from the curriculum. We accomplished this by reinforcing pertinent objectives of our ESL oral communication class, including language elements and researching, interviewing, and oral presenting skills.

2. **Real-world connection.** A multimedia project should make a real-world connection to the students' lives by exploring topics of current interest. For example, one of our documentaries dealt with the treatment of the elderly in Arab society, and students felt they made a difference by bringing awareness to an unexpressed issue in their society.

3. **Extended time frame.** The most successful projects do not end in one session; they offer students the chance to experience challenges that conclude in a significant final product from which they can obtain a clear sense of accomplishment. According to Chas-

tain (1976), successful second language learning depends on sustained long-term interest.

4. **Student involvement in decisions.** Although the teacher can set rules and limitations, students should make their own decisions related to both the form and content of the final product. They are the ones who will make most of the major decisions while the teacher is the facilitator and advisor.

5. **Collaboration.** While working on their documentaries, students collaborate by sharing ideas and responsibilities. Collaboration must be equal, and to keep it fair teachers and students can use an *effort sheet* system. I give students a sheet with two columns; one column says "Type of Effort" and the other column says "Detail." Under the first column students list an effort such as "Interview with the psychologist," and in the second column they note details like "Make an appointment," "Create questions," and "Tape the interview." Effort can also be monitored as the teacher intermingles with the students as she passes from group to group, giving her feedback and checking on the progress of the projects.

6. **Assessment.** Assessing a multimedia product is an additional challenge, and it is important that the teacher considers all the dimensions of the project. (See Appendix 2 for an evaluation plan for a multimedia documentary project.)

7. **Technology.** A multimedia project allows students to acquire technological skills. Instead of making notes for simpler oral presentations, students have a wider choice of displaying pictures, video clips, recordings, and other multimedia products. Technology-enhanced projects have positive effects on today's students, who are surrounded by a high-tech environment.

Conclusion

Obviously, project-based learning is a challenge; to be successful, the teacher must take several important factors into account. The reward is a great method that increases student interest and involvement in acquiring a second language. By creating a linguistic environment that matches the real world, project-based learning adds variety to the curriculum, teaches valuable skills, creates a spirit of collaboration, and heightens feelings of self-worth. It also helps students become

autonomous and able to pursue second language acquisition on their own.

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Appendix 1
Description of Multimedia Documentary Project

Documentary Production Project

You are required to produce a short documentary film on one of the topics below.

Topic 1: Your documentary should deal with the question, "What makes adolescents commit crime?" You should particularly look at adolescents in Saudi Arabia. You could interview a social worker, a psychologist, a counselor, or even a religion teacher.

Topic 2: Your documentary should answer the question, "What are the roles of parents and peers in the cause and prevention of crime?" You should particularly look at the issue from a Saudi perspective. You could interview parents, students who have some information on the topic, or Special Education instructors.

Topic 3: Your documentary should analyze the issue of "boot camps" in Saudi Arabia and in the world in general. You could interview any knowledgeable person who can give you a perspective on this method of punishment.

Topic 4: Your documentary should deal with the serious issue of child abuse. The best people to interview for this topic are Special Education instructors. One good idea would be to interview students who might have lived through child abuse. They can remain anonymous while telling their story.

Keep in mind the following points:
1. The presentation should run no less than ten minutes and no more than fifteen.
2. All members of the team should be given equal opportunities to talk.
3. You should use relevant vocabulary words and phrases studied in class.
4. All interviews and related information should be in English.

You should hand in an *Effort Sheet* on the day of presentation specifying each team member's type of effort.

Evaluation
You will be evaluated on the following criteria:
- Use of language
- Quality of ideas presented
- Evidence of research conducted
- Team work
- Quality of production
- Nonverbal communication
- Duration of presentation
- Creativity

Appendix 2 — Evaluation of a Multimedia Documentary Project

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Teacher _____

Student Name_____ Score_____

Topic_____

Content (25%)
Score is based on the overall content of the documentary and on whether the film deals with the issue at hand and answers the questions related to the topic. It is also based on the type and quality of interviews conducted.

Language Usage (20%)
Score is based on the quality of language the individual student uses in the film and in the short presentation after the film viewing.

Role (20%)
Score is based on the part the student plays in the film. This includes individual creativity, time duration, and general elements of voice and presentation skills.

Production (10%)
Score is based on the overall quality of production and media tools used.

Time (10%)
Score is based on the time duration of the whole production (not less than 10 minutes or more than 15 minutes).

Team Effort (15%)
Score is based on instructor's daily evaluation of work within the team as well as on the effort sheet handed in by the student.