Web-Based activities: Enhancing English Language skills

By

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Abstract

This study examined the effect of Web-based project learning on enhancing English language and translation senior students' cultural awareness and writing competence. For this purpose, one class was selected at random and assigned to an experimental group. It encompassed 25 students who formed small-groups, two to five students each. These participants were involved in several online activities which made the final outputs of students' Webpage projects. To examine the effectiveness of the Web-based projects on enhancing cultural awareness and writing competence, two instruments were developed by the investigator; a) pre- and post-writing tests, and b) pre- and- post cultural awareness tests. Quantitative analyses of students' performance on the pre-and-post tests revealed significant gains on both cultural awareness and writing competence. Besides, qualitative data supported the significant impact of Web-based projects on students' cultural awareness and writing competence. Among other factors, these gains were attributed to the rich online environment, easy access to authentic material, and contact with authentic native speakers through email exchanges. Relevant implications and recommendations were offered.

Key-Words: Web-based project learning – writing competence – cultural awareness.

Introduction

At this juncture of the 21st century, international communication has become easier than ever before. With the advent of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), especially the Internet, barriers among nations have diminished drastically. Most classroom activities aim at helping learners to acquire surface language features such as grammar, structure, and vocabulary. In other words, learners do not have authentic opportunities to use language in real-life situations. In fact most of classroom activities and procedures which are over-dominated by the teacher aim at helping learners memorize language material relevant to final examinations. Yet, Foreign Language (FL) teachers and practitioners should experiment with new innovations that might help learners acquire language and function in authentic communicative settings. To this end, FL educators should use modern technological applications to overcome such problems. Among others, the Internet is a useful and powerful tool for language teaching. Besides, using Project Based Learning (PBL) could help enhance various FL competencies.

The Study

Writing is a difficult activity for many English as a foreign language (EFL), students. For them, the challenges are enormous. According to Aliweh (2011), students feel frustrated by many problems as lack of appropriate English lexical expressions; inappropriate use of mechanics, paragraph coherence, grammar, spelling, and cultural knowledge, and inability to generate and develop ideas about specific topics. Closely related to this, some teachers do not usually offer proper feedback to students throughout the writing stages.

Similarly, many Emirati students suffer from intercultural deficiencies. This difficulty may be ascribed to the fact that some cultural aspects of the English language are not reflected in textbooks adequately and this causes serious communication difficulties. As a result, many Emirati students lack the awareness of the target culture and this may deprive them of interacting successfully with EFL native speakers. Thus,

teaching culture in the foreign language classroom is still a difficult issue for many foreign language teachers. There is a risk of presenting only selected aspects of the culture and, therefore, lack of authentic material aggravates the problem of intercultural deficiency. So, this study intends to make use of the Internet and the World Wide Web in order to help students to get access to the enormous variety of authentic cultural materials and to allow students to communicate and share ideas through Web-based activities. Hopefully, this will help develop students' writing and cultural competences.

Study questions

The present study aims to tackle these difficulties by seeking answers to the following questions:

1. What is the effect of Web-based projects on enhancing foundation students' cultural awareness?

2. What is the effect of Web-based projects on enhancing foundation Students' overall writing competence?

Here, specific components of the writing competence include; a) the writing content, b) paragraph organization, c) word choice, and d) grammatical structures.

Hypotheses

In order to handle the above questions, the following hypotheses will be examined:

1. There will be a statistically significant difference between students' mean scores on the pre-and post-tests of cultural awareness in favor of the post test.

2. There will be a statistically significant difference between students' mean scores on the pre-and post-tests of overall writing competence in favor of the post test.

The above hypotheses were examined on the 0.05 significance level.

Review of the Literature and Previous Studies

This section elaborates on the literature relevant to project-based learning, Web-based learning, intercultural awareness, and writing competence. It also reviews the previous studies on PBL.

1. Review of Literature

This section addresses relevant literature to study variables. To be specific, definition, potential, criteria, and phases of PBL will be reviewed. Besides, the major concepts and underpinnings of both intercultural and writing competencies will be presented.

1.1. Project-based learning

Project-Based Learning (PBL) is an approach that organizes learning around projects.

There are many definitions and interpretations to project-based learning. According to Buck Institute for Education (2009), project based learning is a systematic teaching method that engages students in learning knowledge and skills through an extended inquiry process structured around complex, authentic questions and carefully designed products and tasks. Because of the collaborative nature of project work, Stoller (1997) stated that "projects can be arranged as integrated topics, practical problems or activities leading to the creation of a certain visual or written end-product" (p. 19). Also, PBL is effective in enhancing student motivation and fostering higher order thinking skills, especially when supported by Internet technology.

1.2. Web-based projects

There is a consensus among researchers that the Internet is a viable medium most suited to PBL. So, there are different reasons why project pedagogy and Internet-based instruction represent a good match. Kasper (2000) ascribed this to the availability of various resources which provide authentic materials that are easily accessed in comparison with traditional print materials. At the same time the teacher has the opportunity in an authentic context to teach the essential skills of finding and evaluating information in the digital form. In addition, students usually take more care with their writing, both its content and the mechanics, when they know that there is an authentic audience (Barron, 1998). Besides, the amount of autonomy that Web projects permit can help learners become involved in planning the stages of project completion, assessing the content and presentation of their fellow students' pages and evaluating the success of the project. Moreover, Web-Based Projects (WBPs provide learners with the medium for sharing their products through publication which gives students a sense of ownership that is essential to the success of the project. Thus, Web projects encompass real work produced by real people in the real world.

1.3. Intercultural awareness in FL education

FL Learning is not merely a matter of memorizing vocabulary and grammatical rules; it also entails developing deep cultural understanding among students. In other words, students need to develop a global perspective as well as a high level of cultural competence in order to acquire the ability to interpret intentional communications and customs in cultures different from their own. A plethora of research has emphasized that without the study of culture, FL instruction is inefficient. In other words, foreign language study seems senseless if students do not acquire adequate information about the people who speak the target language or the country in which the target language is spoken. So, understanding a language involves not only knowledge of grammar, phonology and lexicon, but also major features and characteristics of the culture.

1.4. EFL writing competence

To begin with, writing has a central status in FL teaching. Therefore, most EFL programs give writing a special priority as a major literacy skill. However, writing is an endless and complex process that allows students to illustrate thoughts and ideas to make them visible and concrete. It is a difficult skill for native and nonnative speakers alike. This is because writers should consider many issues such as content, organization, purpose, audience, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling and mechanics. Moreover, it calls for deep thinking, learning, as well as reflection. Thus, while putting their ideas on paper, students painstakingly examine their writing, reconsider various parts, add, delete, rearrange or even change their drafts altogether (Ibrahim, 2006).

2. Method

This section elaborates on study procedures; e.g., the sample, instruments, data analysis and results, as well as relevant conclusion and suggestions for further research.

2.1. Participants

The participants were 25 students, 3 males and 22 females. The average age of the participants was 21 years.These students have studied English for 14 years. Also, these participants were enrolled in this course as a requirement for English language and translation bachelor degree.

2.2. Instruments

In order to examine the effect of WBPs on students' intercultural and writing competencies, the following tools were developed and administered by this investigator:

2.2.1. The online cultural awareness test

To examine the effect of Web-based projects on enhancing the British culture awareness of experimental school students, the researcher designed two equivalent forms of the online cultural awareness test; one was used as a pre-test and the other as a post one.

Each test consisted of thirty (30) multiple choice questions covering four components; 1) customs and traditions, 2) daily life (clothes, education, work, wedding, and housing), 3) food and drink, and 4) etiquette. Scale items were synthesized from relevant material of previous studies (e.g. Aliweh, 2004; Kitao and Kitao, 2001).

2.2.2. The online writing test

After a comprehensive revision of relevant literature (e.g., Aliweh, 2011; Ibrahim, 2006; and Salem, 2007), the researcher developed two equivalent forms of the writing test; one was used as a pre-test and the other as a post-test. In each test, the students were asked to write two paragraphs; one descriptive paragraph (Write a paragraph to describe your hometown.) and a narrative one (Write a paragraph about an interesting trip you once participated in).

2. 2.3. Writing competence rating scale

Students' performance on the online writing competence tests was rated according to five criteria: 1) content, 2) organization, 3) grammatical structure, 4) word-choice, and 5) mechanics. Here, it is worth mentioning that both the spelling and grammar checker of the Microsoft Word application were suspended in order to deny the participants' access to these functions as the writing assessment test required evaluation of the mechanics aspects. Students' scores ranged from 1(not developed at all) to 5 (fully developed).

2.2.4. Validation of study instruments

To verify validity and reliability of the online writing competence and culture awareness tests, the two tools were piloted on a random sample of foundation students (n=30) other than those assigned to the experiment. Statistical analyses of Pearson Correlation coefficients rendered high equivalent reliability values of 0.94 and 0.93 for the first and second forms of cultural and writing test, respectively. As for inter-rater reliability, two raters reached an agreement level as high as 0.98% on students' scores.

2.3. The Web site for culture and writing competences

This Website (http://cwc-project.com) included personal log-on accounts and recordkeeping facilities. The account management and recordkeeping tools are parts of the system design. For account management, students can have usernames and passwords to log in. Through this facility, the researcher could monitor students' progress. It also contained four instructional units. Each unit included one cultural topic. Through Webbased instruction, the participants in the present study used several technologies: email, WWW links, and online resources related to the potential cultural components. Thus, the participants practiced searching, reading and writing skills. Also, they had the opportunity to make blogs, posts, uploads, and other types of files which were meant to practice active learning in class. The home page of the site includes the site name, the account management system, a calendar, a clock, and major cities in the United Kingdom weather, an online dictionary, Face book, visitor counter, 360 virtual tours, test link, and directions for upload Webpages.

2.4. The Web-based project implementation

Based on the previous roles of the teacher and the main aim of the project, online activities proceeded in the following way. The researcher gave the students an introductory session about the project, the site and how to access it. Also, the researcher helped the students to log onto the site through usernames and passwords. Most importantly, the researcher identified the participants with the major objectives of this project: a) to become aware of the various aspects of the British culture and b) to make use of the information they acquire while reading cultural topics in order to practice writing. For this reason, the instructor fully explained the five writing stages.

Then, the instructor divided the class into groups and distributed project contract handouts. This contract was signed by group members who agreed to take part in this project. Then, the participants had to extensively read through, summarize, and report on the assigned culture loaded topics relevant to the fulfillment of their projects. To this end, they had to navigate related sites, engage in virtual tours, and exchange authentic emails with relevant contacts.   Also, they had to exchange views and information with their peers.

2.5. Writing-based activities

For the writing competence, the process writing approach was followed throughout the project. The participants went through five steps of writing process: pre-writing, drafting, revision, editing, and publishing. Yet, these five stages of the writing process are fully explained below. 1) Pre-writing activities, 2) drafting, 3) revision, 4) editing,5) reflection, 6) online posting, and 7) celebration.

2.6. Results and Conclusion

After conducting the post- writing and intercultural competence tests, relevant data were analyzed by using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).   Relevant statistics are provided below.

Results

In the current study, both quantitative and qualitative analyses were used. Specifically, the paired samples t-test was used to identify the effect of the Web-based projects on enhancing British cultural awareness and writing competence. On the other hand, qualitative data included students' reflections and PBL rubric on the implementation of the Web PBL. The results will be presented here in light of the study hypotheses.

Hypothesis One

There will be a statistically significant difference between students' mean scores on the pre and posttests of cultural awareness in favor of the post test. In order to verify the validity of this hypothesis, the paired samples t-test was administered to compare the mean scores of the students on the pre and post cultural awareness tests. Relevant data to this hypothesis are provided.

Hypothesis two

There will be a statistically significant difference between students' mean scores on the pre- and post-tests of overall writing competence in favor of the post test. Yet, detailed data on the various hypotheses which examined the effect of the Web PBL on the components of the writing competence (content, organization, grammatical structures, word-choice, and mechanics) are provided in table (1)

Table (1): The t-values for the writing competence components on the pre- and posttests

Writing components	Tests	N	M	SD	df	t value	Sig.
Content	Pre	25	4.02	1.84	35	13.466	0.000
	Post	25	8.5	1.25			
Organization	Pre	25	4.1	1.8	35	13.988	0.000
	Post	25	8.2	1.6			
Word-Choice	Pre	25	4.8	1.7	35	12.362	0.000
	Post	25	8.3	1.3			
Grammatical Structures	Pre	25	4.4	1.7	35	15.048	0.000
	Post	25	8	1.3			
Mechanics	Pre	25	4.2	1.7	35	12.524	0.000
	Post	25	7.9	1.2			

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As the above table shows, the WBP yielded significant effects on the various aspects of the writing competence: a) for the content, the mean (*M*) scores were 4.02 and 8.50, the standard deviations (*SD*) were 1.84 and 1.25 for the pre and post-tests respectively; the degree of freedom (*df*) = 35, t = 13.466, *p* > 0.01); b) for paragraph organization, the mean scores were 4.1 and 8.2, the standard deviations were 1.8 and 1.6 for the pre and post-tests respectively; (*df* = 35, t = 13.988, *< 0.01*); c) for word choice; the mean scores were 4.8 and 8.3, the standard deviations were 1.7 and 1.3 for the pre and posttests respectively; (*df* = 35, *t* = 12.362, *p*>.01). This means that the second hypothesis was supported; and d) for grammatical structures; the mean score on the post-test was (8.0) as compared to (4.4) for the pre-test. The *SD* is (1.3) for the post test and (1.7) for the pretest. The *t*-value is (15.048) and this significant for *(df =35)* at the 0.01 level. In other words, the paired samples *t*-test analysis showed a significant difference in favor of students' scores on the post test for all the components of the writing competence.

Relevant interpretations of these findings are offered in the next section.

2.7. Conclusion

As indicated above, the WPBL yielded significant effects on students' cultural awareness and writing competence. Major factors which might have contributed to these results include the ease of access to online resources, authenticity of information, high student motivation, and the integration of modern ICT tools, especially e-mail exchange into email project-based activities.

Yet, this study has several implications to EFL education. First, this study underlines the importance of enhancing students' cultural awareness because language learners need to become more familiar with the target culture in order to overcome the cultural barriers they may encounter when communicating with native speakers. On the other hand, the present study has provided evidence for the role of writing

process approach in enhancing the writing competence. So, EFL teachers should implement the various stages of the writing process (pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing). Students should become aware that writing is a recursive process that requires planning, organizing, editing and evaluating. Adopting the process approach may contribute to improving students' writing quality.

Also, teachers at different stages should make use of the ICT technology available in their language classrooms. Also, students should always be motivated to update their technical skills. Furthermore, EFL/ESL teachers should find out ways to embed the Webbased activities into their instruction. They should know the importance of giving learners interactive activities based on using various multimedia components; e.g., audio, video, text, and graphics.

2.8. Suggestions for further research

Finally, several issues related to this study call for further research. Most importantly, the effect of Web-based project learning on other language skills (listening, speaking, reading and vocabulary) remains unexplored.   Also, the effect of Web-based projects on students' pragmatic performance is worth investigation. Besides, further research should examine the effectiveness of other types of projects e.g., brochures, power point presentations, field trips and diaries in enhancing FL skills. Finally, this study could be replicated on a larger sample and through a longer duration of time.

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