

PROJECT-BASED APPROACH APPLIED TO PINE ASPIRANT STUDENTS: LESSONS LEARNED FROM THREE ACADEMIC PERIODS

ELIANA LEÓN-ABAD and SARA GONZÁLEZ

^{1,2}Universidad Estatal Península de Santa Elena, Ecuador

SUMMARY

This case study presents the results obtained from an intervention carried out with a Project-Based approach in testing three semesters to the PINE-Nivelación program at Universidad Estatal Península de Santa Elena. Instead of responding a close-ended questionnaire as a test, an online TV Broadcast Show project was presented, in which students were responsible from the conception of idea until the execution in a live streaming during the day of their test. The process of organization, assessment, and evaluation for this project took around sixty days per each academic period. The results of the application of this approach in three semesters are shared with the intention of proving there are alternative forms of ESL testing and as reference for future research.

Key Words: PBA; testing; ESL projects; assessment; PINE

INTRODUCTION

According to the Ecuadorian law for Higher Education programs (2018), article 81 states that to have access to any public Ecuadorian university, aspirants must pass a leveling course. At Universidad Estatal Península de Santa Elena (UPSE) several aspirants apply every semester to become formal students in a major from many that this university offers. To have full acceptance to a higher education program, each major had prepared a leveling program that would satisfy and prepare future university students to continue specializing in a specific field of study.

At Education School, aspirants to the *Pedagogía de los Idiomas Nacionales y Extranjeros (PINE)* major are no exception. They must pass three subjects: Elementary English, Spanish Grammar, and Developing Skills. This paper focuses only on the last subject. Developing Skills class syllabus was designed with a main goal: To prepare students to be able to communicate in English language using all four skills.

To achieve this goal, there is a four-month period for students -and teacher- to demonstrate they are ready to become pre-service teachers and become official students at the university's school of education. The program for this class has been designed with different activities that will allow students to practice all four skills in English language. A

variety of techniques and methodologies have been presented with the intention of diversifying and preparing aspirants to get ahead of this module.

One of the characteristics about PINE major aspirant students share is the difference in their English Language levels, and of course, each student has a different background towards English language. Confirming the information stated by Somjai&Soontornwipast(2020), in the English language educational context, the environment of our PINE students does not enhance them to use and produce English in their daily activities.

There is a limitation between what happens in the classroom and their real-life situations. Their only chance to actually produce learned English language is limited to the leveling course classes. This problem had arisen up to the point to even limit the face-to-face interactions due to COVID-19 restrictions in all three consecutive semesters. It was evident that consequences of a pandemic have affected students at UPSE in every aspect of their lives.

This argument is supported by the study entitled The impact of COVID-19 from FACE to FACE to ONLINE learning which evidenced that the COVID – 19 pandemic affected a lot of things such as “education life, home life, parents’ life, students’ life, teachers’ life, and learning process. However, teachers had to look for appropriate ways to develop the learning process of their students and try to increase and motivate them any time.” (Carabajo et al., 2021, p.166)

During the terms this study took place, different approaches were considered. Gathering and looking for activities that would include all, or at least, almost all four skills was a challenge. Paddy (2021) stated that even though there are different approaches to teach English Language, there will always be a debate on deciding which is the most effective. Every teacher’s intention would be to look for the best to help students to develop English language skills.

Another problem detected was the lack of effective tests to maximize the use of four English language skills considering the limitations referring to time, resources, and confinement. It was necessary to validate all skills acquired in the Developing Skills classes. For instance, students would demonstrate they are ready to continue their university’s major studies.

To obtain an integral evaluation of contents, different approaches were presented in class. One of approaches was Project-Based Learning in the form of an online streaming show. The objective of applying this approach is because it provides a deeper learning in real-life contexts. On ERIC (2022) webpage, explained by Roessingh (2010) as stated originally by Davis et al. (2000) working on these tasks would assess learners’ interests, experiences, and knowledge with the appropriate direction and guide in the learning process.

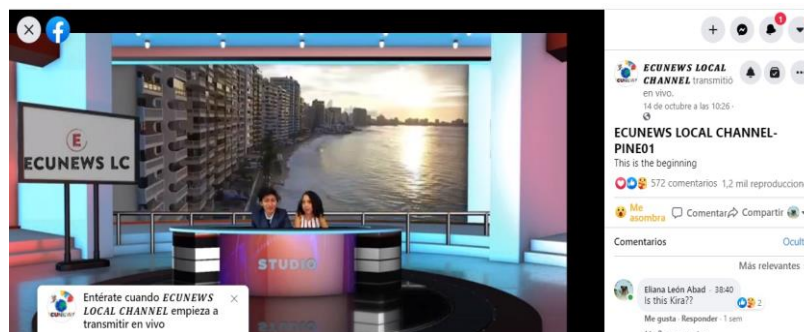
The subject of this study was the creation of an Online TV Broadcast Show and the evaluation of all activities that were implied in it. As the final test, students had to demonstrate that they are able to apply all four English language skills while creating the segments, writing and editing the scripts, preparing and helping their peers to present and pronounce words correctly, editing the videos and working with voiceovers and subtitling, all together with the creation and promotion of their broadcast in two different social media sites.

To be specific, at the end of each academic semester, to pass the Developing Skills subject, they had to work on a project called “EcuNews Channel”. Figure 1 shows the first group’s live broadcast. This project consisted in creating a streaming channel that will present a variety of segments, interviews, news broadcasts, the weather report, conversation with authorities or people who are an influence in the university community.

To organize this, students belonged to different crews, which were organized in the areas of video/editing, music/animation, script creation, social media editors (must create a fan page, obtain followers/viewers for presentation day, revisors/pronunciation coaches, Hosts (presenters), news anchors, a cooking segment, a medical advice segment, a varieties show/interview, and a sports segment. The streaming was presented live and would not be longer than thirty minutes.

Figure 1

Broadcast of the first project presentation – EcuNews Local Channel – PINE parallel 01



Note: Screenshot taken while students were presenting live their project. To avoid any unforeseen event, students chose to present via Facebook and YouTube channels.

Even though the project integrated all students, they were evaluated under individual and group rubrics. In total they were evaluated with three rubrics categorized in Preproduction, Multimedia, and Presentation stages; the teacher was always in charge of registering an observation sheet per class. At the end, they were evaluated by their teacher, a second English teacher who was going to observe and evaluate the final presentation (show),

and two students from a higher semester were also in charge of giving a qualitative overall evaluation for reference.

METHODOLOGY

The participants of this study correspond to a population of 132 students aspiring to the Pedagogy of National and Foreign Languages (PINE, as per its initials in Spanish) major at Universidad Estatal Península de Santa Elena (UPSE) during the academic semesters 2020-1, 2020-2, and 2021-1. From this population 42 are male and 90 female aspirants among 17 and 35 years old. The research question established for these purposes was:

Did the implementation of a test based on a project-based approach enhance overall English skills in PINE aspirant students?

The design of this study is quantitative as the grades' records obtained from pre-tests and post-tests are considered. The method applied in this work is non-experimental since it has a specific group chosen to compare test results at the beginning and at the end of the intervention "without the manipulation of an independent variable" and the research question is only exploratory. (Chiang, 2015, p.287).

The datum collected for analysis belong to the evaluation grades on first and second tests from each academic period. The comparison between previous and post project application will serve as a variable analysis to answer the research question proposed. A review about the teacher's observation records will also be discussed, as this paper intends to identify changes in motivation, English language adaptation to real-life contents, and the use of the four skills during the organization and presentation. There were some objectives settled, the research was looking for alternative sources of testing beyond the generic platform questions and multiple-choice answers.

This research was mainly focused on achieving the following main objective: Analyze the influence and results of a Project-Based approach to PINE aspirant students during three academic periods. To achieve this, the following specific objectives were settled: 1) To collect pertinent data to compare and analyze results before and after the application of the "EcuNews" project, performed by PINE aspirant students during three academic periods between the years 2020 and 2021; 2) To analyze grade scores, skills obtained and motivation in students during and after a Project-Based approach developed with PINE aspirant students.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Lesson learned 1: A Project Based Approach resulted in higher scores in all three academic semesters.

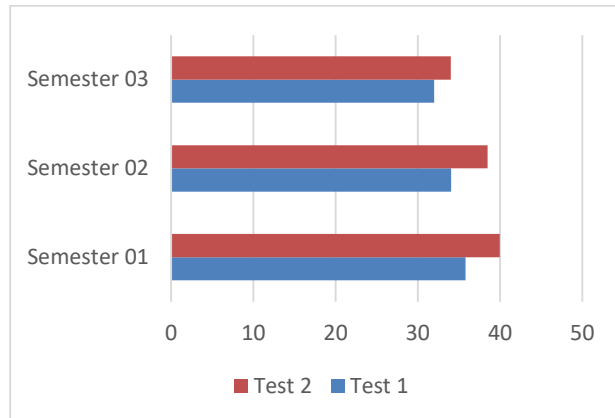
The application of this approach intended to work with all four English language skills together or try to develop with students the use of most of them at the same time while

they were developing the project. The process of scaffolding students' experience as learners in this methodology took a time for explanation, preparation, rehearsal, and application. The teacher was aware that this form of evaluation took some beginners' steps, and it was a different way of learning and thinking for students. At the beginning, teacher and students dealt with some challenges concerning to understanding the project-based methodology process, following each groups' activities, doing research before, during, and after class among other tasks.

It represented a series of classwork, homework, individual and group activities that were part of their formative assessment. Now, putting all these activities together was the main goal of the final test. Everything that was learned, compiled, adapted, and applied for two months had to be reflected in a thirty-minute broadcast. What was the result? Students demonstrated that each one had a role, and as a group, they had to pull all these experiences out together and obtain a final product.

Figure 2

Developing Skills Subject Test Scores



Note: Figure 2 represents the scores obtained by PINE aspirant students in three academic periods (2020-1, 2020-2, 2021-1) in the subject Developing Skills. Test 1 was the result of an objective test together with an individual speaking test. PBL was applied during the second term and was the result of Test 2.

Grading with the rubrics helped students, teachers, and external peers identifying the items that would have been evaluated. This represented a helpful guide to getting to know exactly what they were supposed to do and present. Figure 2 compares the scores obtained before and after the intervention. The blue row represents the first test, considered as a traditional form of evaluating ESL students with objective questions and

a speech previously memorized. The red row shows the test results after the project aired. As a result, after grading individually and the groups' process, the scores for the second test increased in 4.15 points for semester 1, a total of 4.44 points in the second semester, and in the third semester there was an increase of 2 points.

The results above evidenced previous studies done more than a decade ago, proving positive effects on the test results for students who were evaluated under a PBL methodology. Hallinger & Lu (2011) demonstrated that ratings in the implementation their research based in PBL programs "rose from an initial mean of 3.54 in the first term of implementation... to a level of 4.06 by the end of the first year of implementation" (p. 276) showing the effectiveness of their PBL program in higher education scenarios.

Hence, evaluating a project may have different opinions, it could be said that it was the big elephant in the room. Larmer (2019) suggests interesting ideas for grading PBL. Some of these ideas were considered at the moment of recording class grades and obtaining an overall average. The first one and the most important to consider was that the project's presentation was only a small percentage of all grades obtained. It is important to emphasize that greater weight to individual classwork was assessed. The teacher used a traditional quiz applied in Quizziz platform to register the use of correct vocabulary and use of English. As mentioned before, rubrics were also considered for formative and summative assessment.

To sum up, evidence has proven that shifting processes and evaluation towards a PBL model helped students to improve their grades, and it also helped the teacher to understand how this could be evaluated and what could have less ponderation in scoring. As a result, the instructor and the learners benefited in these areas.

Lesson learned 2: A Project Based Approach encourages the production of skills and positive attitudes.

Developing this project resulted in lots of benefits for the students. Teacher's observation records evidence an increase in students' oral and written skills. Following Granado-Alcón et al. (2020) research, teachers also became a guide for instructing and assessing students in the right path to follow. However, the ones with the active role were the students, who had to construct their knowledge by exploring and adjusting content into their contexts.

A project-based approach in general looks connecting competencies with the demands of the real-world. The project students were able to present explored all the above, proving that students were exposed to a real English language which had to be adapted into their needs. Teamwork, leadership, sharing tech knowledge, respecting opinions, problem solving, guiding others were the most prominent values, attitudes, and skills obtained from teacher's records.

As they had to broadcast online, students were able not only to practice English language, but they also gained other ICT competencies. Students demonstrated how to create a

Facebook fan page, a YouTube channel, create content to invite and obtain subscribers to their social media, gaining leads, and program a Premiere video and more digital marketing tools involved in this process. As stated by Hallinger and Lu (2011), “the fact that students are “learning English” does not enable them to acquire the abilities and understanding they will need for the twenty-first century.” (p. 269)

One more relevant aspect was developed here. They found peer coaches who were responsible of guiding, helping with pronunciation, taking them into the pre-production features, leading their own peers to the goal set. As a reminder, this project was carried out in the middle of a pandemic. Students did not attend to face-to-face classes. Consequently, as a class, there was not any “classroom culture”, they only had a WhatsApp group chat. This caused some to become invisible, do not have any real friend or a “real” classmate around. For the teacher it was evident that the class was not a class, they were isolated students who met five hours a week with the teacher.

During and after project’s execution, the teacher noticed changes in students’ interactions. Internal jokes, nicknames, emotions while greeting their peers started to emerge. All these feelings helped to create a group of classmates, peers, colleagues, and friends. They were not distant anymore, they started to become “altogether” working on a project. Some of the comments the teacher received were “Miss, I can finally know the names of all of my classmates.” Other students claimed that “This is the first time I can talk to my friends other things than University stuff.” All of these feelings, emotions, skills, values, attitudes, and competencies helped to create a closer group of human beings pursuing one objective in common.

3) Lesson learned 3: A Project Based Approach promotes students’ engagement

When talking about engagement, it is referred to intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in the teaching-learning process. Harun et al. (2012) suggested that motivation is key at the moment of learning. Studer & Knecht in Progress in Brain Research (2016) talked about the Expectancy Value Theory firstly developed by John William Atkinson in the 1950s and 1960s, which explains that each human being is motivated if there is an expectation that the desirable result will be considered as valuable, in other words, the author states this phrase by declaring that actually “nobody wants to take a risk if they believe they will fail” (p. 234)

At the beginning of a PBL approach there was a certain resistance from the students, mainly because it was a new methodology for them, and they felt insecure with this approach as they did not have any previous experience. Hence, Studer & Knecht (2016) reveal that the motivation in students tends to be low during the first phase. However, motivation plays an important role at the moment of applying a project-based approach methodology. Concerning to this, Studer & Knecht (2016) emphasize the following:

Tasks that seem to be valued by students are actually influenced by several factors of motivation. It can be seen worth doing from different angles. Biggs and Tang [2] referred to extrinsic, social, achievement and intrinsic motivation as the factors affecting students

to engage in tasks... These elements can be closely linked to the expectancy-value theory and the goals that students can set and the process to attain those goals. (p. 235)

In this project specifically, the motivation of students increased as they gained knowledge and understanding about what they had to prepare and how they were going to present it. In the extrinsic way, students felt that they socially belonged to a group, they did not feel alone, they had a guide (teacher) and some “experienced peers” who they could benefited from: some of them could work with technology, others knew how to edit videos in a cellphone, some others helped with pronunciation and spelling correction, and others were able to use social media for free advertising. Shared previous experiences turned into higher motivation as lessons moved on.

In the intrinsic way, self-motivation was evidenced in extra efforts students did in order to have positive feedback from their peers. Students who considered themselves “limited while speaking English” felt they needed to improve (and quickly) because the others depended on them. All this external and internal feelings of wanting to do it better led students to develop a higher self-esteem and the power to recognize that everyone had something to teach and something to learn.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper was sought with the intention of proposing a different form of evaluation for students at a higher education level. After COVID-19 pandemic, higher education will no longer be the same. It is up to educators adapt curriculums and find other forms of assessment to encourage *learning while doing*. Learners need skills and competencies to lead them towards the XXI century, and the application of a project-based approach can help on that.

This study proposed the creation, production, implementation, and presentation of a TV Show, with the characteristics that communication and technology permit today. The intention was to offer a holistic approach to the development of English Language Skills to help and motivate PINE aspirant students to become greater pre-service English teachers.

During and after the application of this project, it was expected to identify higher results on project-based evaluations not only in scores, but also as a combination of ESL & ICT acquired skills opposite to the results from objective English language testing. Students were encouraged to think outside the box. The project presented positive insights, but it also evidenced challenges for all participants.

Motivation played an important role as this was an unexpected variable that influenced greatly in the learners’ academic and personal areas. The information generated in this research would serve as a baseline for future references in the field of assessment and evaluation, as Universidad Estatal Península de Santa Elena tends to generate deeper research based on previous projects done with its students.

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