

Article

Student identity: transitions through project work

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ABSTRACT

Students entering higher education in the UK must be able to learn independently and understand how knowledge is constructed in their future academic community. This is particularly true for international students, who may come from academic backgrounds with very different practices and conceptions surrounding learning, teaching and the nature of academic discourse. This paper outlines a project-based course innovation involving students on a pre-sessional EAP course in a UK university. We argue that project-based learning not only develops students' language and academic skills but also provides the means to develop their identities as legitimate participants in their future academic communities.

Introduction

Over the last two decades, the growth of UK Higher Education (UKHE) has been accompanied by a rise in the number of international students, to nearly 392,000 in 2014-2015 (UKCISA, 2016). All students entering UKHE must quickly become familiar with what is expected of them as learners, how teaching takes place, and how academic knowledge is constructed in this context (Wingate, 2007), yet many international students come from academic cultures where student and tutor expectations, teaching and learning, and knowledge creation practices differ significantly from the UK. To support international students through this transition, Luxon and Peelo (2009) note a need for local-level initiatives that act as a conduit for top-down international student recruitment policies. This article examines one such innovation, a supported independent study project within a pre-sessional course. The project casts learners in a new role, with implications not only for their experience and understanding of practices in UKHE, but also for their perception of who they are and how they contribute to this learning community.

Rationale and background to the project

To aid international student transition into the academic, linguistic, and cultural norms of UKHE, the institution discussed here, offers pre-sessional courses in English Language and Academic Skills. These run year-round for between 40 and 5 weeks, with entry points every 5 weeks. Courses are in English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP), moving to discipline-specific pathways for the 5 weeks preceding the commencement of academic programmes in September. Most students come from East Asia, particularly China, and the Middle East. The majority progress to postgraduate taught programmes in a range of disciplines.

The innovation described here is a 10-week project involving 150 students which took place from April to June 2016 within the EGAP phase of the pre-sessional course. The project involved two 90-minute classes and 1-2 hours of independent work per week. Students worked in groups to conduct simple empirical research into an aspect of the University's proposed 10-year, multi-million pound campus development.

The project was introduced to enhance learner autonomy and group work skills for study and employment, and was aligned to the University's graduate attributes. Intended learning outcomes (ILOs) were for students to:

- Recognise and apply common processes and features of basic empirical research projects
- Engage with the University and local community
- Work effectively in multicultural groups
- Work independently and manage their time
- Reflect on learning.

The project was unassessed and formative, to encourage linguistic and academic experimentation. The BALEAP Can-Do Framework for EAP syllabus design and assessment also informed course design (BALEAP, 2013). The course designers' approach was not that students must adopt the culture of the receiving institution. However, we believe that international students must be able to understand and navigate practices in UKHE to avoid "cultural shock": "a primary issue affecting student success" through its potential impact on academic performance and personal well-being (Kingston & Forland, 2008, pp. 211-212).

Project outline

The project structure was as follows. Students formed groups in week one. A "flipped classroom" approach was taken in the first five weeks, with classroom time utilised to "push" linguistic output (Swain, 1995) and support more linguistically and cognitively demanding tasks. Students learnt about the project topic through background reading and by attending a guest lecture in week two, then selected a sub-topic of the campus development to investigate, such as study space design, conservation of the University's historic buildings, or green energy. They considered basic research methods and ethics, then created research questions and instruments. These instruments consisted of questions for 15-minute interviews with campus development team members (architects, planners and project managers), organised by course designers. Students also wrote short questionnaires and administered them in person to the public, students and University staff to elicit perceptions, preferences and recommendations regarding the campus development. Data were collected and analysed in weeks six to nine, and in week 10 findings were disseminated via poster presentations attended by peers and interviewees. Throughout the project, formative feedback was provided from tutors, peers and self-reflection, mainly to enhance learning processes and learner autonomy.

Shifting learner engagement

Tutors and course designers continually evaluated and developed the project using reflection, observation, discussion, and informal student feedback from conversations and in-class

surveys. We became aware that, although project ILOs were presented explicitly to students in the course overview and by tutors, student feedback suggested that what they felt they were learning was quite different to what we intended.

In its early stages of the project, despite their academic abilities, experiences and other attributes, some students struggled to identify the project aims or did not identify with the aims. This disconnect had several possible causes: the unfamiliar project topic which was unrelated to students' academic programmes; its cognitively and linguistically challenging tasks; or the difference between its goals and the more conventional language and skills focus of other EAP classes. Further, many students' prior experience and expectations of assessment-led learning and didactic teaching practices contrasted with this unassessed, student-led project. The prospect of interviewing high-status professionals was also daunting, with the fear of public failure and reduced self-esteem if communication broke down. These disparities may have precipitated insecurity and poor identification with the project.

In the subsequent data collection phase, student engagement seemed to grow. Despite our initial concerns over student engagement, the interview session with campus development team professionals was successful and vibrant as students interviewed (many for the first time) a native or proficient non-native user of English who was not a language tutor; they could see the connect or disconnect between questions and responses, and evaluate their interaction. Students and interviewees reported effective communication, and the feeling of 'inclusion' in an academic community was evident in their language, instruments, preparation and attitudes. This was reflected in or perhaps partly due to the professional interviewees' treatment of the students as educated, articulate and "valid" postgraduate researchers.

These interviews emerged as a significant milestone in the project and in students' self-perception. From this point, momentum gathered in terms of student motivation, engagement, and quality of work. Students increasingly understood how the different elements of the project supported each other; for instance, how research questions, texts and empirical data interacted to create new knowledge. The one-hour poster presentation session in week ten formed an important conclusion to the project, with many students confidently presenting convincing and articulate research findings to peers, tutors and campus development team members.

Student engagement: the role of critical incidents

We had not anticipated such an obvious and positive shift in student engagement over the duration of the project. Students were moving away from language learning as a primary objective even though tutors saw strong improvements in this regard. This shift was paralleled in student feedback and reflection which increasingly referred to skills and activities they associated with postgraduate student researchers. Students often focused on learning outcomes prompted by what we understood as "critical incidents" in and outside class, such as interviewing, ethical awareness, analysis and visual presentation of data, or teamwork. Some incidents did not involve tutors, while others held high significance for students but not for tutors and course designers. This fits with Tripp (1993, p. 40) that "incidents only become critical because someone sees them as such" and suggests growing student reflection on action.

The second emerging theme was students' emotional response; notably, growing confidence and satisfaction at being able to complete project tasks. Few students reported increased connection with this university in particular, but instead, many seemed to be adopting a more assured postgraduate student role with their growing ability to create knowledge, co-constructed with other participants in their sociocultural context and through intertextuality.

This may be an example of an adjustment of self-beliefs which, according to Wingate (2007, p. 395) contributes to understanding how one learns within an HE environment. Similarly, Farrell (2008, p. 3) notes that formal reflection on incidents can help the individual to develop new understandings of the learning process. Our course design and its informal feedback mechanisms seemed to be a catalyst to develop this “noticing” disposition which supports learner autonomy.

Evolving roles and participation

We believe the shift in self-perception from language learner to postgraduate student reflected the development of nascent identities situated in a postgraduate student community of practice, real or imagined, as the project demystified structures, roles and codes. Students may have had some form of L2 self-image before arriving in the UK, as implied in their choice to undertake postgraduate study in an L2 environment, and projects build on this. For some students, this image was clearly somewhat nebulous, but we believed that those with pre-course experience of academic or professional life had a stronger L2 self, reflected in a more immediate identification with the project ILOs and attainment of academic and research skills outcomes. Underlining the importance of identity in learning, this could be seen as the beginning of “legitimate peripheral participation” (LPP), or “the process by which newcomers become part of a community of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29). This transition seemed to be facilitated in this case by the projects. Participation and “future selves”

Lave and Wenger (*ibid*) state that motivation relates strongly to identity and membership; we believe that projects motivate and equip learners with the language, skills, understanding of its systems and sense of legitimate belonging to participate in a community. Using the framework provided by Dörnyei’s L2 Motivational Self System (2009), the identity shifts we saw could also be interpreted as learners integrating with their own self-concept rather than an external community. Experiences, interactions and critical incidents within the project enhanced a sufficiently vivid and plausible self-image to motivate behaviour to achieve a future “ideal self”, for example, the use of videos or examples of a task, followed by classroom input, practice and feedback, then task performance in the semi-authentic project context. However, the “ought-to” L2 self, conforming to external norms and expectations, may have also motivated students as a preventative measure to avoid failure in the project, for example in their thorough preparation for public task performance. This may have particular relevance for students who had told or implied to tutors during the course that their academic path was largely determined by parental or societal expectations.

Implications for EAP course design

A typical EAP class could be perceived as both restricted and restrictive; it aims to develop necessary academic competencies but may take a prescriptive approach, imposing a fixed identity on learners that does not build the confidence, motivation, or autonomy of a more organically evolved identity. Alternatively, omission of identity as an explicit learning outcome, or failure to situate it, may create difficulties if vague or conflicting identities can emerge only incidentally in a course. Through course content which enables students to position themselves within the practices, roles and systems of a real or even imagined target community of international postgraduate students, and through providing opportunities to develop social membership in this community, student identities can develop to guide learning.

Our findings might support Salter-Dvorak's call for courses which go beyond the basic "bolt-on language courses" that appear to be seen by some within UKHE as sufficient to support international students. Rather, there is a need for courses and activities which allow learners to "create identities which can enable LPP" (2014, p. 857), not as actors conforming to an imposed norm, but as valid and self-directed participants creating and adding to a community.

Conclusion

Our initial aims in devising the project discussed in this article were to enhance student autonomy, group work skills and engagement with the University. We believe that the project achieved the last two objectives, and certainly met the first one, although deeper investigation of individual student experiences and critical incidents is needed to enhance understanding of themes that emerged from the project. Nevertheless, we propose that situated projects that attend explicitly to identity provide conditions which are absent from many classroom-only language-based courses. These conditions can develop the strong motivational force of an ideal future self, with potentially powerful long-term implications for learning. In longer EAP preparatory programmes, elements that are explicitly included to sustain, develop and focus motivation to enable situated identity development and legitimate peripheral participation have great potential for guiding learning. Indeed, we believe that these may be as necessary an element in EAP programmes as more traditional language and academic skills in supporting student transitions to UKHE.

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