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Promising Practices: Task-Based Grammar Projects: Engaging and Empowering University IEP Students

By Lisa Rost Lewis and Joy Daniels Bueti

Second language research suggests that a focus on structure is beneficial for language acquisition for adult ELLs and that it is most effective when integrated within meaningful, communicative contexts (Savage, Bitterlin & Price, 2010). When language teachers use task-based projects as a means to “mobilize [students’] grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning” (Nunan, 2004), students can be both engaged in the classroom and empowered to use language for authentic purposes. With this in mind we decided to integrate task-based grammar projects into our Academic Purposes ESL classes in the Haggerty English Language Program at the State University of New York, New Paltz (known as HELP at SUNY New Paltz).

The Academic Purposes (AP) level is the fourth and highest level in our program. At this level students take a combination of ESL and academic classes. The core ESL classes (Reading/Writing, Listening/Speaking, and Grammar) at the AP level are credit bearing and are designed to prepare students for academic study. Thus, the end goal of the AP Reading/Writing class is for students to produce a portfolio of essays that can pass a review by composition teachers in the English department, and the end goal of the AP Listening/Speaking class is for students to successfully give a presentation to a panel that includes instructors both in and outside of the IEP. It seemed fitting, therefore, to have a culminating project in AP Grammar that would also provide students with a bridge to their academic studies.

The two projects that we developed independently are “Campus Interviews” and “News Reports.” These projects have been used separately with different classes. What both projects have in common is that they are assigned to the students to work on for portions of the semester, leading to a culminating presentation, while the class simultaneously studies with the textbook Focus on Grammar 5 (Mauer, 2012). Both projects have the goal of increasing the students’ familiarity and comfort when participating in academic settings and allowing them to use increasingly sophisticated grammar in authentic situations.

Campus Interview Project
The Campus Interview project provides students with an opportunity to speak with a professor or professional in their field. Students identify someone to interview who is in their chosen field of study and write interview questions, revising as necessary. Students then make an appointment to speak with the person, which allows us to address cultural issues of appropriateness and politeness and work with grammatical structures such as embedded questions. They practice interviewing each other to become comfortable before finally interviewing the professor, where they have the opportunity to use and comprehend spoken English in an authentic setting.

After completing their interviews, the students write a report, following guidelines and including certain grammar points. The format of the report is loosely based on one that would be used for a research report: overview, methods, results, and reflection. The students are asked to incorporate many of the grammar points that they’ve worked on throughout the semester: indirect speech, passive voice, adjective and adverb clauses, and a variety of verb tenses. The report format lends itself well to a natural use of these structures.

Finally, on the day of the final exam, instead of taking a traditional “grammar test,” the students meet for a symposium, where they share the results of their projects and listen actively to each other, taking notes and asking questions. In follow up comments about the project, students have expressed feeling more “confident” and “encouraged” about pursuing degrees in their fields because of having interacted with the professors and having integrated their “findings” into a scholarly report.

News Reports

The News Report project provides students with the opportunity to become investigative reporters. Ultimately, students will create a news broadcast about an unsolved mystery. Students are asked to explore unsolved mysteries on Unsolved.com. This website, a holdover from the television show Unsolved Mysteries, contains stories from the bizarre to the macabre. Students enjoy this process. They see electronic forms of media: television, magazines, newspapers, and the Web as pertaining to their lives; therefore, they are more interested and involved in the texts (Hobbs, 2005). Just by looking at this site, students are engaged and excited about the project. In small groups, students are asked to focus on one unsolved mystery. Once they have made their selection, they must summarize the mystery and share it with group members. Through this exchange, students make sure they have addressed the key points of their mystery and disseminate information as they decide what will be useful in their report, thereby demonstrating skills preparing them for success in their academic classes.

Then students complete the next part of the process: research. Through the use of library databases, they delve deeper into their mysteries, finding more information to enhance their broadcasts. Researching exposes students to authentic language through a variety of electronic media. Warschauer and Meskill (as cited in Hobbs, 2005, Multimodality and Motivation section, para. 3) stated, “Skillful media use and script-reading activities can also support the acquisition
of English language skills, particularly among second-language learners.” In addition to fostering language learning, students learn how to do research – an invaluable skill for college students.

Now, students are ready to write the script for their news broadcast. It is here they must be mindful of grammatical constructions in their writing, paying particular attention to tenses, adjective and adverb clauses, passive voice and reported speech. Students write the first draft of their script, and then the revision process begins. Reporter groups are paired off and the groups share the scripts with each other, obtaining feedback on content and grammar. Then the scripts are handed to the teacher for feedback. When scripts are returned, there is another revision process with a new group. Practicing the writing process is a skill useful in college classes. Finally, the script goes to production.

At this point of the process students create their news broadcasts. They do this outside of the classroom with very little input from the teacher. Through this learner autonomy, students are motivated to produce a product that is both creative and interesting. A sample broadcast can be found at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_y0LXsSOa7Q&list=UUOFMVzaF07wyCsDMviC86qA

During the last class, there is a screening of the news broadcasts. Lively discussion ensues following the reports, which they all thoroughly enjoy watching. Students become competent presenters, another skill that will serve them well in academic classes.

Conclusion

Both of these task-based projects offer students the opportunity to use grammar in an authentic context. By focusing on situations that are interesting and meaningful to them, students develop language as a means to an end, rather than as an end in itself. Students are motivated, engaged, and empowered through these projects, and they develop skills crucial for success, not only at the university level but also beyond.

References


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