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Turning from traditional methods to project-based instruction, the author found that her students learned more

by Susan Gaer

I was a traditional teacher using a grammar-based curriculum along with dialogues and drills to teach English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) to immigrant populations when I arrived at the Visalia Adult School in central California in 1989. There I found a population of Southeast Asian Lao, Hmong, Mien, and Lahu refugees who had been in beginning-level ESOL classes since their arrival in the United States in the early 1980s. Most of the instructors were using the type of instruction I did; it was not working with the group at all. The students seemed resistant and had little confidence in their ability to learn English.

Reading all I could on different types of learning, I came across Elsa Auerbach's work. In her book *Making Meaning, Making Change*, she describes ways to help students develop language skills while conducting a meaningful project. I was intrigued about the possibilities of using a project-based curriculum and decided to try it. I described some projects from *Making Meaning, Making Change* to my students, explaining that I would like them to do something similar. They agreed to give it a try. In searching for a topic, we talked about the concerns they had that their children were losing their cultures. The students wanted to do something about this. We decided they could write down recipes they knew from Southeast Asia, recipes that were, until then, passed orally from cook to cook. Students brought ingredients to school, learned the terms for how to measure them, then made the food. We wrote down the recipes as the food was prepared and compiled them into a cookbook. This project helped my students develop a sense of community and an interest in attempting a more complicated project.

Although, in theory, students should choose projects themselves, in lower level ESOL classes, students quite often do not have the language or

confidence to develop project themes. I listen to my students to identify underlying issues that are meaningful to them. To get things about what will engage them, I pay attention to what they read, write, and say about their lives, their families, and their jobs. I have found that, in the beginning, sometimes even with more advanced ESOL students, I choose the project, but as time goes on, the choice of project shifts to them.

Folktales

Following the cookbook effort, I wanted another project that would put the students in the role of expert. Most of the students had minimal reading and writing skills but very strong oral traditions. At the time, I was working with a family literacy program as a volunteer. The program focused a lot on storytelling. I realized that the students could be experts and pass on some of their culture by telling the Lao, Hmong Mien, and Lahu folktales that they had learned as children.

The original idea was to have the students practice the folktales and then tell them to elementary or pre-school children. Looking for information on how American folktales are told, I went to the district librarian. She informed me that the eighth grade curriculum had a unit on folk tales and suggested that I team up with a class at the middle school to develop a joint project. I contacted the appropriate teacher, who was enthusiastic. Together we defined the project: my students would tell folktales from their countries to the middle school students. The middle school students would write them down and illustrate them and we would try to get them published. My language objectives for the class were to have students tell a sequenced story using pictures as a storyboard that would be understandable to the eighth graders. My students would read what the middle school students had written and critique it for accuracy.

When I first approached my students with this project they were not sure it would be possible, concerned that their language skills were not good enough. If I thought it would work, however, they wanted to do it. They wanted to get these folktales written in English for their children and grandchildren. They knew that their oral traditions were dying and this would be a way to preserve some of their culture.

The district librarian came to class and, telling tales such as *The Three Little Pigs* and *Cinderella*, showed the

A Hmong Folktale

Once upon a time in Laos there lived two people who were very much in love. Their names were Tongni and Saemi. The young sixteen-year-old couple wanted desperately to get married. The only thing standing in the way of the couple's happiness was Tongni's parents' strong disapproval of Saemi. Tongni's parents refused to let their beloved son marry her because she was from a Hmong clan different from their own.

Tongni's love for Saemi was so great that he died of a broken heart. He could not accept the fact that he would never be able to marry his true love, unless his parents changed their minds about her. Saemi sang mournful songs expressing her feelings about how she had no place to go and how she didn't know

students the various ways that folktales could be told using puppets, visuals, body language, and role play. This was foreign to my students. Their storytelling customs included very little use of body language and no visuals. To engage eighth graders, however, I suspected they would need something in addition to their oral skills. We decided on using visuals to supplement the storytelling.

After the librarian's visit, the eighth grade class hosted a get together so they could get to know my students. The middle school students were fascinated by my students' childhoods. They were particularly intrigued by the early age of marriage in the Hmong, Lahu, Lao, and Mien communities. While only a handful of my students had shown up for this activity, all who attended seemed to have a wonderful time.

what to do now that she must live without her only true love. After Tongni was buried, Saemi went to see him. She couldn't see him while he was being buried because in the Hmong custom, it is wrong for the women to see the burial. For seven days Saemi took rice, chicken, and pies to Tongni's house. At his house, Saemi cried and called frantically for him to wake up. She did this six times and still he did not wake up. But the seventh time she called him, Tongni rose from the dead and Saemi was overwhelmed with joy.

The couple went to Tongni's house and begged his parents' approval of their marriage. They reminded his parents that Saemi had proved faithful to Tongni by waking him up. His parents were pleased that their son was finally getting married. At Tongni and Saemi's joyful wedding, they received beautiful new clothes and had a lot of fun. The wedding was very festive with many joyful people. Tongni and Saemi rejoiced their life together and lived happily ever after.

- told by Hmong students at the Visalia Adult School and written by students at Green Acres Middle School in Visalia, CA

When we next met in the classroom, a discussion developed among the students. I did not take part. After it was over, those who were not at the party apologized for being absent, admitting they did not come for fear of being ridiculed by middle school students, who were the same age as their children. They had heard about how well the party had gone and about how interested these children were in their lives and cultures. They asked me to schedule another meeting, promising to attend. This is, indeed, what happened. Not only did every one of my students come, they brought some of their family members as well.

Meaningful Language

Once the two classes had met, the real work began. I divided my students into language groups: Lahu, Lao, Hmong, Mien. Each group chose a folktale to tell. Then they had to find pictures to go with story. This required research in a local library looking for appropriate pictures. My students prepared storyboards visuals depicting the story and practiced telling their stories. They practiced in class and with other classes. They practiced and practiced and practiced. This is when I first started seeing meaningful language development grow out of project-based instruction. Usually when I asked my

students to practice a language structure, they do so for only a few minutes. With this activity, I asked them to stop and they begged me to let them continue. They really wanted to do their best in front of those eighth graders. In addition to practicing, I had borrowed many American folktales from the district library and read these on a regular basis with my class. At the same time, the middle school students were learning how to ask for clarification and what types of details make for a good written story, and studying the cultures of the students.

Finally, the day arrived. My students told their folktales to the middle school students, who recorded them on audio tape. Although the tales were never officially published, I label the project success. I believe that by practicing to present a folk tale, my students improved their oral skills; their presentations in English were the proof. In earlier ESOL classes, my students were trying to learn grammar and failed. This project allowed them to be in control, as they once were in their native countries. They had a successful interchange with native speakers of English. In addition, during this project, my students were content experts and the middle school students were learning from them. I believe this raised my students' self esteem. My students also expressed satisfaction in seeing a previously unwritten tale documented. The eighth graders seemed to get a lot out of this experience, as well. It was one of their first exposures to the Lao, Hmong, Mien, and Lahu cultures.

A New Setting

Six years and many projects later, I joined the staff of Santa Ana College, School of Continuing Education, Centennial Education Center. Located in an urban setting, it has about 36,000 ESOL students, most of whom are Latino. Enamoured as I was with project-based education, I wanted to develop a project that would work here, with these students. Because Santa Ana had very structured curricula with set standards that had to be met, I started out by integrating small projects into the curriculum. Lower level students developed a photo essay about their families; upper level students wrote about their families and made class books.

I wanted to do something that would have a larger impact on the student body as a whole. In the spring, 1996, I interviewed students involved in student government about what they felt was lacking in the school. The consensus was that a student newspaper was needed. So, I decided to propose a class that would develop one. It was approved by the curriculum committee and my department by the end of summer, 1996. The class I created was called Computers and Writing. It began in the fall, 1997.

I advertised the class; about 12 students enrolled. Despite the late afternoon schedule, the 12 were there everyday. We formed an editorial committee and wrote a survey that we distributed to all students via their teachers. The survey was in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese so that everyone could respond. Survey questions listed topics that the newspaper could cover, such as art, sports, games, articles about the community, articles about school events, school calendar. Students checked the topics in which they were interested. We received about 500 responses, tallied them, and used the

information to decide what features we would run in the first issue of our newspaper. We then issued a call for articles and got quite a few articles from students on all campuses of the college.

While the students were creating the issue, I spent a lot of time working with them on the skills needed to write articles, using the writing process approach. For example, in one issue, students interviewed our Dean. First, they wrote questions, next they interviewed her, taping the interview. Finally, they wrote the article. At each step of the way, I critiqued their work, helped them develop the articles, and worked on necessary grammar points related to their articles. We also studied the *Los Angeles Times* and learned about photo captions and headlines.

The first issue, in fall, 1997, was nine pages long. Although class met for only five hours a week, between work done at home and in class, the students worked on the paper for about 12 hours a week. When we were close to finishing the first issue, we stayed long hours into the night. I was surprised that the editorial group was willing to do this. We published the paper by Thanksgiving and, after a publishing party of sparkling apple cider and chips, we evaluated the process. Students in the class wanted to do more writing. We had received so many articles from other classes that few articles from the class were needed. We have gradually worked more class writing into the newspaper. Our administration was so pleased with the product that they provided a newspaper stand in which we could place copies of the newspaper. We have now published three issues of the newspaper and hope that this school year brings at least three more issues.

Crucial Elements

Reflecting on my experiences using project-based instruction, I realize that a number of elements are crucial to success.

The project must be geared to the population. The folktale project would not have worked with my young urban Latino population. The newspaper would have been a disaster with my mostly non-literate Southeast Asians.

The students must see value in a project. The folktale project was developed to save oral stories from extinction. The cookbook project documented traditional recipes. The newspaper was a need identified by the students at the Centennial Education Center. If the project resonates with the students, then they will work to complete it.

Flexible timeliness are necessary. I have had the most success when projects can start and end within a four- to six-week time frame. This allows students a sense of completion and success. Although my newspaper project is a semester-long course, I try to get the students to produce a newspaper every six weeks.

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about their lives, their families, and their jobs. I have found that, in the beginning, sometimes even with more advanced ESOL students, I choose the project, but as time goes on, the choice of project shifts to them.

With beginning level students, I need to take a fairly active role, providing examples of completed projects to encourage the students to produce their own. With more advanced classes, it is easier to get the class to develop a project that meets a need they have identified. In these situations, I take the role of a facilitator. Classes can do multiple projects if the class has multiple needs. In a multilevel class, learners can be grouped and a number of different projects can be run at the same time. If a class identifies a number of needs, they can also work in groups clustered around different needs.

I have found that, as I work through the first projects with new students, they are rather skeptical. But once they see the finished product, whether it is a cookbook, a newspaper, a performance, or something else, their skepticism evaporates. At my school, word of mouth has brought me classes ready to embark on a project.

Conclusion

Using a project-based approach has helped motivate students to learn language for a purpose. I have also found that this methodology promotes community among class members. In both the folktale and the newspaper projects, a developing sense of community helped foster the motivation needed to see the project to completion.

I have since started integrating mini-projects into all my general ESOL classes at the Centennial Education Center at Santa Ana. Projects that students choose to do are based on material in their textbook. For example, in my beginning class, we devote much time to learning how to talk about the family and daily life. The class produces a small book which includes stories about family, work, and weekend life. These types of projects require the students to use the material in a meaningful way. Projects need not be as extensive as the newspaper or folktale efforts.

Student Poetry

Praying

by Maria Mendez

*I can't find ease or calm for my
soul
Where can I find them? Oh Lord.
My restless spirit doesn't find
peace.
Surrounded by materialism, lust,
sensuality,
Egoism, rivalry and all them set me
aside from you*

*Where? Where can I find you? Oh
Lord.
So much hate, so much violence, so
much
noise, enough to silence your voice.
The world involves me, his arms
catch me.
Oh, God, please console me.
Make me free; break all the ties
That joins me to this materialist
and
vain world.*

- Adapted from the student
newsletter, *Centennial News*, vol.1,
Iss.3, June, 1998

I believe that using a project-based approach to language learning gives meaning to the learning that normally goes on in a classroom. I have taught a traditional teacher-centered classroom using a textbook and was always dismayed at how little language was learned. The instruction in project-based learning, at least the way I do it, is less direct than in a traditional class. Students develop language and literacy skills by working on a product that will exist beyond the classroom walls. This creates excitement and motivation that I have not seen in a traditional, text-based only class. In project-based learning, I do a lot less teaching and see a lot more learning in the classroom.

References

Virtual Connections, Mark Warshauer, Ed. University of Hawaii Press, 1995.

Auerbach, E. (1992). *Making Meaning, Making Change*. McHenry, IL: Delta Systems and Center for Applied Linguistics.

Connect to the Project Web Site

I have developed a web page that lists a variety of projects that students can participate in or classes can replicate.

[Connect to project web page](#). If you are interested in adding a project to this page, contact Susan Gaer at: sgaer@earthlink.net.

About the Author

Susan Gaer has taught English for speakers of other languages for the past 20 years. She is currently an assistant professor at Santa Ana College, Santa Ana, California. Besides project-based education, she is also interested in the integration of technology into the curriculum, and edits the CATESOL Newsletter Online Column. You can e-mail her at sgaer@earthlink.net.