DIRECTING STUDENTS' ATTENTION TO LANGUAGE USAGE IN THE REAL-LIFE CONTEXT

Siao-cing Guo

Department of Applied Foreign Languages
National Taipei College of Business
guontcb@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper outlines a language learning passport activity that required EFL students to observe and collect English expressions used in real life contexts. The aim of the activity was to show that students are in fact surrounded by English if they make a little effort to pay attention to the language as it is used in their daily lives. A pre- and post- language test and a survey were utilized to examine the effects of the passport activity on students' language awareness and students' attitudes about the outside of class activity. The language test results revealed a significant improvement on students' vocabulary, and the survey results indicated that the activity project significantly increased students' awareness of English expressions used in real life, and it also improved their knowledge of practical English.

Keywords: learner autonomy, project work, out-of-class activity, passport activity

INTRODUCTION

Most EFL students are immersed in a total first-language environment. They have very little exposure to English materials once they leave classroom. In-class instruction may become the only contact students have with English. Thus, it poses a challenge for teachers to create opportunities to maximize English learning in a limited class time. Passport activities are adopted to expand learning opportunities in the community (Lai, Yang, Liang, & Chan, 2005; Lee, 2007)). These passport activities require students to attend language or community-based activities outside of class, from which students collect stamps in exchange for class credits or rewards. While passport activities are intended to create more opportunities for language exposure and practice, many of them are limited to preprogrammed activities. Very few passport activities engage students in a real life English setting. Taiwan, although lacking an English environment, is not completely short of authentic English

resources in neighborhoods. The passport activity, designed and implemented by the researcher, encouraged students to direct their attention to English usage in real life. This passport activity was meant to increase students' awareness of English usage in their daily life. "The readily available resources" in students' surrounding "could serve as an impetus for language growth" (Guo, 2011, p. 246).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Within a set curriculum, teaching time, unified exams, demanding work load and various restrictions, how can teachers extend the practice of language with learners without investing in time-consuming and complex programs? While textbooks and pre-selected materials can provide valuable information to learners, students seem to have little interest in them. As Griffiths and Keohane (2000) point out, textbooks often fail to achieve a meaningful level of involvement by the learners. If students are asked to do tasks relevant to their real life, they will be more engaged, and likely to be more motivated. Thus, learning needs not to be confined in the classroom; it can be expanded beyond the boundaries of classroom into the community (Hyland, 2004). Out-of-class project activities appear to be an applicable option. Utilizing project work, teachers can take a less dominant role and shift the learning responsibility to students. Project work addresses multiple needs and interests of students and creates a variety of authentic English language input (Hillyard, Peppen, and Vasquez, 2007). In *Project Work* (2002), Fried-Booth presents various project activities in different scales. Some can be carried out within one class time; some require weeks of execution. There are also other project work programs like learning journals (Porto, 2007), language portfolio (Little, 2009), news writing(Manyak, 2008), technology-based or online learning (Cheng and Lee, 2006; Kaltenbock, 2001; Healey, 2002; Hsu, 2007), community learning (Hillyard, Peppen, and Vasquez, 2007; Russell, 2007). Fried-Booth affirms the benefits of the adoption in project work and states that project work "[encourages] students to move out of the classroom and into the world", and "helps to bridge the gap between language study and language use" (2002, p.7). Involving students in project work not only increases students' motivation but also develops their autonomy in language learning and use.

According to Little (2009), autonomous learning involves critical reflection, decision making, and independent action, and as learners become more autonomous in language learning, their language use will escalate. Little believes that being autonomous is one basic need of human beings, that is to be able to set their own time to carry out actions and to feel competent in the things they do. If students are not motivated or involved in learning on their own term, the teacher can set up tasks guiding students to further their learning. Unfortunately, EFL teachers often doubt the

feasibility of out-of- class activities, which Little (2009) attributes to three causes: 1) there is no English environment, 2) there is a lack of know-how, and 3) the rigidity of curriculum, schedule, textbook, exam. Teachers should not underestimate students' capability in language learning. As classroom teacher Wan (2007) suggests, it is time teachers focus on guiding their students to explore language in their private domain, that is students' self-learning in class and out-of-class.

The Passport Activity

This passport activity was an out-of-class activity created for non-English majors at a technical university where English was a mandatory course for four consecutive years; however, students' motivation for language was generally low. To encourage students to utilize school resources, students needed to visit some designated places on campus such as English Chat room and Media Center. For this passport activity, students also had their own choices of visits outside of campus where English was used. Students had to take notes and gathered the English expressions and translations on sites. Students were instructed to explain their purpose of visit to the staff or the supervisor of the place when they went out of campus. Once students finished and showed their notes to the staff of the site, they would politely request a signature or a stamp on their passport. Dornyei (2001) suggests, "rewards can constitute powerful motivational tools" (p.129), so as an incentive for participation, a winning prize was given to students who collected the most signatures or stamps. The purpose of this English Passport Project was to increase students' awareness of English used in their surroundings, to expand their learning opportunities beyond the classroom, and to motivate their interests in learning English. Students were able to choose times and places they preferred that fit their needs to acquire the language so that they were able to enjoy the process while they learned.

METHODS
The Experiment

The experiment was the English passport activity that required students to visit places both on campus and off campus. Places on campus included English practice areas provided by the English Division such as English Chat Room, English Media Center, and Video Conferencing Center, and the school library where there were plentiful references and resources in English. Places off campus included museums, restaurants, wholesale stores, department stores, or any other places where English usages could be found. Students were required to study the English or translation used in the place for at least thirty minutes and to take notes on the English expressions they learned or found interesting on the site, and they would then politely request the

staff to stamp their passport afterwards.

Instruments

    There were two research instruments incorporated in this passport activity: 1) a questionnaire, and 2) a pre- and post-language awareness test. The questionnaire included nine questions regarding the degree to which students paid attention to English signs and expressions, their utilization of language resources on campus sites and in the real world, as well as their opinions on the impact of awareness on daily language usages. The pre- and post-language awareness test contained six multiple –choice questions and five items of translation questions. The questions included information about the English extracurricular activities provided by the English Department and the common language usages students might encounter in their daily lives such as English words they may see in a restaurant. Both instruments were reviewed by three experienced English instructors at the university for face validity.

Participants

    A total of 189 non-English major students from a technical university in northern Taiwan participated in this study; among them 186 completed the language test and 166 responded to the survey.

Procedures

    The researcher recruited non-English major students from the freshman and the sophomore year to participate in the study at the beginning of the semester. The researcher explained the purpose and requirements of the project to the recruited students. It was made clear to them that the passport activity was an out-of-class activity with no credit. Students could participate in this project freely on their own time. Students' course grades would not be affected by the results of the tests, the questionnaire or the collection of the project passport points; however, students were encouraged to take part in the project with an incentive that the three students with the highest points would be rewarded with a prize.

    Students were given a pre-test on the language awareness at the beginning of the semester. The participating students also filled out the questionnaire at the same time. Students had about two months to complete this project. During this time frame, students visited designated places like English Chat Room on campus and their favorite places off campus to gather new vocabulary words, interesting expressions, and translations using their English Passport. At the end of the semester, the participants were given the post-test on language awareness and students' passports were collected.

RESULTS

A. The Language Test

    Pre-test

        On the pre-test of vocabulary, the mean score of all 186 participants was 59. The mean score of the post test was 73. The result of the mean scores from the pre-test of the language test was low with the highest score 47 and the lowest score 38. Of all the students, 58% scored below 60. It showed that most students failed to recognize common English words or names for popular public places such as Family Mart. After the passport activity, the means scores increased tremendously to 73 with the highest 95 and the lowest 47.

Table 2. Results of paired t-test on vocabulary

Language	N	Mean	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre-test	186	59	-17.32	185	*.000*
Post-test		73			

        On the paired *t*-test comparing the means of all the participants from the pre-test and post-test, the Sig. *t* was *.000*. The results from the *t*-test show a significant difference between their knowledge of language before and after the passport activity. The results indicated that this English passport activity had significantly boosted gains in vocabulary among the participating students, and it also expanded their language learning opportunities outside of the classroom. Students were motivated to pay more attention to English in their surroundings which they may not have noticed before.

B. The Questionnaire

        There were nine items on the questionnaire. A Likert scale of five values was used in this questionnaire. (1 = "not at all"; 2 = "just a little"; 3 = "somewhat"; 4 = "a lot"; 5 = "very much/often.")

        The results of the questionnaire prior to the project were as follows.

Table 1. Means on students' habits toward the use of English

	Means Pre-test	Means Post-test	*t*	Sig. (2tailed)
1. I usually would find ways or resources on campus to learn English.	2.37	2.83	-5.35	*.000*
2. I usually pay attention to English usage on campus (i.e. names, signs, instructions).	2.55	3.23	-6.52	*.000*

3. I usually would find ways or resources off campus to learn English.	2.42	2.88	-5.51	*.000*
4. I usually pay attention to English used in daily life (i.e. signs, posters).	2.91	3.51	-6.09	*.000*
5. I usually pay attention to English used on products.	2.90	3.58	-8.13	*.000*
6. I usually pay attention to Chinese or English translation in daily life.	2.52	3.34	-10.47	*.000*
7. Paying attention to English used in daily life (i.e. signs, posters) can increase my English vocabulary.	3.43	4.01	-7.78	*.000*
8. Paying attention to English used in daily life (i.e. signs, posters) can increase my overall English skills.	3.46	3.89	-5.62	*.000*
9. English teachers should include more daily life English in class instruction.	4.02	4.19	*-2.33*	.021

When asked about whether they paid attention to English used in their daily surroundings at school or outside of school, students' responses were rather low. The means from item 1 to item 6 were all below 3.00. The results from item 1 and item 3 indicated that students did not generally seek ways to improve their English on their own. In terms of their opinions on whether paying attention to English used in daily life could improve their English, they showed more positive results (item 7 = 3.23; item 8 = 3.28). Students also indicated that English teachers should include more daily life English in their instructions.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study investigated students' language awareness and examined the effects of the passport activity on students' awareness of English used in their surroundings. The questionnaire findings revealed most students did not make use of the resources available around them, which could be a result of lack of motivation and directions. After the implementation of the passport activity, the results from the language

awareness pre- and post-test showed a significant difference in their knowledge of real life language. It is evident that steering students' attention to real life language usage did increase students' awareness and knowledge in language. Students began to locate English resources and extract information from them. Because of this effort, their vocabulary size and practical language knowledge had greatly increased. Shen, Tseng, Kuo, Su, & Chen (2005) found limited vocabulary to be EFL college students' major problem in language learning. These findings show that it does not require a high cost or a complicated procedure to set up a real life task and argue for the inclusion of authentic environments to expand and enrich students' learning experience.

Outside of class project like the passport activity takes students into authentic environments that reflect the way English is actually used in real life. In an EFL context where English is not part of student's lives, and one of the only English environments in which students are immersed, if it has a fixed curriculum, textbooks, and traditional tests, students will view English as a subject rather than a language used as a means of communication in a social environment. Researchers like Gulikers, Bastiaens, and Martens (2005) stress the importance of inclusion of an authentic environment and an authentic task to show the relevance and incite students' motivation in developing language skills that they can find useful in their lives. Based on the findings of the study, the Passport activity enabled students to expand their language experience to outside the classroom, which, as they discovered, is filled with authentic English usage, thereby providing them with a rich addition to the existing structured curriculum. As Chu (2009) points out, students from a structural curriculum can benefit from participating in learning environments that enable them to develop real-life language skills. A real-life activity like this can increase students' awareness of English and offer an opportunity for language learning in a context different from classroom practice. It draws students' attention to the authentic language that is certainly more real and meaningful to them.

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提升學生對實境英語用法的注意力

郭筱晴 Siao-cing Guo

應用外語系
國立台北商業技術學院
guontcb@gmail.com

摘要

　　本論文主要探討英語護照活動對學習英語為外語的同學的影響。學生需要觀察並收集日常生活英文用語來進行英語護照活動。本活動之目的最主要是希望同學們能體會藉由日常生活中的觀察，以利英語的學習一點也不費吹灰之力。本研究採取前側與後側的語言測試和習慣調查來衡量課外英語護照活動的效益。研究結果顯示英語護照活動顯著的提升同學對日常英語的認知同時還增進他們的外語運用知識。

關鍵字: 自主學習，計畫活動，課外活動，護照活動