Transformative Language Education: The English of Sustainability

Joseph Serrani, Mahidol University International College, Thailand
Alexander Nanni, Mahidol University International College, Thailand

Abstract
As the countries of South-East Asia continue to broaden their horizons and coalesce into a single ASEAN community, numerous transformations are taking place that will radically alter the educational landscape. The ASEAN Secretariat emphasizes sustainable development as a goal to permeate the changes ahead, which will require the voices and experiences of all the stakeholders involved. Current university students in Thailand will graduate during the integration of the ASEAN Economic Community and will face social change in all aspects of society. Preparing students for the challenges ahead is the context for this paper's focus: a term-long project that combines business studies and EFL. The project uses content-based language instruction and transformative pedagogy to engage students in study of the Triple Bottom Line framework developed by John Elkington. In addition to improving students' language skills, the aim of the project is to provide students with a richer understanding of social responsibility and business ethics — an understanding that they develop themselves through exploration and critical thinking. Determining the successfulness of a company by researching and analyzing its effects on the environment and society in addition to its profitability offers students the opportunity to rethink corporations' role in society as well as their own. Student autonomy is emphasized through independent research, peer editing, and negotiating meaning of sustainability. The project described in this paper can be adapted to suit a wide range of content and should therefore be of interest to language teachers in diverse contexts.

Keywords: Content-based instruction, sustainability, EFL, triple bottom line, transformative education

Introduction

This paper will introduce a project that utilizes content-based language instruction in order to facilitate transformative learning. The goal of the project is to improve students' language ability while simultaneously fostering awareness of business ethics and social responsibility. The content around which the project is based, John Elkington's triple bottom line framework, was selected based on the needs of students at the Preparation Center for Language and Mathematics, which provides an intensive English for academic purposes program at Mahidol University International College in Thailand. The content of the project has been tailored to meet the needs of theses specific students; however, the project can be adapted to meet the needs of students in diverse contexts.

Thailand is a member state of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which will form the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) at the end of 2015. The stated goals of the AEC are to create the following: "(a) a single market and production base, (b) a highly competitive economic region, (c) a region of equitable economic development, and (d) a region fully integrated into the global economy" (ASEAN Secretariat, 2012, p. 6). English is the working language of ASEAN, and this language will only become more important in the region upon the integration of the AEC. Barriers to trade and labor mobility will be relaxed, and as a result individuals and companies in member states will face increasing competition. These changes have significant implications for educational systems in the region.

The Thai educational system is in a state of flux. A wave of reforms followed the Asian economic crisis of 1997 (Sangnapaboworn, 2003). The crisis was blamed partially on a lack of effective education in the kingdom, and these reforms were meant to prevent further catastrophes (Jungck & Kajornsin, 2003). The reforms promised much: the modernization of the Thai educational system, its decentralization, and a shift from teacher-centered to student-centered learning (Hallinger & Bryant, 2013). Despite the ambitious promises put forward after the crisis, deep change has been slow to come (Hallinger & Lee, 2011). Changes mandated by the Ministry of Education have failed to reach the classrooms, causing frustration on the part of the public (de Segovia & Hardison, 2009; Hallinger, 2010). Because of this, many students enter university with only rudimentary critical thinking skills.

It is in this context that Mahidol University International College strives to "[provide] quality liberal arts education" ("A liberal arts education in an Asian setting," 2012). Mahidol University International College, which was founded in 1986, aims to "produce well-rounded graduates" ("About MUIC," 2013) who are able to "meet the challenges of living and working in the 21st century" ("A Liberal Arts Education in an Asian Setting," 2012). Attention to context is critical. Green (2012) cautions, "In education, as far as student learning is concerned, it is a mere step from 'best practice' to 'one size fits all', an approach that threatens to silence a multitude of alternative (even complementary) approaches, especially in a multi-cultural setting" (p. 2). Accordingly, the project described in this paper is explicitly situated in the Thai higher education context.

The specific institutional context informs the implementation of this project. Many students who are entering Mahidol University International College first take foundational English for academic purposes courses in the Preparation Center for Languages and Mathematics. Students typically enter the program at the pre-intermediate level of language proficiency and exit at the upper-intermediate level. In the intermediate and upper-intermediate level classes in the Preparation Center for Languages and Mathematics, the language skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing are integrated. Students in these courses write essays based on readings and audio lectures, then participate in small group discussions on the same topics about which they have written. In short, the upper-level language courses are taught using content-based instruction.

Content-Based Language Instruction

Content-based instruction is increasingly prevalent in programs teaching English for academic purposes. Beglar and Hunt (2011) provide a concise explanation on the priorities of this type of instruction: "A focus on real-world content and the understanding and communication of information through language is the key to second language learning" (p. 93). This approach, which "integrates the learning of some specific subject-matter with the learning of a second language" (Brown, 2001, p. 234), has both linguistic and cognitive benefits. It is aligned with communicative language teaching in that "the primary focus is the acquisition of information" (Kasper, 1995, p. 223), information that is "meaningful ... [and] contextualized" (p. 223). As for cognitive benefits, content-based instruction allows students to build up significant knowledge in a particular area, which can in turn aid in the development of reading comprehension skills.

It should be noted that there are "strong" and "weak" versions of content-based instruction (Brown, 2001, p. 234). The "strong" version prioritizes content over language learning, whereas the "weak version," which can also be called theme-based instruction, values language and content learning equally. Brown (2001) provides an example of a theme-based language course: "An intensive English course for intermediate pre-university students might deal with topics of current interest such as public health, environmental awareness, world economics, etc." (p. 236). Both the "strong" and "weak" versions of content-based instruction are based on the following major principles: "automaticity, meaningful learning, intrinsic motivation, and communicative competence" (Brown, 2001, p. 236). With regards to guiding principles, content-based instruction can be contrasted with skill-based instruction, in which students take "separate classes in reading, writing, speaking and listening, supplemented perhaps by an extended writing or study skills class" (Garner & Borg, 2005, p. 119). Skill-based instruction is a throwback to the "pre-Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) days of language teaching" (Brown, 2001, p. 233) when focus on forms (i.e., on grammatical features) dominated. This type of instruction tends towards higher levels of monitoring and less automaticity. Students in skill-based courses are often "forced to plod through" (Brown, 2001, p. 233) courses that lack cognitively challenging and engaging material, whereas students in content-based courses benefit from meaningful and thus intrinsically motivating material. Finally, whereas skill-based courses often "[teach] students a lot *about* language but sometimes at the expense of teaching language itself" (Brown, 2001, p. 233), students in content-based instruction "reflects the dynamic nature of real-world use" (Garner &

Borg, 2005, p. 131) of language. Largely because of "administrative considerations" (Brown, 2005, p. 233), skill-based instruction has long been a "mainstay" (Garner & Borg, 2005, p. 119) of university preparatory programs; however, the advantages of content-based instruction are becoming increasingly evident.

Content-based instruction has achieved positive results in both ESL and EFL contexts. A study by Kasper (1997) found that content-based instruction offered intermediate-level English language learners studying at university two benefits: improved language skills and an increased chance of successfully completing their degree program. These students were ready for "full matriculation into the academic mainstream" (Kasper, 1997, p. 318) sooner than students in skill-based language instruction. Song (2005) reported similarly positive results. In a study conducted at an American university, the author found that content-based ESL instruction had both short- and long-term benefits. In the short term, students achieved higher scores and were more likely to pass the language course. In the long term, students' performance in further language courses and in content courses improved. The author concluded that "[content-based instruction] enhances cross-curricular academic achievement in both language and discipline courses and promotes academic growth and success over time" (Song, 2005, p. 435). In an EFL context, Kirschner and Wexler (2002) describe the success of a content-based course based on the life of the artist Caravaggio. They found that the course provided many opportunities for students to use English to convey meaningful information. This led to increased student motivation, and the authors observed that "students are far more engaged in the process of reading and learning in this unit than in other courses" (Kirschner & Wexler, 2002, p. 174). The benefit of content-based instruction in a variety of contexts is supported by the literature.

Needs Assessment

The mission of the Preparation Center for Languages and Mathematics is as follows: "to provide educational experiences which cultivate students' academic English communication skills; to foster their ability to be self-reflective and responsible learners; and to stimulate their curiosity about the world." The project described below was created with the intention of simultaneously addressing all three core elements of the mission. That is, it seeks to provide students with the language skills that will lead to their success in an English-medium liberal arts program, to foster the development of autonomous learners with strong study skills, and to help students become responsible citizens of Thailand, ASEAN, and the world.

Many of the students enrolling in the Preparation Center have spent the entirety of their academic careers being exposed to the "pedagogy of the worksheet" (Pennington, 1999, p. 2). In the case of language classes, this has often taken the form of skill-based language instruction. Despite having studied English for several years, in some cases since kindergarten, many students lack communicative competence. Learning that has been largely rote and teacher-centered has deadened many students' passion for learning. Furthermore, in some cases teacher-imposed extrinsic motivation has not allowed students to become autonomous learners. The project described in this paper represents an attempt to meet the needs of these students.

Business Sustainability and the Triple Bottom Line

In the search for meaningful content for the upper-intermediate level courses, student interests and needs underlie the selection process; the fact that 60-70% of the students in PC plan to pursue business studies in university became a significant determining factor. Further factors included the future involvement of many PC students in a family business that will be grappling with the challenges of an integrating AEC that has stated goals of inclusive and environmentally sustainable growth (ASEAN Secretariat, 2009). A marriage of these factors was found in the "triple bottom line" (TBL), a phrase coined by John Elkington in 1994 ("Triple bottom line," 2009). Elkington, a business sustainability consultant, envisioned companies evaluating their performance based on three very different indicators, only one of which would be the traditional profit and loss concern. In the triple bottom line framework, social and environmental impacts are calculated separately and, ideally, hold equivalent weight in proportion to a company's profitability.

There are no universally applicable accounting methods for social and environmental impacts; however, rather than minimizing these two aspects of the TBL, the lack of widely accepted accounting methods serves as an opportunity for firms to create ones that address the specific concerns of their situation, which vary widely. This allows for a level of autonomy, even creativity, in creating such accounting methods that requires a high degree of self-awareness of sometimes difficult truths and questions the role of the corporation. Stakeholder theory considerations come to the fore and drive the discussion. The process of crafting social and environmental accounting methods is then one of discovery, reliant on a critical approach, and holistic at core. Used as the content of an ESL program, business sustainability provides fertile grounds for transformative learning. In the course of engaging with the idea of sustainability in business, students will not only gain the knowledge and lexis that this entails, but also reexamine the norms of doing business and what role they want to perform in society; a "perspective transformation" (Clark, 1991) is possible.

The TBL Project

To begin the project, students read and watch video about the history of the environmental movement. Learning about the devastating effects industry has had on the natural environment is a graphic introduction to the interconnectedness of the three bottom lines. A video segment from the PBS documentary *American Experience:* "Rachel Carson's Silent Spring" is used to underline this relationship. Following this, students read adapted texts from Elkington's book *Cannibals with Forks* to gain a detailed definition of the TBL and real world examples of its application. Discussions are held to address any misunderstandings, extend knowledge, and theoretically evaluate local businesses TBL.

With this grounding in business sustainability, students are then given a large corporation to research and evaluate in terms of the TBL. Students are shown how to use Google's advanced search operators to find online sources of information and given guidelines for evaluating the credibility of those sources. Once students have collected a number of sources, they begin outlining a term paper. The structure of the term paper is provided to help students organize their research and findings. Each student is assigned an instructor that acts as an advisor through the process of

outlining and drafting the paper. Advisors offer recommendations for improvement of content and language in one on one meetings and written comments on the various drafts. Students use APA the 6th to cite their sources of information and submit drafts to Turnitin to ensure academic honesty. Finally, students present their research in class to their peers and advisor.

Evaluation

Using the TBL as the content for the term project fulfills Brown's (2001) four principles of "automaticity, meaningful learning, intrinsic motivation, and communicative competence" (2001, p. 236). Students are provided a number of tools to use and guided through the project by instructors and their advisor which allows them to do the work on the project largely independently and, to some extent, at their own pace. Despite the focused content of the project, students are free to investigate any number of aspects about the corporation and the TBL. What they learn about sustainability and how businesses affect people and the environment is directly relevant and meaningful regardless of their future career. Through the understanding that everyone is a stakeholder in the operation of a corporation, students' views of what it means to be a consumer, employee, or business owner is changed and deepened. On an individual level, students are able to see that their consumption habits are not simply a matter of preference or convenience, but have real consequences for the world in which they live. This imparts an enhanced level of motivation in the learning process because the content itself is no longer abstract and removed from their experience, but intertwined with their daily lives. Throughout the project, students are engaged with language in authentic ways, from reading company reports, news articles, and their peers papers to writing and presenting in fashion they will be using at the university level. In discussing, writing, and presenting the topic and their research, the focus remains on communicating effectively, not simply the minutia of grammatical rules. In this way, students' confidence in using the language is significantly increased.

The TBL project is firmly rooted in the mission of the program which is to "to provide educational experiences which cultivate students' academic English communication skills; to foster their ability to be self-reflective and responsible learners; and to stimulate their curiosity about the world." By engaging with and producing academic content, the students of PC are learning to use English is ways that will be necessary in their future studies. Rather than learning English in ways that are unrelated to the university context, the project encompasses all the necessary academic language skills for an English medium higher education program. The independent nature of the project provides an education experience that fosters responsibility through a number of deadlines that students must meet by managing their time and work habits outside of the classroom. This experience mirrors that which they will encounter in the near future. Through the drafting process and peer editing, the project offers ample opportunity for students to reflect on their language and study skills by comparing them with their peers and the program expectations. Having spent nearly 10 weeks researching and analyzing the sustainability of a corporation in a more thorough manner, students clearly have the knowledge and skills to comprehend the world around them in new, more meaningful ways; an inquisitive disposition has been developed.

Conclusion

This paper has described an example of content based learning in an ESL program that seeks to transform the learning process. The content discussed in paper - business sustainability - offers an opportunity to transform the way in which students improve their academic English. The TBL framework is uniquely apt for the context in which it is used, but there are any number of topics that may be employed to engage students and foster their development as learners.

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