Introducing Elements of a Four-dimensional Education into an EFL Classroom

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Abstract

This short reflective article introduces two classroom activities that I implemented when I began a new full-time teaching position last spring. The position allowed me the autonomy to design my semester-long course using the required textbook, project-based learning, and the Center for Curriculum Redesign's Four-Dimensional Education Framework (Fadel, Bialik, & Trilling, 2015). The framework addressed the need to focus beyond just teaching English by focusing on the needs of a 21st century learner. As these activities were implemented, I reflected on each activity critically to see if it achieved my desired purpose in the classroom. I also documented how students responded to the activities. In this short reflective article, I will introduce two of the activities that the students found particularly engaging, outlining the preparations, procedures, and student responses to the activities. I also evaluate how well these activities corresponded to principles of the Four-Dimensional Education Framework.

Keywords: Four-Dimensional Education Framework, reflective practice, tasked-based learning, project-based learning, flipped learning

概要

本稿は、今春から始まった専任教員の業務において筆者が試行した二つのアクティビティの内省に関する論文である。一学期完結型のコースの構想にあたり、大学からは多くの権限が与えられ、所定の教科書やプロジェクトベース学習に加え、The Center for Curriculum RedesignがすすめるFour-Dimensional Education Framework (Fadel, Bialik, & Trilling, 2015)を基に授業を構成した。このフレームワークは英語のニーズに焦点を置くだけではなく、21世紀で生きていくためのスキルを持った学習者の育成も同時に行うものである。これらの活動が授業に導入に伴い、筆者はそれぞれの活動が授業の目的を実際に達成できているのかについて、導入された活動に対しての学生の反応も書き留めながら、批判的に内省を行った。本稿では、学生が特に熱心に参加した二つの活動を取り上げ、学生のアクティビティへの反応も含め活動の導入から終わりまでを紹介する。さらに、これらの活動がどのようにFour-Dimensional Education Frameworkに関連しているかについての評価も行う。

キーワード: Four-Dimensional Education Framework、省察的実践、タスク型学習、プロジェクト型学習、反転学習

Introduction

Last spring, I transferred from a full-time position at a private university in Tokyo accept another full-time position at a private university in Shizuoka. My new position required not only more face-time with students but also more pressure to research and publish. The majority of my required teaching time was allotted to teaching required first-year English courses to non-English majors. English II, one of four required English

courses in the first-year curriculum is an integrated skills course with a focus on the development of reading and writing skills. The students are streamed into leveled classes based on their score from a standardized test taken during orientation. Moreover, each class has a mandatory textbook decided by the full-time English faculty. The required textbook for my class was the *Oxford English Grammar Course Intermediate* (Swan & Walter, 2011). The textbook is divided into 22 sections each covering a specific grammar topic; for example, section four provides explanations and drills reviewing past tense; section six places its focus on explanations and drills using modal verbs. Each section is divided into two parts, "review" covering a review of the basic grammar rules and a variety of grammar drills, followed by "level 2" which introduces more difficult grammar patterns and drills to practice. Simon Borg (2016) laments that while in recent years various communicative styles of language teaching have emerged, in many classrooms, "grammar remains the driving force and the way it is taught has changed very little over the years." This mirrored my initial reaction when I learned that I would be required to use a grammar textbook to teach the course. While I acknowledge that grammar comprehension is essential for language acquisition, I feared the intense focus on grammar would have a negative effect on my students' motivation and sense of autonomy. Borg (2017) further explains that focusing on the completion of discrete-item exercises, similar to the exercises found in the required textbook, has the potential to reduce English learning to the ability to answer and complete such styled questions which is quite removed from my teaching beliefs and practices. To alleviate my discomfort with teaching a course focused on the drilling of discrete grammar points, I set out to design a course that aligned more closely with my teaching beliefs as a TESOL professional (Farrell, 2015) by incorporating a communicative approach to learning English through the implementation of task-based and project-based learning.

Course Design and Implementation

While I felt trepidation at using the grammar-focused textbook for the course, I recognized that the textbook is a worthwhile resource for students to use as a review of the grammar they learned in secondary school as well as a means to deepening their knowledge of grammar. To blend the textbook into the course, I assigned each section of grammar as a homework assignment by flipping the classroom (Bergmann & Sams, 2012; 2014). By assigning the grammar sections as homework, it allowed the students to review and prepare at their own pace. As the answers were included in the back of the textbook, students could arrive to class with their homework checked and the start of class could be reserved for discussion about the homework. It also provided me time to meet with students individually as needed to answer questions. Bergmann and Sams (2012) state that the time spent individually with a student is "very powerful because it requires *all* students to interact with the teacher" (p. 98). This could be seen in the rapport my students and I developed throughout the semester.

In addition to flipping the classroom, the Center for Curriculum Redesign's (CCR) Four-Dimensional Education (FDE) framework (Fadel, Bialik, & Trilling, 2015) provided the grounding for the course design. While the FDE framework was new to me, I ran across it as an Amazon book recommendation after purchasing *21st Century Skills Learning for Life in Our Times* (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). It was originally designed to be a cross-curriculum framework based on the United States education model, but there were strong connections to my teaching philosophy and to the core skills that I was already attempting to foster in my classroom (e.g., collaboration, creativity, and digital literacy). Additionally, in my previous teaching context, I often required my students to reflect on their performance to develop their meta-cognitive skills, so including the meta-learning dimension of the FDE framework seemed a good fit as well. Therefore, it was quite natural to implement the framework in my new English course.

Fadel et al. (2015) explain that recently, the purpose of education has evolved to equip learners with strong character skills and a vast breadth of knowledge to thrive professionally in today's society. This shift in

educational focus aims to move the learner away from passive learning, such as memorizing facts and repeating them on an examination, to learners who have an active investment in their learning who can take what they have learned and apply it toward a variety of different situations. This focus on the development of the learner as a whole really spoke to my belief that teaching and using English is more than just an activity to be carried out in the classroom and also connected with my belief that English is a tool that can be used in various ways in a learners life. Moreover, the traits that the framework utilizes are adaptable to many different situations and contexts and can evolve with the learner. For example, Fadel et al. (2015) incorporate elements of the mind and body by emphasizing qualities such as motivation, leadership, and mindfulness. Furthermore, they aim to "balance content knowledge and understanding with skills that apply that knowledge to the real world; character qualities that build motivation, resilience, and social/emotional intelligence; and meta-learning strategies that help students become reflective, self-directed, and expert learners" (pp. 48-9). These themes matched the qualities that I hoped my students would develop through their English studies and provided a framework for me to focus each of the tasks and projects I began creating during the spring break and into the beginning of the spring semester.

Once I made the decision to base the course on the FDE framework, I began designing the tasks and projects that would incorporate each of the 22 grammar units from the course textbook. The tasks were designed to connect one grammar section to one class, whereas projects were designed to incorporate multiple units of grammar over two to four classes. In this paper, I will introduce one of the tasks and one of the projects that students completed during the course. It is hoped by sharing these two activities, that other English language teachers will be inspired to integrate similar activities and possibly the FDE framework in their own classrooms and contexts.

Activity One: My First Date: A Story

I designed this activity to incorporate the past tense grammar unit. The class was held at the beginning of the semester during the second week before students had a chance to bond with their classmates. The activity was divided into three tasks. First, students were given an authentic story about a couple's first date. The story was about a first date between American college students and included cultural references to pique the student's interest and make them want to read the story to the end. To make the story more interactive and to integrate critical thinking, communication, and collaboration skills, the story was divided into chunks, and students worked in groups to put the story in the correct order. This forced each group to not only scan each section for key words but also discuss and think critically about the story order while also comprehending the overall narrative. As the instructor, I chose the topic because I felt that it would spark my students' curiosity, and caution them to be mindful of their group members reading speeds and ideas, while also fostering a small dose of resilience when I told them, often repeatedly, that the order was incorrect and they should try again. Additionally, this activity allowed groups to have autonomy in executing the task. In some groups, a leader was chosen by the group members from the beginning, while in others, a leader came forward naturally to help facilitate the task. All of these elements were target elements developed in relation to the framework.

While the main theme of the activity was a personal story written in the past tense, I didn't ask the students to write their own stories because time was limited and I felt this would be overly difficult for the students to do so early in the semester. I decided instead to have the students use the story to design a living graph based on the story's timeline of events and the protagonist's feelings. Students were asked to use the time markers placed throughout the story and plot them along the x-axis on the graph. They then had to work as a team to choose the most influential emotions the protagonist felt and plot them on the y-axis of the graph. Finally, each group presented the graph that they created to their classmates using past tense verbs

they had studied for homework. Each group produced different living graphs based on the events and emotions they found to be most important to the story.

Activity Two: Advice Columns

The second activity I designed was a three-part project that was based on two sections from the textbook that introduced modal verbs and relative pronouns. The project was designed around giving and receiving advice and was carried out over two consecutive classes. In the first class the students were given a set of advice columns. To begin, they were only given the problems and were then divided into small groups based on the problem each student found most interesting. Some of the topics included were about a jealous boyfriend, a troubled grandmother, and a used gift card given as a present. Once students were in groups, each group discussed the problem, worked together to check each other's understanding, and then wrote a response using the modal verbs from the unit assigned as homework. This drew on all 4Cs (communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity) in the skills section of the FDE framework. The students were then given the original advice column written in the original post to read and compared their group's response with the original response.

For homework, each student was tasked with writing an original letter asking for advice. They were encouraged to write about true situations as the letters would be shared and read anonymously. The students prepared the assignment using Google Docs so that only I would know the author of each letter.

The following class was held in the computer room, and each advice column was assigned to three different students. This required me to do some advance preparation to ensure that the students did not receive their own advice column. Once the students received their assigned letters, they were given time in class to read each letter and write a thoughtful response. This activity placed heavy emphasis on mindfulness, courage, and ethics as the students were reading about their classmates' problems and giving advice that was, hopefully, meaningful, relevant, and useful. After each student submitted the completed assignment to Google Classroom, I copied each response and pasted it in the original student's advice column file to protect the anonymity of each student's response. I then returned the completed document to each student. It must be noted that while this activity was carried out using digital technology, it is not a necessity. The rationale for using computers for this project was to promote digital literacy and student anonymity.

Discussion

Both activities were designed specifically for this course, connected to related grammar units in the textbook, and carried out in my classroom for the first time. To reflect and analyze each activity, I relied on my teaching journal based on the definitions of reflection and reflective practice by Mann (2005) and Farrell (2013, 2018) and class observations. Additionally, my students wrote reflections at the conclusion of each activity. Using those data, I reviewed the activities to determine if they incorporated the desired traits from the FDE framework and met the desired grammar needs of the students for the sections of the textbook that were assigned.

Activity One: My First Date: A Story

Looking back, I believe that activity one provided students with the opportunity to read a long text written by a fluent English speaker. Most students noted it was the first time for them to read such a long text. Additionally, many students commented that putting the chunked text in order was challenging and that they were thankful to work together. One student summarized the activity by writing, "I used my brain to read and think about many sentences" (Student Reflections). Therefore, based on student opinions and my in-class observations, I think this activity required not only critical thinking but also communication, collaboration,

and cooperation for each group to succeed. Quite a few students commented in their end of class reflections that it was "fun" to work with their classmates. Moreover, through classroom observation, I could see that the students also exhibited various character traits including mindfulness (e.g., being respectful of classmates reading speeds and comprehension ability) , leadership (e.g. some students naturally came forward as leaders, others were chosen by means of rock-paper-scissors), and resilience (e.g., students being told, often repeatedly, that the order of their chunked story was incorrect and they needed to try again) as they worked together to complete the tasks and make decisions regarding the design and content of their living graphs. In this regard, I conclude that the activity successfully integrated elements from the framework and achieved my desired outcomes.

However, while the students enjoyed making and sharing their living graphs, the majority of their communication happened in Japanese. I attribute this to the activity being done in the second week of the semester when students had not yet formed a classroom atmosphere where they felt comfortable speaking in English together. Additionally, many students stuck with using simple emotional adjectives that they were familiar with such as happy, sad, and angry, instead of incorporating more descriptive adjectives that they had come across in a previous homework section and the text itself. Despite these shortcomings from my perspective, the students wrote positively about the experience in their reflections with quite a few students commenting that it was a good activity for communicating and working with people they didn't know well.

Activity Two: English II Advice Columns

The second activity took place toward the end of the semester, roughly ten weeks after the first activity. I planned for this in hopes that the classroom environment would be much more inclusive and conducive to students speaking in English and sharing personal information albeit anonymously. For this project to run smoothly, I felt it necessary for students to feel safe and accepted. While giving advice, they also needed to be able to think critically and objectively about their classmates' problems and provide mindful advice while sometimes thinking about problems that they had never experienced in a creative and critical manner. To soften the sense of responsibility, I designed the entire activity to be kept anonymous to everyone except myself. Overall, I felt that this project was very effective at getting students to include modals in their writing in addition to protecting students anonymity. Moreover, the students reported being very "thankful" and "happy" that their classmates gave them advice and took time to think about their problems. Some students reported taking the advice they received from classmates and implementing it. One student even reported about buying a book about pet care that a classmate recommended while another said they decided to call their mother and apologize for disparaging her cooking skills. Another mentioned that they were going to start eating out less and trying to budget their money better. Overall, the students were very positive about the experience, writing comments in their reflection logs such as "I really appreciate that everyone gave me good advice;" "I could read the letter, think about the problem of that person in my group, and give advice;" and "I read my classmates (advice) columns. There were some unique stories, so I enjoyed reading them" (Student Reflections). A few commented that writing advice columns to strangers was not common in Japanese culture, but that they appreciated the new and challenging experience. One student said they enjoyed the fact that the experience allowed them a chance to communicate with classmates through writing rather than speaking because they had more time to think deeply about each response.

Conclusion

This practitioner research began as I felt misgivings and discomfort about being in a new teaching context and being required to use a grammar textbook as the course textbook, however after discovering the FDE framework, I became motivated to design a variety of tasks and projects that I believe enabled my students to

use English in an authentic way. Looking back, while I personally would not choose the textbook for the course, I am satisfied with how I integrated the textbook into the course and the way in which my students interacted with it. I strongly believe that the FDE framework became a touchstone for reflective practice that I used during individual lesson planning as well as the overall course design. As noted in each individual activity above, student reflections of the activities were quite positive. Overall reflections on the course were also positive. Moreover, it can be said that the students exhibited and experienced various elements from the framework by participating in the classroom activities. Most notably, the students reflected that they learned how to collaborate and communicate with their classmates through working together on tasks and projects. Additionally, many students commented at the end of the course that they had gained the ability to reflect on themselves and their performance through participating in this course. Moreover, despite the flipped classroom requiring more homework compared to other English classes, the students wrote and spoke positively of engaging in the activities during class with students writing comments such as, "I [will] miss this class. I enjoyed talking and doing anything. I'm so happy;" "All classes were very fun. Group work was difficult and hard, but I got confidence. Thank you so much;" and "I think that this class changed me into loving English" (Student Reflections). Therefore, the framework appears to be an effective way to design tasks and projects for EFL learners with varying English abilities. It should be noted that while these activities were carried out at a tertiary level for students who were non-English majors, the framework and activities are versatile enough that they could be utilized in a variety of English language settings to develop well-rounded 21st century English learners, which is a goal I think many EFL educators desire for their learners.

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