

Diversified Research Considerations of the Project-based English Program:

An Overview from the Viewpoints of Institutional Theory,
Communication Philosophy, and its Evaluation Framework

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Abstract

This article organizes the future research targets of the Project-based English Program to enhance the program possibilities from broad perspectives. Concretely, the article argues that past studies of the Project-based English Program have room left in the fields of institutional theory, communication philosophy from the viewpoint of students, and the evaluation framework. Based on the notions gained from past research advised by Suzuki and the author's own experiences of program administration support, he proposes his own thoughts in each section. As will be understood, these discussion points do not cover the entire areas, and they could possibly contribute to clarify the focusing points. Forming a research group for the Project-based English Program composed of a wide variety of specialists is highly recommended to achieve further development.

Keywords

Project-based English Program, institutional theory, pragmatism, assistant evaluation

Introduction

More than 20 years have passed since N. Yuji Suzuki first theorized and began to implement the Project-based English Program (Suzuki 1994, 2003, 2012). After much development, the Project-based English Program has been institutionalized as the official, shared English curriculum of the Colleges of Life Sciences, Pharmaceutical Sciences, and Sport and Health Science, as well as the Graduate School of Life Sciences at Ritsumeikan University. While English education in Japanese universities has not worked well in general, the Project-based English Program has been successful not only in improving students' English competence, but also in realizing communication-oriented English teaching. These achievements increase the possibility that other schools and universities will view the program as a workable model of English education.

The author's unique background first as a student, then as a teaching assistant in Suzuki's classes provides a strong qualification to engage in the methodology of this paper. Finally as a lecturer of that, he has researched and intended to explore its efficacy from both theoretical and practical points of view. Although the research has not yielded enough results so far, it is safe to say that the studies of the Project-based English Program had better not be confined to just a study of English teaching methodology. Rather, they should be regarded as research on educational policy, and the study of project methodology should be expanded as broadly as possible.

Perspective of Institutional Theory

Few studies have investigated English education at universities from the viewpoint of institutional theory. However, having a view of institutional theory is crucial if an English teaching methodology is to be carried out organizationally as a program. Because "practice as a program" requires the same curriculum to be delivered in multiple classrooms by various instructors, it is necessary to standardize the quality of the methodology and ensure its reliability and validity. Adequate program evaluation based on institutional theory should become very important, especially given the current trends demanding accountability and compliance with university administration.

To Institutionalize as a Program

The Project-based English Program has been institutionalized for the first time as a unified curriculum at the Colleges of Life Sciences, Pharmaceutical Sciences, and Sport and Health Science of Ritsumeikan University. It goes without saying that the program offers courses using the same textbook and syllabus. Crucially, being institutionalized means that the program offers all students who belong to the colleges the same opportunities under the same educational philosophy, approach, and technique¹⁾. That is, the program aims at equal implementation in various places by allowing all the participants to share the fundamental concept of project-based learning. In order to realize this, the Project-based English Program has its own administrative organization, rules, and systems of decision making based on communication theory²⁾.

Formal and Informal Rules

North (1990: 4) conceptualized institutions as the rules of the game in the process of considering institutions through the history of economy and politics. The suggestive indication of this research is he pointed out that institutions have two types of rules: formal (e.g., rules of constitutional property rights and contracts) and informal (e.g., conventions and codes of behavior). This explains that, even though a society forcibly takes in a set of formal rules, substantial institutional change can never happen as long as informal rules, which indwell the people's lifestyle, have cultural inertia conflicting with the formal rules. Therefore, in regard to "institutionalization," it is meaningful to take particular note of the informal rules to which players adhere, not merely to analyze formal rules. An exploration

of this sort will help to elucidate the mechanisms of the Project-based English Program, as these mechanisms currently remain “implicit knowledge”³⁾.

Based on the presupposition that the Project-based English Program has been functioning effectively and has achieved tangible results in improving students' English communication ability, it is assumed that a mechanism to functionalize it institutionally inhered in both formal and informal rules. The author considers that the traits of project methodology have a positive impact on nurturing the informal rules of students, and eventually, they form the driving force of program implementation. The following points are taken into account concretely.

The Significance of Project-based English Pedagogy: The Possibilities of Resolution for Disputation among Pedagogical Approaches of Teaching English

Suzuki (2003, 2009, 2012) declared the policies of the Project-based English Program that open the processes and results of the practice, correct it as needed, and continue reforming to improve practices; this can be interpreted to mean that the Project-based English Program willingly accepts various changes as long as the basic concept and methodology are retained. This guarantees the freedom of incorporating teachers' specialties and strengths into the practice and embraces dynamism positively derived from students' diversity. Needless to say, the circumstances and needs are of endless variety in each field of education, and the students' projects are also widely diversified, because the project that each student conducts is based on his or her own interests and concerns. Conventional approaches of English education unify teaching contents; therefore, instructors can control students' performance and patternize it to some extent. On the other hand, because the contents of projects change in distinctive ways, it is comparatively more difficult to predict students' performance in the practices of the Project-based English Program. Inevitably, instructors must act flexibly with a tolerance for various types of project content.

Also, the learning driven by the Project-based English Program does not deny any sort of studying, as long as it maintains or improves the students' English competence or performative knowledge. In this regard, all teaching methods have an advantage to be adopted. It may also be beneficial for a student to implement learning activities of this kind parallel with project activities. One problem in the conventional studies of the English pedagogical method was that they were inclined to be affected by contemporary trends, and the controversies among them eventually were not helpful at improving English teaching as a whole. This article attempts to argue that the Project-based English Program is not influenced by such trends due to the consistency of its methodology.

The practices of the Project-based English Program are the very activities of natural, everyday human communication, whose abstract pattern has broad utility. It is true that fashionable media and characteristics of communication vary dynamically in accordance with the changes of the times. For instance, linguistically emphasized expressions might be favored in one era, whereas communication using images and sounds would be widely preferred in the next. In addition, logicity, telling style, or even scent may be of the utmost importance in a historical period. However, human communication

and the expression of messages based on people's interests and concerns are primordial, so it seems difficult for them to undergo major changes. Given the problem that traditional English pedagogical research has been affected by the trends of the times, the methodology of the Project-based English program would have a comparative appeal because of less subjectivity to be influenced by the times.

The above discussion of institutional theory remains a problem. A variety of demonstrative data are needed to verify the ideas. To promote effective educational reform in Japanese universities, more researchers should engage in this matter by collaborating with specialists of university administration and educational policy.

Perspective of Communication Theory and Pragmatism in Philosophy

Another proposed research area is focused on the philosophical, communication-theory aspect. While, in classrooms of the Project-based English Program, many students are keen to work hard using their English competence as fully as possible, students in the conventional English classrooms of Japanese universities show their lack of self-affirmation by having a sense of being "insufficient" or "incomplete" in comparison to native speakers of English. The latter also display awkwardness in the classroom since the space of English use is artificial. Supposedly, these differences are triggered by the philosophical dissimilarity between them, and the Project-based English Program will succeed in instilling its concept in students in one way or another. In considering student attitude, this paper attempts to interpret its methodology from the viewpoint of "pragmatism," which has been mainly discussed and constructed in American society.

American Pragmatism

Pragmatism was originally addressed by Peirce ([1878] 1992: 132), and it is defined as one methodology of thought and action by James (1907). Peirce described it as follows: "Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then the whole of our conception of those effects is the whole of our conception of the object." Pragmatism formed the backbone of American philosophy in the 20th century, and it later evolved radically into neo-pragmatism, where one can observe a decisive break with the conventional methodology of science.

Pragmatism is a body of thought that has been penetrating American philosophy, which is obviously beyond the scope of this paper. Also, there is no guarantee that American pragmatism is directly meaningful as a theoretical basis of English education in Japan. Rorty (2000), for example, dealt with pragmatism among bourgeoisie in the United States, merely discussing an ideal hope that should be aspired in a liberal democratic society. In contrast, this paper attempts to examine the possibility that the Project-based English Program can conceive and develop its own pragmatism specified in English education, with the characteristics of "useful English education" and "English that students can use in actual communication." This paper provisionally calls this unique pragmatism "project-method

pragmatism” and sketches its particular specialties. Based on Suzuki (2003, 2009, 2012), it describes the concept, especially in regard to nurturing students’ attitude.

Characteristics of Project-method Pragmatism

Communication-oriented principle. In the Project-based English Program, students are expected to be most concerned with students’ carrying out their projects and to work out their communication required in project activities. “Linguistic realization” of their messages takes, as a matter of practice, a second place; therefore, they are liberated from expressions confined to language media.

It is not to be argued that the role language media plays is one of the primary keys in communication, but it is difficult to find human expressions that make use of just one medium in real usage. In contrast, more than one medium can be combined to deliver effective communication as necessary based on the content, situation, or addresser in each case. Students in the Project-based English Program carefully choose which media to use and mix considering their English competence and set priority on developing communication. While past studies of English teaching methodology have been criticized as “linguistic supremacy,” the Project-based English Program is, if I would venture to say, “communication supremacy” in that respect.

Non-rehearsalism. The Project-based English Program requires a student to be autonomous and to carry out his or her project from the very beginning. Put simply, the process is not one of “practicing a project,” but “doing a project.” Students must present the fruit of their project in every certain period, even if it seems unsatisfactory or premature. The only way to make a project complete and satisfactory is to continue doing it until it becomes complete and satisfactory. The unavoidable opportunities of presentations and discussions do not give students a break for lamenting how incomplete the project is. This encourages students to shift their attention to what they are able to do now, which, in turn, promotes the communication ability of students, including English competence, and the students come to take up their own projects with pride. This benevolent cycle seems to function effectively to make students self-sufficient.

Learning in solidarity. Generally speaking, students seem to be stimulated by the other students’ projects. They learn from the projects and tend to evaluate them highly. The reason other students have a strong influence in the practice of the Project-based English Program is thought to be that an environment of solidarity is easily formed because each student shares the situation as a central player of project implementation. Also, the potential for friendly rivalry builds a sense of tension; therefore, it is easy to maintain the motivation to carry on and continue one’s project. This paper regards these traits as “learning in solidarity.”

Whether or not it is stated as such, the Project-based English Program might generate the balanced relationship of “compete but help.” Though many elements are to be considered as explanation factors, this paper takes the following aspect as a critical reason; the content of each project cannot be compared by the same scale. Theoretically, in the Project-based English Program,

every student becomes successful in a broad sense, so students' grades will not necessarily show a normal distribution. Competing in the project class should not entail a sense of trying to "beat" others, nor helping one another if doing so means suffering disadvantages. It is doubtful how much students grasp this point, but this paper emphasizes that the practice of projects is one of the effective pedagogical methodologies to generate a reciprocal relationship between students as well as to evoke a sense of competition.

Pragmatism as an Educational Methodology

As discussed, American pragmatism neither emphasized its educational aspect nor originated from the situation in Japan. Therefore, the philosophy of the Project-based English Program cannot easily be labeled as "pragmatism." However, it would be fair to say that the "two" pragmatisms seem to have much in common, such as "facing the real world," "working with what you can do," and "placing a high value on usefulness." Again, the pragmatism described above is only a part of the larger picture; this paper does not refer to the issue of communication in the global era, attitude of grammaticality, importance of self-esteem, and learning theory, which are left for further discussion.

Perspective of the Evaluation Framework

In previous studies of the Project-based English Program, it is indispensable to develop and practice an adequate assessment model that enables us to evaluate students positively. While there are cumulative studies and their accomplishments in testing research areas, research on evaluation framework in a broad sense, including qualitative factors, is continuously being sought. Many universities in Japan have recently applied portfolio evaluations; however, compared with testing assessment, there is enough room for consideration.

Measurement Evaluation

To clarify the positioning of the evaluation framework for assisting students, this paper proposes three categories: measurement evaluation, qualitative evaluation, assistant evaluation. First, measurement evaluation is defined as an assessment method using a measurable scale of English competence at a certain point. Though it is impossible to guarantee its rigidity, measurement evaluation can be regarded as an "objective" assessment when compared with others, and it contributes to assess the specific English ability of students based on the attainment of testing studies. However, the defects of measurement are that it cannot deal with assessments for subjective and qualitative outcomes, such as communication ability and the project content, which seem to be beyond the compass of measurement evaluation. In fact, current assessments of students' English performance are mainly focused on their measurable English ability; therefore, there is no way that a low-level English student can be assessed highly. It is necessary to compliment that regard by adding other evaluation methods in order to enhance the validity of the evaluation as a whole. This is considered as

a qualitative evaluation.

Qualitative Evaluation

Qualitative evaluation is a way to visualize what is disregarded and seems hard to measure in the quantitative assessment. A typical instance of qualitative evaluation is called “portfolio assessment.” If applied in the project class, portfolio assessment would be able to visualize students growth by accumulating traceable data of images, sounds, and documents of their project, presentation, and discussion. The advantage of this method is that it evaluates a student comprehensively, including factors other than language, maintaining individual diversity. Commonly, qualitative evaluation involves descriptive evaluation or a can-do list that realizes affirmative evaluation. That is to say, qualitative assessment makes it possible to evaluate what a student can do and learn to be able to do, which is useful for nurturing their self-esteem. For the Project-based English Program, which places a high value on students’ autonomy, qualitative evaluation is thought to be of special significance.

However, the technique of qualitative assessment has some defects, which may derive from the insufficient accumulation of studies in this field. As far as English education in Japanese universities is concerned, the criteria of qualitative assessment are still vague, and the validity of the method is doubtful. Portfolio evaluation surely collects many data other than testing scores, but it has a tendency toward “filing.” That is to say, qualitative evaluation succeeds in obtaining data that are ignored in measurement evaluation, but it does not have a clear direction of how to utilize information from these materials.

Furthermore, qualitative evaluation has the problem of its subjectivity, which many researchers have pointed out. Because qualitative evaluation does not usually employ “scores” or “grades,” students find it difficult to understand what they are being assessed on. This does not present an adequate opportunity of assessment because students are not being given needed information. Although there is a radical discussion on the existence of “objective evaluation,” it is essential for an assessment model to have a certain validity, which has suitability for other people to understand its value. To guarantee this, understandable standards must be created.

Assistant Evaluation

On the basis of such problems stated above, this paper proposes a framework of assistant evaluation for future development. Part of qualitative evaluation, assistant evaluation is for empowering students by reporting usable time-series data that can be used to assess them positively. A salient feature of assistant evaluation is to give affirmative evaluation to all students and view each performance of the project as a process. More specifically, while qualitative evaluation is apt to treat the project achievement holistically, assistant evaluation specializes in the students’ points that can be positively assessed.

Due to limitations of space, this paper does not address a concrete model for assistant evaluation; however, the author is currently developing a prototype model suggested by “the mechanism of

enthusiasm” and “realization of positive assessment” in playing games⁴⁾. A more detailed description and further discussion are expected.

Discussion

In closing, let us refer to the Project-based English Program from the viewpoint of a general educational policy. The idea of a “project” is not confined to the field of English education. Although one must be careful to recognize the diversity of understandings and histories of it, as noted in Chapter 1, the methodology of incorporating a project, which creates space for communication that should be natural for human culture, may potentially be a standardized method of learning for all disciplines. Learning driven by project activities can motivate and self-sustain students in addition to inspiring enthusiasm in all educational fields.

In order for the concept of “project” to gain wider acceptance and become established as a major teaching methodology, the existence of a “learning community” seems essential. A learning community requires an environment that is tolerant for fusing, integrating, and transcending disciplines searching for a new sovereign. Once the spirit of a project succeeds in taking root in the environment, it surely exerts a salutary effect over education as a whole as well as Japanese English education. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to collecting discussion points for the future. This topic may also be my long term “research proposal.”

Notes

- 1) Past researches of Japanese English education unfortunately lacked the ideas of institutional and organizational theories. English education reform tends to be regarded as implementing a unified English curriculum, such as the same teaching material under the same syllabus or forming a language center to administer it. There must be an aspect of institutional matter. The problem consciousness of this chapter lies here.
- 2) All particulars are described in Suzuki (2012); therefore no further discussion will be entered into here.
- 3) When the theory is applied, running an organization and creating a system of decision making are classified as formal rules.
- 4) Yamanaka (2011) discussed the concept and structure of the model mainly from a theoretical standpoint. Developing a concrete model and its implementation are being studied.

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Project-based English Program に資する研究論点の整理

—制度・政策論、哲学・コミュニケーション論、評価論—

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要 旨

「プロジェクト発信型英語プログラム」が鈴木によって考案、実践されて 20 年以上が経つ（鈴木 1994, 2003, 2012）。その間プログラムは進化、発展を続け、今日では、立命館大学生命科学部、薬学部、スポーツ健康科学部、大学院生命科学研究科に於いて学部共通カリキュラムとして制度化され、より多くの学生がプログラムの恩恵に浴することができるようになってきた。国全体としての大学英語教育が停滞する中、コミュニケーションを重視し、確実な英語力の向上を成し遂げてきた本英語プログラムは、「うまくいく」英語教育として今後様々な教育機関で参考とされ、取り入れられていく可能性が高いといえよう。

本論考は筆者がこれまで鈴木のもとで研究指導を受け、また補佐として英語プログラム運営業務に携わる中から、「プロジェクト発信型英語プログラム」が今後充実させていくべき研究内容を幅広い視点から整理し、その各々に筆者の試論を加えたものである。具体的には制度・政策論、哲学・コミュニケーション論、そして評価論の見地から研究の可能性を述べている。当然のことながら、ここでの議論が「プロジェクト発信型英語プログラム」の研究の地平を網羅しているわけではない。しかしここで取り上げる論点ですら、幅広い専門性を持つ集団によるコラボレーションが必要なのであり、本論考は論点の一端を明るみにし、整理することを試みた。これにより、多くの研究者による「プロジェクト発信型英語プログラム」への研究が活性し、プログラムの更なる発展に貢献できれば幸いである。

キーワード

Project-based English Program (プロジェクト発信型英語プログラム)、制度論、プラグマティズム、支援評価