

Integrating Community Based Projects in the EFL Research Methodology Course

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Key words: CBL methodology; supplementary material design; procedural challenges; learner market relevant skills.

Abstract. This research is meant to reflect on and to document the redesign and implementation process for the EFL Research Methods class using the CBL methodology. The first part of the research covers the during-design decisions the course designer had to make in relation to the initial communications with the community stakeholders; the nature and scope of the community project incorporated in the course plan; the project activity timeframes; and both the individual and team assessment schemes for project activities. The second part describes and classifies the challenges met during the implementation process. These challenges are classified into: 1) procedural challenges that have to do with the unified curriculum analysis form preparation to be used for collecting data by all teams working on the same language skill; and 2) quality-related challenges which have to do with striking the appropriate balance between knowledge, language competence, and life-long skills and the quality of the team project outcomes. Finally, the research highlights the skill gains for the course learners who are expected to become school teachers themselves in a matter of months.

1. Introduction

I was taught research methods using the commonly practiced approach of engaging learners in theoretical cultural, literary or language projects. I myself taught the course again and again using this same method. The old course format teaches research skills on topics of students' own choice from linguistics, literature, language or teaching methodologies. Like in any typical research course, the skills emphasized are: area and topic selection, reviewing related literature, data collection, discussion and analysis of collected data, making generalizations and reaching conclusions, and documenting resources.

The present paper is meant to reflect and to document the redesign and implementation process of the EFL research methods course using the community based learning methodology. This new method helps improve the learning opportunities for the research methods students by gradually moving towards more experiential learning approaches. The main thrust for the course effort is geared towards providing learners with more authentic learning through integrating real-time projects and towards defining and addressing the language training needs of the elementary public schools. The new format stressed experiential learning by integrating a real-time project that is

intended to deliver service to the government schools in Nablus area in Palestine. The new method was adopted based on theoretical arguments which favored it since it increases learner independence and it has the added value of developing learners' communication, analysis, design, and market relevant skills. It also positively impacts students' perspectives on public service, community engagement, and social justice [1, 2].

As it contributes to building learner market relevant skills, the course will simultaneously improve learners' research skills through the knowledge and practice of the techniques and processes involved in the production of scientific research. The students are given orientation to the meaning and practice of academic research, its various types and tools, the processes involved, and the reasons for undertaking a research project in language teaching. However, the implementation of such knowledge materializes with the production of a quality enrichment material of reasonable length to be developed in collaboration with the teachers and supervisors of English in Nablus area.

Designing supplementary materials for grades 1-4 was defined as an essential requirement to improve the language skills for early learners by the target community. The course teacher organized two meetings with the primary stage language teachers, directorate English language supervisors, and two regional directors from the ministry of education. Both teachers and supervisors stressed the need for putting together both class-based and homework activities for all four levels. The teachers have designed supplementary activities but only a few of them for each level. The crowded classes and the teacher high work-loads do not allow them much time to work on conducting a comprehensive curriculum gap analysis that will culminate in producing enrichment activity books for class and home use.

2. Description of the project

Student teams were formed to work on the design of supplementary materials for the English curriculum, grades 1-4. Each team worked on designing material for one language component in the curriculum- reading, writing, listening, or grammar. The teams coordinated their work with the grade teachers and English language supervisors in the public schools by having periodic interviews/meetings on results of curriculum analysis stage and periodic consultations on tasks and activities.

The teams working on the same grade curriculum were required to coordinate their work to ensure that no overlap occurs and that the materials designed by each team can be put together in one book to be presented to the ministry of education district office for use in public schools at the end of the semester. Table (1) shows the before and after course outcome reform scheme:

Table (1): Old and new course outcomes

Old outcomes	CBL outcomes
Formulate research questions.	Perform curriculum gap analysis for the Palestinian language curriculum grades 1-4.
Make use of available literature (3-5 sources).	Use available research to develop criteria for good practice in English supplementary material design.
Systematically use a model to solve a research problem.	Design supplementary materials to fill the curriculum gaps and justify each activity based on available literature.

Produce 10-15 pages of research in the area of linguistics, or literature, or translation.	Write a short introduction that defines the audience, explains the activities, and gives instructions for teachers and/or parents on how to use the material.
Consistently follow one documentation style.	Justify all work based on good practice by comparing student work with successful models used for same grade.
Report findings to a specific audience.	Report and share findings and designs to teacher and stakeholders in an end-of- semester exhibition.

3. Team composition

The students were divided into teams of 3 and were asked to select one curriculum component for which they had to design materials. It was explained to them that they had to accomplish all three tasks stated in the course ILOs (conduct gap analysis, design supplementary activities, and share findings with all stakeholders). The choice of team members was left totally up to the students to decide. And though the project was defined by course teacher after consulting with the ministry of education teams, it was left up to the students to select the grade and the language skill they wished to take in hand. To ensure fair assessment, the evaluation scheme included both graded team assignments and assessment of individual work. The team work amounts to 55% of the work while the individual assignments totaled 45% of the final course grade.

4. Project scope

The course procedure included five important tasks; a review of literature on good practice; conducting gap analysis by involving target grade teachers and the education directorate supervisors; observing classes to get a feel of learner achievement compared to curriculum outcomes; designing supplementary material for target skill; and sharing designs with stakeholders. Table (2) gives details of these tasks and the times needed to accomplish them over the course of one semester.

Table (2): Project sub-tasks

Time/week	Task specification
1-3	Select grade level and the language skill you want to improve through material to be designed; establish from theory the criteria for good supplementary material in the selected area. Team presentation 1: Present findings of the literature review process especially on the criteria for good supplementary material.
4-7	Curriculum analysis; teacher and supervisor interviews; field visits; reporting on curriculum content and types of exercises; relating data collection results to good practice. Team presentation 2: Present on the nature of the gaps in the curriculum and the types of activities needed to fill those gaps.
7-10	Start design of activities; document in writing purpose and outcome for each activity; consider appeal and learner motivation; collect more information on good practice; meet with the supervisors and teachers again to discuss your design (at this stage you need to think of target audience. Is the material meant for home use under parent supervision or for class use under teacher supervision?)
11-13	At this point, it is important to think holistically, i.e. putting all materials from all teams in one book for each grade; this task will take much coordination of work, much cutting

	down on redundancy and overlap, much thought about what a reasonable length for the project for the respective grade is (you may need to again refer to literature or good practice).
14-16	Project presentations: The teams for each grade will present their designs and rationales on each language skill in an exhibition to which representatives from the ministry of education will be invited to the presentations. The teams will shape up project and submit final copies.

5. Unified curriculum analysis forms

As students embarked on dividing the curriculum analysis load between team members, and since each team member was assigned two units from the school textbook, it was necessary to develop and provide groups with a unified form to synchronize team members' work and to avoid variance in focus between them. The form was developed based on the results of the literature review. The main elements students focused on were: appeal of the design and clarity of instructions (user friendly curriculum activities); integration with other language skills (reading with writing, listening with writing, etc.); quantity of textbook and teacher designed activities (number of activities enough to reasonably achieve outcomes); the ratio of the productive to receptive activities; homework frequency; and achievement assessment frequency. Table (3) shows the results from one curriculum analysis form used to unify group work.

Table (3) curriculum analysis form

Unit	Per-Iod	Activity	Integration	Home Work	Productive Activity	Receptive Activity	User Friendly
13	2	1	X	0	0	X	X
		2	0	0	0	X	X
	4	1	0	0	0	X	X
		2	0	0	X	0	X
	6	1	0	0	0	X	0
		2	0	0	0	X	X
14	1	1	0	0	0	X	X
		4	0	0	0	X	X
		5	0	0	0	X	X
	2	1	X	0	X	0	X
		4	X	0	0	X	X
		5	0	0	0	X	0
	3	1	X	0	0	X	X
		2	X	0	0	X	X
		4	0	0	X	0	0
		5	0	0	0	X	0
15	1	1	X	0	X	0	0
		2	0	0	0	X	X
	2	3	0	0	0	X	X
		4	2	0	0	0	X
	5	1	X	0	X	0	0
	6	1	0	0	0	X	0
		2	0	0	0	X	0
			9/24	0%	5/24	19/24	16/24

The most significant observations from table (3) are:

- Percentage of integration with other skills: 37%
- Writing homework percentage: 0%
- Productive activity percentage: 20%
- Receptive and recognition activity percentage: 72%
- Use of pictures: 67%

As can be gleaned from the analysis results, the main gaps had to do with skill integration, low number of enrichment activities designed by teachers, low percentage of productive activities, learner friendly designs, and low frequency of assessment and revision activities (once every five units).

6. Curriculum design criteria

At the design stage, the students were assigned the task to individually review what good practice says about criteria for good EFL supplementary material. Following presentations and feedback on reports, the whole class agreed on uniform criteria that largely subscribed to good practice. The criteria they used were adapted from Howard [3] and Santamaria and Caballero [4]:

1. Material is user friendly:
This was defined as it being easy to use by pupils, teachers and parents. Enough instruction is provided for each activity. Work load is within pupil foreign language competence. The word list at the end of the book was spread across units and pictures were added for each vocabulary item.
2. Target skill is integrated with other skills: Each supplementary material book will integrate target skill with the other language skills (Reading is integrated with writing, listening and grammar and so on).
3. Design is attractive and appealing: It was agreed to include colors, pictures, one activity per page, and a limited number of tasks within each activity.
4. Material is outcome oriented: The material will gradually build towards achieving curriculum outcome. We went beyond the outcome only if, for example, the curriculum expected writing one short sentence, we could ask for two or three short sentences, but we will not include compound or complex sentences; or if the curriculum expects pupils to read three short sentences, we could include up to five short sentences.
5. Material includes productive and receptive activities. It is important to have students practice production of words, phrases, and sentences in each skill.
6. Material includes assessment activities following every two units.
7. Material personalizes activities, especially the productive ones. It asks pupils about things/people they know from their immediate environments.
8. Activity is well-Contextualized: The material has enough instructions (words , images, examples)
9. Activities develop progressively: Gradual progress from receptive to more productive activities.
10. Material does not overload pupils. It does not introduce new grammatical elements other than those introduced in the curriculum. It explains grammatical rule through illustration or

by adding different colors to illustrate target grammatical item. Or it can add the plural form of has when the curriculum does not mention the plural at all. These are examples on additions which stay within curriculum outcomes.

7. Formative feedback on preliminary designs

When students had designed enough activities, it was essential to give preliminary feedback so the teams could learn from good models and would avoid violation of agreed criteria. It was arranged so teams would give one presentation for each language component.

Feedback followed each presentation. Once we saw actual products, new criteria emerged which sometimes agreed with criteria from good practice and some other times had to do more with design and layout of material. A couple of times I had to ask students not to include activities that are above the learners levels or which went beyond what is expected from the school book. They were also requested to work on clarity of instructions when the required tasks were not comprehensible.

Table 4: Feedback on preliminary designs

Problem	Suggested modification
Followed curriculum in introducing revision every five units.	Bridge the gap of big time intervals between practice exercises and assessment activities
Activities did not follow gradual progressive fashion (from word to sentence to longer stretches of language)	Arrangement of the activities should be structured (easy – medium – hard)
Too many requirements in one single exercise like asking them to listen, circle, draw, and write.	Cut down on requirements and introduce examples for clarity of instructions.
The reading material covered mainly accuracy and comprehension.	Include productive reading activities; use reading to improve other skills and vice versa. They were also advised to include authentic use of language like dialogues.
It was essential to draw student attention that productive activities should vary in level of difficulty.	There are some high, low and medium level productive activities, and the supplementary material should include all 3 levels.
Students wanted to take the grammatical component back to traditional practices which tested knowledge of grammatical items through multiple choice and circle correct answer types of activities.	Follow curriculum focus on production of grammatical structures. They were advised not to take good practices and turn them into bad ones.
Students added new components (like long words for first graders or new grammars for higher levels.	They were asked not to put high pressure on the kids or their teachers by introducing new grammatical elements other than those introduced in the curriculum.
Activity overload (pages packed with activities which takes away from activity appeal.)	Use only one activity per page and add pictures and examples.
Using long paragraphs (10 lines) when the curriculum says 1-3 sentences.	Stick to curriculum expectations or add a couple of sentences beyond those and only towards the end.
Sequencing problems where the revision was all used at the beginning of the level.	Divide revision activities and spread them up equally.

8. Assessment of project designs

To guarantee fair assessment, the teacher included individual work that equals 45% of the total grade. For example, teams will submit curriculum analysis reports but then they will individually write the criteria from good practice. They will also do the curriculum design in teams but will present their work individually, so each will develop material for the two units s/he analyzed and will present the work as it belongs in the final group product. Table (5) shows the new assessment scheme as compared to the ones used for the non-CBL design.

Table (5): Old and new assessment course scheme

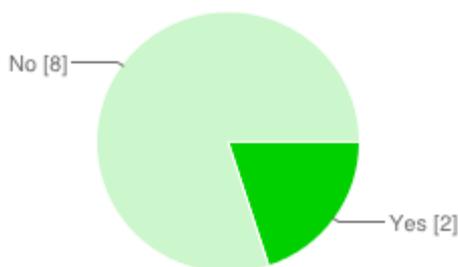
First exam (20%)	Curriculum analysis report 15% (Team grade) Criteria for good practice 5 % (individual work)
Proposal and notes (15%)	20% curriculum analysis results report (team grade)
Proposal Presentation (10%)	Product presentation 10% (individual work)
Research paper (25%)	Supplementary material product 25% (team grade)
Final exam (25%)	Final exam (25%)
Participation (5%)	

Compared to the earlier evaluation scheme, the new one is conspicuously more skill-based. It more emphasizes team work. It measures interview and observation skills, team management skills, time management, and presentation skills. The scheme also guarantees that the knowledge base is achieved by training students on various research methods and tools (methods like evaluation and action research; tools like curriculum analysis, observation, and interview tools). The students were also trained on designing survey studies and were told that they may need them as pre- and post-satisfaction/feedback poll when they pilot the material. The knowledge base was tested in the final examination which was assigned 25% of the course.

9. Peer evaluation

The product presentation was followed by peer-evaluation. One student designed evaluation tool based on the criteria from good practice. The class completed a computerized Likert scale and yes/no design evaluation survey and results were also shared immediately. The results often agreed with the feedback the team received from class teacher. For example, the evaluation results for the grade four writing materials showed that the design team needed to pay more attention to clarity of instructions for each activity which got the lowest result with 20% only agreeing that there was enough instructions for each activity.

Is there enough instructions for each activity?

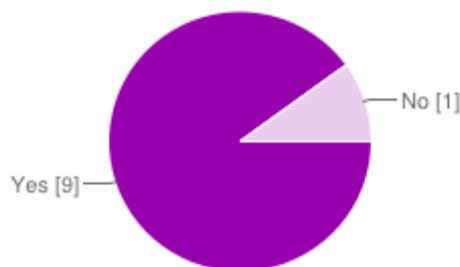


Yes 20%

No 80%

The same team scored best on skill integration with the other language skills (90% thought they did well on integration):

Are the four skills integrated in the material?



Yes 90%

No 10%

The rest of the question requested feedback on if the material is outcome oriented, if it includes enough, if the design is user friendly, and if there is gradual development in the exercises. The scores on these aspects ranged between 70% and 80%, which indicated that though more work needed to be done on those, the team has done well enough there.

10. An exhibition of student work

The teacher formed a team of student volunteers to design the course exhibition layout and send out invitations to exhibition guests. Representatives from University administration, English Department staff, English language supervisors, and teachers of target grades were invited to attend and were informed that the purpose behind the exhibition is to make student work available for use in the public schools. Around a hundred visitors came to the exhibition, to whom the students explained the process and the product of their engagement with the surrounding public schools community. Both the product and the process were received well by the guests. The students received two invitations to present their work to all grades teachers in two education directorates. The vice president for academic affairs wrote a short note praising the work and asking the course teacher to disseminate the idea to other departments on campus.

11. Conclusion

The paper explained the process of integrating community-based learning in the English Department research methods course. Nine student teams managed to design 1000 activity sheets for primary English classes. The materials they produced were collected in four supplementary activity books which were given to the directorates of education in the Nablus area. In a country like Palestine, where the primary school teachers' weekly load is 22-28 hours and their class size ranges between 30 and 40 pupils, such student contributions remain invaluable.

As a learning experience, the project achieved many outcomes which could not be achieved in the more commonly practiced method of teaching research in isolation from the surrounding communities. The students have learned to do gap analysis in an actual public school setting and to propose solutions for shortcomings in the curriculum and in teacher practices. They have become more accustomed to team dynamics and to accommodating the less than perfect team member habits. They have come to see their work as complementary to the work of other students in the same team and to that of other teams as well. They were able to establish and to work according to

criteria for good practice. In short, they are now more prepared to engage with the English teaching profession because they have become more aware of school books outcomes, early learners' needs, and EFL classroom practices.

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