

Framing HCT's graduate outcomes with task-based & project-driven writing projects

Peter Karagianakis

Peter Karagianakis has taught English and administered at the college level in the United States and in Greece; worked for the US Federal Government as a language service specialist; trained as an official examiner for the Michigan Proficiency and Competency of English Certificates; taught at the Military Language Institute (MLI) in Abu Dhabi; appointed chief instructor for the Royal Guards, at the Palace of HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nayhan; instructed Public Speaking courses at New York Institute of Technology; and taught EFL/ESP at Abu Dhabi Men's College. His interests include Deconstruction, discourse analysis, pragmatics, EFL classroom cultural paradigms, notions of identity, and the theory of the nation.

Introduction

This article outlines practical ways in which HCT Graduate Outcomes (GOs) such as technological and information literacy, critical and creative thinking, team-work, self-management and independent learning can develop through writing skills with task-based project-driven activities within a Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) lab or IT environment. Moving from the theoretical spectrum of analyzing the learning significance of particular writing approaches to describing classroom activities that reflect the aforementioned GOs, this article then elaborates on how specific GOs that underscore learning and competency skills can be effectively integrated into project-driven and task-based writing.

The activities that are described in this article can be divided into two types: those that can be performed in a traditional classroom environment - that is, no technology - and those that require IT to enhance the writing/learning experience. The level of computer know-how that the CALL/IT-related activities require includes students being familiar with a CALL lab/IT environment, using e-mail, Web Browsers, and Web design tools such as Front Page and Dream-Weaver as well as knowing how to up-load and download pictures and documents. However, student-writing skills are at the heart of this article. No matter what the learning environment, writing remains an essential and fundamental skill that the learner has to marshal either traditionally, with pencil and paper, or with keyboard and IT skills. Within this framework of understanding, a basic pedagogical question is how can activities that promote the student writing/learning relationship be more effectively developed.

GO 2: Critical and Creative Thinking

Writing is perhaps the most complex language skill. Unlike speaking, reading, and listening, writing has the unique characteristic of requiring more formal language training than any other skill. It requires the ability to correctly sequence grammatical and lexical structures in written form. Writing entails that the final product successfully develop from a writer-based creation to a reader-based text. Accordingly, it requires cognitive problem-solving ability so as to be able to evaluate and generate comprehensible ideas while searching for language with which to express those ideas (White & Arndt 1991 :12).

Teaching of the writing process should reveal to the learner that the final writing product has many 'submerged' writing layers that need to be worked through as part of the authenticity of the critical and creative writing process. By reworking the various writing stages, the writer is led into a more conscious understanding about the skill of writing itself. Our concern is not to have the student imitate writing models but to engage in and develop a sense of writing as a multi-layered skill by generating ideas, organizing information, pre-writing, and drafting.

To help achieve GO 2, tasks can be set that require the use of meta-cognitive strategies, thus encouraging students to coordinate their own learning process. That is, learners can undertake various tasks that are writing-related yet which move the focus from the writing itself on to learning/language skills. These skills may include reviewing

and refining information already acquired; selectively searching and organizing new information based on teacher/student brainstorming and mind-mapping sessions; performing Internet searches for relevant information and pictures; and making decisions alone or as a team regarding the information, task, and its requirements. These language-learning sub-skills are inextricably linked to the writing experience itself, but they are also cognitive skills that require critical thinking effort on the part of the learners.

Prompting the Creative Thinking Writing Process

By setting up the writing process as a mind-map inquiry, students are prompted to develop their creative thinking processes using a specific theme to generate ideas. This approach helps learners schematically 'see' connections between ideas, words, phrases as well as generate more ideas for further discussion and writing. That is, the amorphous structure of the mind-map enables more creativity in making connections as students respond to the theme schematically rather than structurally and linearly. Indeed, by mind-mapping key phrases and words around a specific concept or key phrase and its associations, the focus shifts away from grammatical and lexical accuracy. This means learners can respond more freely, and are less inhibited by linguistic accuracy since it is not part of the writing process at this stage. In addition, there are no strict right or wrong associations because students' mental links can differ based on how the student perceives theme and associations. In this way, learners have a much broader sense of the writing task. In terms of GO 2, creative thinking and writing merge, and learners are enabled to exhibit critical thinking integral to the argumentative essay in a supported way.

GO 3: Global Awareness and Citizenship: Fostering the Writing Environment

Another purpose for a writing lesson can be to make students conscious of how writing can transcend the strict classroom vision that they may have of it, making a broader and more realistic perspective of writing attainable. To achieve GO 3, learners can be introduced - or reminded - of the possibilities of authoring their own writing for the Internet-that is for a readership other than the teacher and fellow students. Learners need to understand that this means that people beyond the classroom will be able to read their work, which instills a sense of pride for what will be "on display out there" for others to read. Accordingly, the CALL/IT environment can motivate and offer learners more possibilities in their writing/learning efforts by providing an non-HCT audience.

To this purpose, steps towards achieving Global Awareness as a GO include training and encouraging learners to place their e-mail on a teacher/student web design page and then asking students to up-load their writing samples for "a genuine reading audience" that will respond to their writing. Sites I have successfully used or consulted in the past are listed in Appendix 1. If students are trained in a Web Design tool such Front-Page or Dream-Weaver, writing can be showcased as part of a team-based project. In this way, IT skills and writing will eventually merge for presentation purposes in a web-based format. This also means that English courses establish a close working relationship with educational IT in a collaborative effort to embed particular IT skills

essential to enhancing the language syllabus and ESL teacher and learner efforts.

When students send their writing over the Internet in the form of e-group exchanges, they begin receiving multi-level questions regarding the content, and many become more conscious and concerned about their writing. They are faced with questions about their own national and cultural heritage and history that may require further investigation. This prompts learners to solicit information from various sources, including using their L1, but they have to render the response in L2, for their readership audience. Efforts like these have encouraged students to become more aware of what is shared knowledge and what is not, and providing accurate information about the United Arab Emirates while also taking pride in the whole process—from ideas to writing, to presentation design—as all work is showcased on the worldwide web for others to see. It also helps learners engage in the writing process with a sense of novelty and meaningfulness, rather than seeing writing as limited to the classroom environment (Karagianakis 2004:16-17).

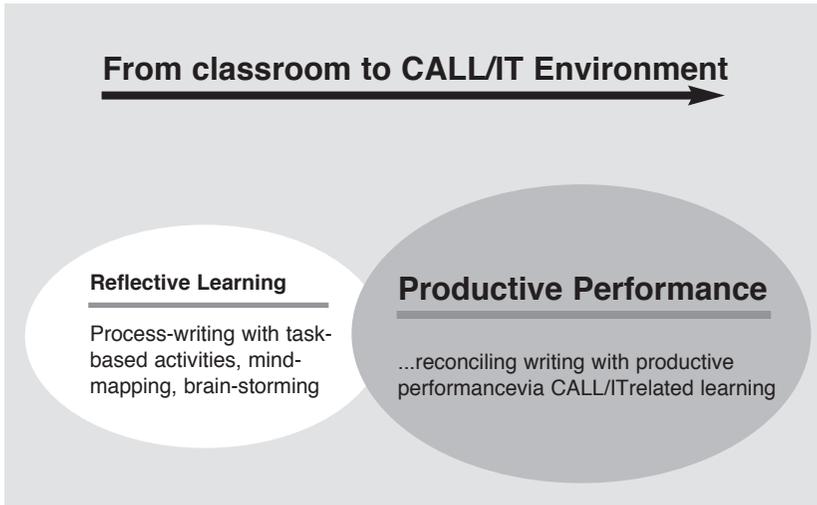
For example, initiating a general topic about the United Arab Emirates in class may lead to students writing about Ras Al-Khaimah (RAK), one of the seven Emirates. After a brainstorming session, the writing may come to focus on aspects related to history, more specifically investigating the presence of the Portuguese or the retaliatory battles between the British and the Al-Qasimi family's fishing fleets. Students writing about RAK may make use of ideas, vocabulary, and phrases provided during the presentation of the theme to write about particular aspects of that Emirate or do a Web Search. In this way, students are able to become selective about information to be used in the writing process.

To give another example, themes related to tradition in the Emirates may have students brainstorming and writing about one of the few dhow boatyards left in the Emirates. Or, a focus on Abu Dhabi as today's oil-rich capital of the UAE may result in investigating pearl-diving and fishing, the traditional professions and sources of basic income for its early inhabitants. Further CALL/worldwide web investigation and classroom discussion about Abu Dhabi may result in investigating how historically, water scarcity resulted in practically no vegetation as well as no summer residents in Abu Dhabi. Projects like these can also entail finding pictures either on the WWW or scanning representative images to highlight the writing projects. Writing approaches and topics like these provide innovative ways to inquire and then present information which makes an impression on readers and our writers. In short, by having learners use and develop their own background knowledge of a particular Emirate, they learn to focus more concretely on particular information that pertains to their world.

Accordingly, learners come to a better appreciation of the use of the Internet since their learning task is not only more manageable but also engenders national pride since specific information can be found in cyberspace about aspects of a locally based theme or item of knowledge. Because of their e-mail exchanges, students have commented how people in North America, Australia, and the UK are unaware of the history and traditions of the UAE while those who have heard about the UAE usually only know about Dubai, not the other Emirates. This, too, helps to develop global awareness (GO 3)

GO 4: Technological Literacy and Challenging Writing Environments

Task-based project writing encourages students to move from reflective learning to productive performance. This is schematically illustrated below:



A project-based approach promotes technological literacy through a required project task that entails IT skills. The purpose is to have the student become an active participant in her/his own learning, while the teacher facilitates this process. This is what is called Integrative CALL, where students learn to manipulate technological tools as an on-going process of their language learning, yet these tools are also the basic skills for the 'global information based economies' (Warschauer 1998 :58). In this way, learners prepare for the demands they will meet outside the classroom by training them in technological literacy and vocational competency skills in line with HCT's GOs.

To effectively achieve GO 4, learners should come into the CALL lab/IT environment with specific tasks and deadlines in mind. This is important because one of the main drawbacks with CALL lab/wireless environments is that students associate them with chatting, blogging, e-mailing, and music-videos. This classroom reality, particularly in a wireless classroom environment, can seriously detract from quality teaching/learning time and precipitate challenges in trying to implement a successfully timed lesson plan. The implicit objective should be to not only train students to use IT but more importantly to foster awareness of the Internet's significance as it pertains to finding specific project-related information and not as a chief source of entertainment and socialization at the expense of organized learning. These are important aspects of the Internet in defining learner/user-perceptions and educational global awareness, but this understanding also means that the teacher has planned out each phase of the project-task and that there is a course syllabus in place that directs and legitimizes these efforts from classroom, pre-CALL, and on to CALL/IT phases.

GO 5: Self-Management & Independent Learning

Approaches discussed above have contributed to developing GO2, GO 3 and GO 4, but also prompt learners into Self-Management and Independent Learning Skills, another key HCT GO, by clearly specifying particular tasks, project stages, and time frames that learners have to manage for project development and completion. This is well exemplified at Abu Dhabi Men's College (ADMC) within the General Education Curriculum of the Diploma Foundations Program, where freshmen students are required to work on a program component entitled Personal and Professional Development (PPDV). At ADMC, this course, PPDV 0155, has students working together on projects that include learning how to use Encarta to find specific project information; surfing the Web for information related to particular project related task requirements; and various other IT related tasks. In addition, some of the PPDV Projects are topically related while others are more geared to global awareness, technological literacy, and vocational competency.

The biggest challenge that students face with this type of learning, however, may not be from language and IT task requirements, but from the perplexities that stem from Self-Management and Independent Learning as functional frameworks. This is important, because they challenge various aspects of the local classroom culture that teachers may easily overlook.

Self-Management and Independent Learning as part of student-centered learning have the potential to create complex issues. Contributing factors may include Western models of learning that promote autonomy and emphasize student-centered classroom teaching/learning environments as part of their methodologies. Indeed, the chief underlying framework of PPDV aims at placing the learner as much as possible in control of his learning in terms of effective time management and collaborative effort while the teacher primarily facilitates and monitors. However, many of HCT's new learners prefer to depend heavily on teacher assistance and look towards the teacher for direct help or answers; conversely, current Western methodologies discourage what is viewed as over-reliance on a teacher by encouraging models of learning autonomy and emphasizing time management, and by planning, prioritizing, and delegating respective project related tasks. The EFL teacher plays a catalytic role in the classroom culture because he or she can actually take into account learner expectations, and thereby effectively mediate expectations and project requirements.

For example, students' sense of the temporal learning environment appears to place more importance on social interaction than on structured time and the significance of timelines, which may explain why it is not uncommon for students to need frequent teacher intervention concerning deadlines, particularly as it applies to completing various PPDV project-related tasks and the various components of integrated projects in latter semesters. Project-based work within a homogeneous L1 environment with team member collaboration sets up the possibility for students to socialize at the expense of time-limited learning.

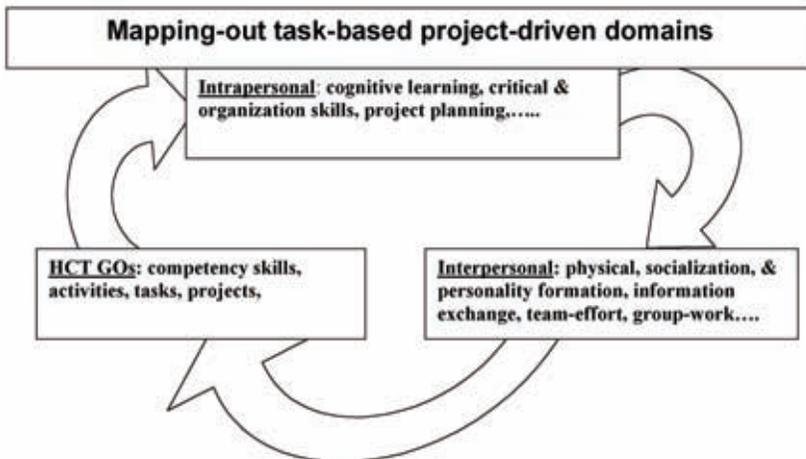
Reconciling Classroom Culture and with GO Expectations

ELT practices that are framed by self-management and independent learning are characterized by facilitating opportunities for language participation and interaction at the student level. In part, this may stem from the understanding that project-work approaches assume that if the English language teacher sets up the right kind of classroom learning activities “language learning will take care of itself” (Allwright quoted in Harmer 2001 :27). Johnston (2003) explains that teachers perceive learners as having a “moral duty” to participate within these teacher expectations. Yet, this view also assumes that learning approaches are understood as having similar functions and in our case also desirable effects in different classroom cultural settings. But to what extent can we really claim this?

Cases in Classroom Culture and Teaching Approaches

In his ethnographic microanalysis of classroom culture, Erickson (1996) quotes McDermott et al (1975) to point out that while cultural differences play a role, it is sharing of attitudes of social identity - co-membership - which has a decisive effect on relationships. Erickson, in studies of Italian-Americans regarding learner culture and classroom learning, found that one of the main influences on the teacher/student relationship was “classroom participation frameworks” and the extent to which students students were familiar with them, which in turn depended on the frameworks they were accustomed to in daily life outside school. Erickson's study on classroom culture revealed that “interactional problems occurred where there was cultural incongruity between home and school” (Erickson cited in Thorp, 1991). From this study, Erickson argued that effective language teaching required two skills: Academic Task Structure (ATS) and Social Participation Structure (SPS). The former (ATS) has to do with “subject matter” while the latter (SPS) has to do with the teacher. SPS, according to Erickson, “involves knowledge of what social conventions are necessary to learn to do the subject” (Erickson quoted in Thorpe1991). Interestingly enough, what has been underestimated in ELT is the extent to which English language teachers using task-based project learning in EFL classrooms, particularly in homogeneous L1 environments, can claim that their practices are compatible with their intentions (Karagianakis 2007 :54).

As others have argued, language learning should not be seen merely as a cognitive (intrapersonal) process but it is also experiential (interpersonal), which may indeed suggest why socio-cultural theories postulate that the interpersonal precedes the intrapersonal (Crawford 2004 :6-7). This understanding takes on more significance in the UAE's socio-cultural environment if one considers that the ELT teacher/student relationship is mediated primarily through specifically defined learning activities and tasks (Karagianakis 2007 :57).



The above diagram represents how contingent classroom culture, HCT's GOs, and task-based project-driven learning frameworks are. This factor should not be overlooked particularly in relation to homogeneous groups of adult EFL learners. Within this context, the EFL teacher can easily (mis)interpret classroom learning encounters without realizing or examining how they are linked. This is particularly so because of the normative nature of ELT's social and cognitive teacher discourse and the position that Western educational frameworks occupy within this dynamic. Indeed, ELT approaches have developed a methodological knowledge-base that teachers use to define their learning environments personally and professionally rather than examining, for example, how experiential knowledge can effect teacher perception, efforts, and methods. Implicitly, understanding the classroom culture is contingent on teacher efforts to be cognizant of how learner classroom culture reflects social engagement and learning habit formation, particularly as they relate to task-based project-driven learning frameworks. This insight is particularly important firstly as interactions impose their own rules of involvement, and secondly because this needs to be considered in terms of the EFL classroom teachers' attempts to cultivate particular Western frames of educational involvement.

Conclusion

Throughout this article, an attempt has been made to explain theoretically and practically how writing can be merged with a task-based project-driven approach that is inextricably linked to HCT GOs. My purpose has been to explain how students can experience the writing process from generating ideas, mind-mapping, thematically and selectively classifying those ideas, and using IT to enhance and enrich the writing experience. The article has also attempted to explain how the teacher is faced with reconciling particular classroom cultural challenges that stem from specific GOs and task-based project-driven learning frameworks. The ultimate purpose is to effectively merge our teaching/learning objectives so that writing experience, CALL/IT competency skills, and HCT GOs can take on greater authenticity and meaningfulness for both teacher and student.

Appendix 1.

Sites for sharing student writing include:

Intercultural E-Mail Classroom Connections

<http://www.iecc.org>

Email Projects Home Page

<http://www.otan.dni.us/webfarm/emailproject/email.html>

Mystery Character E-Mail Project

<http://www.indiana.edu/~cell/spring00/mystery.html>

<http://www.isabelperez.com/penpal.html>

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