

# Creative Language Learning Projects with Emerging Digital Media

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## Abstract

This paper introduces seven genres of the digital media projects that can help the 21st century EFL learner develop intercultural communication capability (ICC) in English with creativity afforded by emerging digital media. It is based on a project by the author and a group of pre-service teachers during the Fall semester of 2012-2013. Guided by a list of suggested topics and the concept of learner-centeredness, the team discovered many useful project ideas. Although communicative language teaching, task-based language teaching, and multiple intelligences are all behind the applications, we found that when learner-centeredness is the guiding principle and ICC is the goal, possibilities are abundant. It is true that we are only limited by our imagination when it comes to teaching a language with digital media. The purpose of this workshop is not to exhaust all the possibilities, but to help the audience become aware of the availability of the many language learning projects which afford opportunities for the key principle and the goal. As new tools emerge, the particular digital media introduced might become obsolete, but the key concepts presented here will make sure that new tools will be used in a creative and meaningful way to support language learning.

## 1 Introduction

Software applications for second and foreign language learning purposes have come a long way. Warschauser (1996), among others, has categorized the evolution of computer assisted language learning into different stages: behavioristic, communicative, and integrative. Whatever the changes and no matter what new tools are emerging, suggestions made by language educators have been relatively stable for the past two decades. In fact, the key pedagogical philosophy that has been advocated for the best classroom integration is always along

the line of constructivism and learner-centeredness. It is found that teachers who operate based on these concepts often could provide students with the 21st-century learning experiences, combining media technology and master expertise to motivate students to inquire, to find answers, and to learn. One important characteristic for this kind of learning experience is creativity afforded by a project-based approach which allows sufficient room for learners to use the digital media to express themselves in the target language and experience the target culture, no matter how limited the learner's proficiency is.

Although many forms of software application have emerged in recent years and used widely in everyday life and work, research continuously finds that they are not used much in everyday language classroom. One of the reasons is that teachers do not have the time to explore and create ways to integrate the tools into classroom instruction. In addition, many language teachers tend to think of applications too narrowly: only those with language learning content are considered worthwhile, missing out a large number of other possibilities. There is a need for language teachers to understand the variety of genres of language learning project available in order to bring active and fulfilling learning experiences to the learner and make the most of the digital media.

The seven genres discussed in this paper were identified and carefully examined by the author with the help from a group of pre-service language teachers during the school year 2012-2013. Guided by a list of suggested topics and the concept of learner-centeredness, the team explored and then discovered many useful project ideas that encourage creativity in learning English. Although communicative language teaching, task-based language teaching, and multiple intelligences are all behind the applications, we found that when learner-centeredness and creativity are the guiding instructional principle and intercultural communication competence (ICC, Fantini, n/a,

cited in Godwin-Jones, 2013) is the learning goal, possibilities are abundant. It is true that we are only limited by our imagination when it comes to teaching a language with the digital media.

## 2 The Rationale

Although there are many different types of applications on the internet that can be used for language learning, it is possible to think of them as affording two major types of language learning experiences: One is those that abide to a drill-and-practice or paper-and-pencil quiz or exercise mode of language practice. This more familiar method can come in many different forms including, for example, multiple choice, matching, and many other quiz types that created by the *Hot Potatoes* suite or a simple shooting game that involves one learner interacting with a digital media. It is obvious that these applications emphasize mastery of basic language skills. With intercultural communication competence, however, such discrete level or fact-oriented exercises without the learner's personal engagement in the target culture may not be the best option. For the purpose of developing cultural understanding, learners need the experience "to approach, appreciate, and bond with people from other cultures" (Shrum & Glisan, 2005, p. 136), and the project-based approach is considered more appropriate. It treats the language learner as a language user, not learner, allowing them to make use of everyday digital tools and to take many different paths to use their language in order to develop intercultural communication competence.

There are multiple theoretical originations for project-based learning. John Dewey (1859-1952), American psychologist, philosopher, educator, social critic and political activist is the key scholar project-based learning was attributed to. In TESOL, project-based language learning can also be supported by the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach and the philosophy of learner-centeredness with much emphasis on giving sufficient room for the production of language and learner autonomy. CLT as an umbrella term for many of the recent language teaching methods such as task-based language learning is often used to characterize a language classroom that has a large amount of interaction among students, rather than merely between a teacher and a class of students. The teacher is not the only person that is active while the learner passively listening to organized

materials that have already been selected and processed for them, as in a lecture hall. On the contrary, the learner is engaged in meaningful communication and learning to fulfill daily functions in the target language, as which are the main goal of CLT. Authentic language is emphasized, and accuracy and fluency are both important. Communication skills are developed mostly through group or pair work, roleplays, games, and simulations that have some kind of information gaps which students must work out collaboratively using the target language in its four integrated skills. It brings the focus of learning and instruction to production, making it clear that language learning must develop both active productive and receptive skills (Larsen-Freeman and Anderson, 2011).

However, if students only work through information gaps, this is still a teacher-controlled form of practice with limited language learning outcomes. Using project-based learning it is possible to develop expert knowledge and cultural understanding in the new language, which becomes the stronger version of CLT: i.e., content-based language learning (Larsen-Freeman and Anderson, 2011, p. 131): learners are not learning to use English, but using English to learn something new. It also does not have 'predetermined linguistic content' as the weak version of CLT. The goal is mastering both the content cultural, and language in an authentic context. Thus, content-based language learning also lends a strong support to project-based learning, an approach that has often been considered the best use of technology in education.

## 3 Features of Project-based Language Learning

Project-based language learning is actually a challenging and time consuming process, but it could lead to rewarding results that are not possible with more traditional methods. In Boss and Krauss's approach to projects, five features are emphasized (2007, p. 12):

- Projects form the centerpiece of the curriculum – they are not an add-on or extra at the end of a "real" unit.
- Students engage in real-world activities and practice the strategies of authentic disciplines.
- Students work collaboratively to solve problems that matter to them.
- Technology is integrated as a tool for

discovery, collaboration, and communication, taking learners places they could not otherwise go and helping teachers achieve essential learning goals in new ways.

- Increasingly, teachers collaborate to design and implement projects that cross geographic boundaries or even jump time zones.

Dudeny and Hockly (2007), on the other hand, has provided the following as the features:

- Both short-term and long-term
- Group activities
- Communication & Sharing of knowledge
- Cooperative & Interaction
- No specialist technical knowledge is needed
- Real-world
- Greater motivation
- Encourage critical thinking skills
- Ss do not just regurgitate information, but have to transform that information in order to achieve a given task

There are many different forms of projects, including creative writing projects, computer-mediated communication projects, or inquiry projects. It can be for language learning purposes only, interdisciplinary, or requiring integrated language skills. Successful projects have to be structured, and it needs time to plan and design. Dudeny and Hockly specified four basic steps for implementing a successful project:

1. Choose the project topic: Will your learners be researching famous people, an event or an issue?
2. Make the task clear: What information will they need to find – biographical, factual, views and opinions?
3. Find the resources: Which websites will your learners need to visit? Do these websites contain the information they need and are they at the right level?
4. Decide on the outcome: What is the final purpose of the project? For example, will your learners be making a poster, a presentation or holding a debate?

This list is similar to the steps for a WebQuest project, a web-based inquiry project that aims to make the best use of online resources for all subject areas. Bernie Dodge (1997) defines Webquest as “an inquiry-oriented activity in which some or all of the information that learners interact with comes from resources on

the internet, optionally supplemented with videoconferencing.” It is structured as a series of webpage which present the project information as the introduction, question & task, the process, resources, and conclusion (March, n/d). These steps can be considered the basic components of project-based instructional design. One important aspect is to decide a project genre. There have been many different projects genres developed by language educators all over the world, but the seven below all use emerging digital media in some way and have been advocated as creative yet useful for foreign language learning.

#### **4 Seven Genres of Creative Project-based FL Learning with Digital Media**

Although information sources for project-based learning such as the WebQuest Central provide many project design patterns, not all of them are useful for FL (Foreign language learning) or EFL (English as a foreign language) learners. EFL is similar to FL but is very different from all the other school subjects. Most significantly, learners are supposed to *use* a language that they are not familiar with. Thus, Sox and Rubinstein-Avila (2009) assert that WebQuest projects (WQs) for English language learners have to have three extra features in addition to those for conventional WQs: linguistic, multimedia, and organizational. That is, the language used for explaining the project has to be simple and concise, information must be presented with multiple modality, and pages and information must be consistently organized in order to assist comprehension. Other researchers (Koenraad and Westhoff, 2003; Koenraad, 2005) also specified the importance of attending to SLA and CLT theoretical considerations such as having sufficient language input and output opportunities. Drawing on the unique needs for foreign language learners, seven project genres are presented below.

##### **4.1 Genre 1: Language Quest**

Seeing the uniqueness of foreign language learning process, language educators in Netherland first developed Language Quest as a special form of WebQuest (Koenraad and Westhoff, 2003; Koenraad, 2005). In addition to following the principles of a WebQuest as

developed by Dodge, Language Quest also have the following features based on CLT:

- The task should encourage the use of the target language as instruction language and language in use for the duration of the task and for the end products of the Language Quest.
- The material presented in the Language Quest should be authentic. The tasks within the Language Quest should be functional and realistic.
- The task should be learner-oriented and should therefore be attractive and related to the learner's reality.
- Students can work on the task in a flexible way. The task offers different routes, media, procedures and ways of collaborating.
- The task should encourage students to exchange information and expertise, preferably in the target language.

Koenraad and Westhoff (2003, 2005) used a webquest that plans a visit to the Disneyland as an example of the Language Quest project. Levi Altstaedter and Jones (2009) used the same travelling theme with a group of Spanish learners who designed a brochure, created a concept map, and wrote a reflective essay in Spanish for a trip to Argentina. In a study with language teachers (Chao, 2006), it was found that designing itineraries for overseas trips is indeed the particular WebQuest pattern most often chosen by EFL teachers. The final product of such projects allows the learner to introduce the target country with multiple modality of literacy, making use of texts, pictures, photos, videos, or sound tracks that they found on the Internet representing various places that they mean to visit. Other LanguageQuest products are reports, videos, plays, or exhibitions, which involve the learner in reading authentic information (authentic input), planning based on their understanding of the target language culture, linking language learning with a real-world context, and finally engaging in creating the product through the pushed output process (Swain, 1995; Swain and Lapkin, 1995). All the materials the learner use is authentic, functional, and indeed realistic. The active construction process can be attractive and motivating to the learner and thus are considered a useful project genre for foreign language learners.

## 4.2 Genre 2: Virtual Quest

Although LanguageQuest is promising for language learning, there is one key problem: FL or EFL learners tend not to communicate in the target language (TL) among themselves in the process. To create reasons to use the TL during the project, teachers need to make use of computer-mediated community, or CMC, a form of digital projects that has in recent years generated a large number of studies among language educators and researchers (e.g., Jin, 2013; Liaw, 2006; Stockwell and Stockwell, 2003; Warschauer, 1995). With CMC, language learners have the opportunity to work with another group of learners who may or may be native speakers but are from a different geographical location. In order to create a product for the project collaboratively, the learners have no choice but to communicate with one another in the target language, and the interaction between the local and the distanced partner is made through the internet communication tools, such as email, Facebook, conferencing tools, or Skype.

One unique CMC study which made use of the 3D virtual environment, *Second Life*, to engage foreign language learners in a *LanguageQuest* is Vickers (2010), who called his project *VirtualQuest*. Usually when creating a product is the focus, both teachers and learners tend to overlook the learning opportunities in the process. *VirtualQuest* allows learners to first experience and then stop to reflect on the experience and learn from it. Different from *WebQuests* or *LanguageQuests* which aim to create a product, *VirtualQuests* are exploratory in nature and aim to create language learning content from unplanned dialogues, conversations, and cultural experiences that occur in *Second Life* as the learner interact with others. Learners define their tasks in the virtual environment, which then lead to a product output as well as learning materials for the whole class. This practice is supported by a language teaching approach called the Dogme language learning (Meddings and Thornbury, 2009), which aims to draw learning materials from the learner's experience interacting with others instead of depending on a textbook. The example provided by Vickers is an English learner who investigated a variety of ways to use SL in order meet people, get an understanding of the environment, explore places, and learn English. Although the learner had difficulty using voice chats and participating

in group talks with a large number of native speakers in SL, in his final presentation he reported his experiences and evaluated SL as “a good way to learn English.” This learner’s experience reminds this author of many other ways to use MOOs (Multi-user, Object-Oriented) or text-based virtual realities for language learning in the early days of CALL. For example, learners can use SL to perform a soap opera (Turner, 1998), to enact a historical event, or to engage in collaborative writing projects. This emergent and dialogic pedagogy can also create cultural immersion opportunities for FL as well as EFL learners. It also features autonomy, relevance and motivation and thus is recognized as very appropriate for learning ICC with web2.0 tools.

### 4.3 Genre 3: Presentation Projects

Depending on the level of learners, it is also possible to engage learners in a presentation genre of projects, such as having the learner use digital media to introduce their country, their family, their favorite person, and their room. For WebQuest scholars and practitioners such as Bonnie Dudge and Tom March, this task may not be considered a Webquest because there seems not much critical thinking and web resources involved. However, with such projects EFL learners could engage in pushed or comprehensible output (Swain, 1995; Swain and Lapkin, 1995), which is a process that allows learners to experiment with the new language by actually using it while getting necessary feedback from interlocutors. In this indispensable process for language development, the learner may look as if only copying and pasting what they see on the Internet, but the selection of information, figuring out the written information, reorganizing and restructuring the material, and presenting the material in written or oral production using appropriate language forms to an audience are important and difficult literacy to develop.

In this author’s oral training classes, EFL learners have been asked to engage in such projects. The topics used include “*This is my favorite!*” in which the learner presents a topic that they like, such as their favorite vocal artists, dance genres, and sports, while “*You may not know this but...*” allow students to present a new piece information to the class and involve the class in hands-on learning activities. With the focus on fluency, the principle for selecting a

topic is that every learner must have something to say about the topic. Selection of tools is of the students’ choice. They could use all the audio-visual media that they think useful, but it is specified that video clips and songs cannot be played more than one fifth of the whole presentation time (i.e., 4 minutes out of the total 20) since most of the time should be used for the presenter to speak in person in the target language. Tools that students use for these presentations are many, including the camera and video functions in their own smartphones, *Power Point* and *Prezi*. Oftentimes students would also create a short movie with *Movie Maker* or download one from *Youtube*. These presentations, although do not require collaboration, are challenging and rewarding to the presenter because of the hard work involved before, during and after the presentation. Students usually are nervous and stiff at the first presentation during the school year, and gradually become more comfortable and feel proud of their own ability to present an extensive topic with reputable performance. For learners of weaker language skills, the topics can be less challenging and the presentation can be made less lengthy, and the effects can be expected to be equally positive.

### 4.4 Genre 4: Visual Projects

Visual projects for the purpose of develop intercultural communicative competence do not simply put learners at the position of a consumer of ready-made graphics or visuals. Instead, it is important to engage learners in playful, creative use of language using various visual tools and artifacts, such as images, photos, videos, maps, ads. With these visuals, learners can also be encouraged to express their feelings by telling a story, writing a poem, creating a fairy tale, making a drawing, or creating a comic (Godwin-Jones, 2013)

Many digital applications have recently become available which allow users to create graphics and visuals with great convenience. These tools are useful both when the learner creates their own graphics (i.e., learners engage in production) or when they are given graphics to mediate understanding (i.e., learners in comprehension). With self-created visuals such as pictures and photos, it is possible for the learner to accomplish two goals in the language learning process: arousing interest and mediating text-based language development with an alternative mode of expression – one that feels

natural and comfortable for most youngsters and visual learners. On the other hand, compared with words and abstract symbols, graphics and images can also help the learner construct a concrete understanding even when they are struggling with an unfamiliar foreign language discourse.

Two recent tools can best represent such a graphic-creating genre: *Toondoo* and *Microsoft Photo Story*. The former is an online website for creating cartoons. Instead of drawing from scratch with an electronic pen brush as the simple drawing tool available in every computer, the user of *Toondoo* is now given a wide variety of ready-made graphic components, such as different natural scenes, backgrounds, buildings, furniture, everyday objects, animals, as well as bodies, noses and eyes of different shapes and colors. To get started, the user first selects one, two, three, or four frames as well as a horizontal or vertical page layout; it is also possible to create cartoon e-books, which are formed by connecting a series of one-frame cartoon pages. Most importantly, a feature of *Toondoo* is its community undertone, a common feature for all Web 2.0 tools. In the case of *Toondoo*, the community feature means that all the created works can be shared or made available to all visitors, registered members, or designated individuals, giving an authentic reason to engage in creation. Members can also give others' works their appraisal, comment, and support so that real communication functions can be achieved. In addition, with this community feature, users and members can interact and learn from one another, generating a lot of creativity among users.

Another widely used tool in this genre is *Photostory*, a familiar software application for producing photo slideshows. As *Photostory* is a piece of stand-alone software, it does not have the community feature. However, as it is readily available in every computer, there is no worry about network failure. It is also a lot faster to put together a finished product than *Toondoo*. The user first needs to select and input photos, and then with a few keystrokes and selecting actions, all photos will be displayed according to the user-assigned order creating a connected slideshow with proper transition effects. Appropriate background music could also make the slideshow look even more professional.

In terms of language classroom application, projects can be so designed that learner groups are asked to use *Toondoo* in creating cartoon stories, which can later be used in speaking or

writing assignments. Instead of the usual practice of writing or speaking in responding to teacher-created or professionally created cartoons, learners can be expected to feel more motivated to respond to peer-created cartoons. With *Photostory*, project ideas include "My Favorite Home Cooking" or "My Dream Life." With teenager learners, it is important to make sure that every student has something to say about the topic and that no negative feelings could be generated because of the theme.

#### 4.5 Genre 5: Journalism Projects

Having students work as a journalist could make use of all four language skills. Examples include creating a narrated tour, oral history, or digital storytelling, as Godwin-Jones (2013) suggested. Learners could also interview native speakers or other people to collect data for a written or oral report on a topic of interest to themselves. Gardener (1995), for example, reported how the learner's production of video documentary could lead to authentic language use. *CNN iReport* is a website in which students can submit their news stories and get published. The types of digital media that could be used to support journalism projects are plenty, including all those available in a smartphone such as a camera, video, sound recording, note-taking functions and applications. For EFL or FL learners, the challenge of finding people for such a project can be met by conducting interviews with native speaker interviewees online or with local people and then translate the discussion into English. Another way of creating journalist content is using 'Scoop it', which allows the user to put together a page of specific information searched on the internet. All of these will be motivating projects for EFL learners.

#### 4.6 Genre 6: Cultural Immersion Projects

Cultural immersion is difficult to achieve with EFL environments if not for networked digital devices. When learners explore and interact in the *Second Life*, for example, the whole experience could give the strong feeling of being immersed in a different country or culture. *Second Life* suggests some interesting and popular places to visit ranked according to topics (available at <http://secondlife.com/destinations/learning> ). Websites that introduce overseas trips such as

*Peek.com* are useful for a vicarious cultural immersion experience. With *Stay.com*, learners could also get to know all the tourist attractions in 140 cities of the world.

In addition, interactive videos can also bring cultural immersion when experts, guests, and other classrooms are invited through interactive video conferencing tools to interact with the learner in real time. Recently, mobile devices have also played a role in providing cultural immersion opportunities, as Godwin-Johns stated that students on a field trip or during study abroad could use the mobile device to interact with peers at home, engaging all the students in the overseas experience. These applications, however, have not been taken advantage of by many EFL classes, perhaps due to the high demand for technical stability for people to interact synchronously and through video signals.

#### 4.7 Genre 7: Real-world Problem-solving Projects

Foreign language learners often do not think of themselves as having the ability to participate in world-wide problem solving projects due to the perceived lack of sufficient language proficiency, but the Internet has created many such opportunities for everybody, including, of course, foreign language learners. There have been many K-12 EFL teachers from Taiwan and many parts of the world participating in world-wide problem-solving projects such as those sponsored by international organizations such as iEarn- International Education and Resource Network (<http://www.iearn.org/>). Students solve a real-world problem by working with other students from all over the world. As of September 2013- January 2014, project teams are solicited for producing a newspaper, regional history, creative writing, reporting on a hero, and discussing global issues in education and environment. Many of these will be real-world issues that students need to engage in inquiry and develop solutions. It is also possible to engage in local public service and then present or write about this experience. Liu (2012), for example, reported a project in which EFL university students wrote about their experience in real-world public service experiences.

## 5 Conclusion

This paper introduces seven genres of project-based foreign language learning. There

are of course many other possibilities with other emerging tools. For example, Baralt, Pennestri, & Selvandin (2011) used *wordles* in teaching writing, a tool that generates “word clouds” from text. Coniam (2008) reported the use of *chatbots*, or online robots, as language learners’ conversation partners. Music production with *SingOn!* or *Adobe Audition* are also possible to lead to EFL learning project ideas, although there have not been many researchers reporting the use of music as a creative project with language learners.

With the newer tools constantly coming to the market, more creative project ideas can be expected. Language teachers could get inspirations from project information for other subject matters such as the Twenty Ideas for Engaging Projects by Edutopia or a PBS video documentary titled, *Digital Media – New Learners of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. The purpose of this paper is not to exhaust all the possibilities, but to help the reader become aware of (1) the importance of a guiding principle in selecting CALL tools, (2) the availability of the type of projects that afford the possibilities of using digital media for developing intercultural communication competence as well as language learning. As newer tools emerge, the particular digital media introduced here may become obsolete but the key concept of creative project-based learning will make sure that new tools will be used in a creative, productive, and meaningful way to support not just the more traditional concept of language development but also intercultural communication competence.

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