Project-based Self-study of the Korean Language

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ABSTRACT

One of the most constant challenges language educators confront is how best to enhance the learner’s cultural awareness as well as to improve communication skills. This paper presents a case study of project-based self-learning in which students develop autonomous and collaborative learning skills through the understanding of Korean culture. The case study is based on two projects undertaken by three undergraduate students in Australia who were studying Korean. One project was carried out jointly by two students and the other by a single student. Both projects involved viewing Korean dramas to analyze Korean cultural aspects in Korean dramas, the comparison of Korean culture with Australian and Japanese cultures, and discussions with Koreans. The analysis of students’ journals and final project reports suggests that this type of learning activity is more effective than conventional classes in terms of the acquisition of cross-cultural competence and the development of autonomous and collaborative learning skills. This type of project-based self-study is also useful for the teaching of less commonly taught languages because it does not increase teachers’ workload significantly as is often not the case with project-based teachings.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recently, the number of students studying Korean in Australian higher education institutions has increased considerably as the Korean Wave boom has created renewed interest in learning Korean. Despite that, the Korean language education in Australia still has a long way to go before it will actually be sustainable. All Korean programs in the Australian universities typically face difficulties in maintaining advanced level courses with low enrolments, as the main growth is limited to the beginner level.

Apart from low enrolments, there is another challenge which affects the advanced level courses. As the level of study goes up, diversity of students’ backgrounds also increase. For example, in the same course there are the students who have been on a student exchange program in Korea for one year, and the others who have studied only in Australia and possess varying degrees of communicative competence. This is, of course, a very common problem across all Less Commonly Taught Languages.

In particular, under the current economic downturn, the diversity of students’ background as well as the low enrolments are threatening the very existence of the advanced level courses ever before. Therefore, there is an urgent need to develop the relevant and appropriate curriculum which accommodates the diversity of students’ Korean proficiencies and enables them to learn Korean according to their needs and goals. At the same time, the curriculum should also be financially viable.

To respond to this situation, a project-based self-learning approach was implemented at the third year level of a Korean course at Monash University. This paper investigates three main issues which emerged from this case study.

(1) How does the project accommodates the diversity of students’ backgrounds?
(2) How does the project develop students’ autonomous and collaborative learning skills?
(3) Is the project based self-learning model as effective as conventional classes in terms of the acquisition of cross-cultural competence?

2. Case Study

This study investigates the teaching method used in a third year level unit, KOR3002: Project in Korean 2 at Monash University during the second semester of 2008. This unit is not a core unit of the Korean major but can be counted towards its major. The unit is specially designed to provide broad, differentiated opportunities for students who are self-directed and highly motivated. It aims to expand students’ linguistic competence and knowledge of a topic area of students’ choice by allowing them to undertake an in-depth project.

Students worked on the projects for the whole semester (13 weeks) and had fortnightly regular consultations with the unit coordinator throughout the semester. The students were required to submit their project proposals including a detailed plan and its assessment methods, which was worth 10% of the final grade, within two weeks of the commencement of the semester. The rest of components were negotiated between the unit coordinator and the students through consultation. Detailed components were varied among the students, but they mainly consisted of fortnightly journals and an individual or group project and the final reports.

Students were allowed to carry out the project as a group or individually. The topics and assessments were chosen by the students in close consultation with the unit coordinator. As all of them were interested in Korean dramas, the projects involved viewing of Korean dramas to analyze Korean cultural aspects. To enhance cross cultural awareness, the projects included the comparison of aspects of Korean culture with other cultures. Australian and Japanese cultures were chosen for comparison, since the students were familiar with those.

2.1 Subjects

There were three undergraduate students (one female and two male ones) in this unit. Their ages ranged from 21 to 23. All three students started the beginner course ‘Korean 1’ together in 2006, which is for students who have no previous knowledge of Korean. However, by the time they took this unit, their levels of Korean proficiencies became quite varied. Despite the fact that all were studying Korean at the third year level, their journeys in studying Korean were different. After the second year, one student went to Korea as an exchange student, while the other two continued their study in Australia. The detailed information about the students is as follows:

a) Student E: A female international student from Japan who had been studying in Australia since secondary school. She was doing Korean as her major. She had completed two years of her three-year Bachelor of Arts degree and had been to Korea as an exchange student for one semester.

b) Student M: A male Japanese heritage local student who had completed two and a half years of his three-year Bachelor of Arts degree. He was doing Korean as his minor and studying Japanese at an advanced level. He was taking this unit as an elective.

c) Student S: a male local student who had completed four and a half years of his six year Bachelor of Arts/Science double degree with two diplomas in Korean and
Spanish. He was doing Korean as a diploma and had studied an advanced level of Japanese in his Bachelor of Arts degree. He was also very interested in linguistics and had completed the similar project based unit, ‘KOR3001: Project in Korean 1’ in the first semester of 2008.

2.2 Data collection method and analytical procedures

Data for this study was collected from students’ project proposals, reflective journals, interview recordings, writings and final reports. In addition, notes from the consultations with students were used to provide information relevant to this study.

The group consultations were conducted for 60 minutes in length and 6 times during the semester. The individual journals were submitted by the students fortnightly 6 times during the semester.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1 Diversity of students

Students’ different proficiency levels and their personal and academic interests were reflected in the projects. As students’ preferred choice, a joint project was carried out by the two male students and an individual project was chosen by the female student (Student E) who had been to Korea. It was obvious that E’s proficiency was higher than the others and she felt that she would not be able to maximize her language ability in a group project. As E’s main goal was the improvement of her Korean, she tried to make use of every opportunity for utilising her Korean, which was why she wrote the proposal in Korean, while others did in English. She also aimed to watch five Korean dramas and one film each week, while the others aimed to watch one Korean film several times with both Korean and English subtitles.

Another example of the variations that affected the students’ choice of the projects was their academic interests. Student S, who was doing three languages, was very interested in linguistics. Naturally his interest in linguistics was reflected in the group project. For example, he conducted the group project for which he and his project partner watched a Korean Movie *Sanchaek* (Stroll) in order to improve their understandings of the language and cultural knowledge. They focused on the specific aspects of the language such as rudeness/politeness or showing gratitude in ‘natural’ communicational situations, with reference to English and Japanese for comparison. Student S noted in his journal “research sociolinguistics in Japanese / English” for the task to be carried out. According to his first journal, he spent 2 hours to search for sociolinguistic articles online and also read about differences in body language between the languages for four hours and searched for reading on Japanese sociolinguistics for a half hour.

He also applied his knowledge to the analysis of the Korean politeness system. For instance, he made observations on first three scenes of the movie after watching it several times and compared the sentence endings over scenes. He observed that three sentence endings were used: (1) casual form between two friends; (2) ‘yo’ form was used between two males and female work colleagues; and (3) ‘imnida’ form was used between a police officer and parents at a police station. This observation provided him with an opportunity to verify his knowledge of the Korean politeness system which was previously acquired from the Korean class, but this task also enabled him to apply his analytical skills to a close investigation of the different register used among these people as shown below:

<At 8:22 on DVD counter>
1. Applying for a job

Young lady, previously unknown, and middle aged man

They use ہ form, but it’s different to the ہ form between the colleagues. I think the lady uses a different intonation pattern to show a formal register.

<At 10:35 on DVD counter>

Again the boss is using ہ form, but the intonation has changed the register again. It’s still sort of formal, but somehow more “explaining” and less “asking”.

I don’t want to ask any questions about intonation yet, because I can’t really hear the differences yet. It would be good if there was a computer program that could draw out a line for it! However, it might be worth taping the various parts, and asking the person from just the voice if they think the person is being polite, or formal, etc. I think this is hard to study at the moment.

3.2 Autonomous learning

Students learn best when their learning objects meet their individual needs and interests (Scarino, Vale, Mckay and Clark 1988, 3). However creating learning objectives which reflect their own needs and interests was a quite challenging task for students. To clarify their needs and interests of learning Korean for the proposal, students went through various challenges and adjustments.

One of issues all three faced was defining the scope of their projects. It was very difficult for the students to choose a topic without given guideline. Through consultation with the unit coordinator, the students managed to narrow down their topics and made some progress with the outline of project. However the proposals were still too ambitious to be accomplished in a limited time frame. This issue was raised in a consultation time, but they decided to go ahead as planned but agreed to review and modify the proposal later on. This approach was taken by the coordinator to enhance learners’ self-awareness in setting out their own learning path and assessing their own achievement in sensible ways (Sercu 2002, 61). It was also important that the role of the unit coordinator should be seen as a facilitator who assists the students to be responsible in developing their own learning process.

As autonomy is an ‘ability to take charge of one’s own learning’ (Holec 1981, 3), the students’ awareness in having responsibility for their own learning is crucial to the success of any project based learning. Later when the students realised that their proposals were not achievable, they requested the unit coordinator grant approval for modification of their proposals. For example, Student E had difficulty with the time management. Through consultations, she realised that she allocated too much time to watch dramas. She reduced, therefore, the number of films and the dramas that she aimed to watch, in order to focus more on preparation for interviews with a Korean.

Interviewing a Korean after watching drama or films was part of the both projects. This task was quite difficult for all three students, in particular, for Students S and M. In the interviews, they managed to ask some questions prepared in advance, but had trouble understanding interviewees. Their Korean proficiencies allowed them to understand only a few fragments of sentences and words like “saram” and “neunde”. Student S reported that they learnt that “neunde” was used very often, but did not realise that it was used that often. To understand the interview, Students S and M made an attempt to transcribe the whole recorded interviews, which they soon discovered to be very time consuming. As
this strategy was not successful, they needed to take other steps to rectify it. They used the technique which they had acquired from the listening comprehension exercises of the previous Korean units. Their reform strategy was to make possible answers to their interview questions and actively listen out for those in the interviewees’ answers. This technique appears to be successful. This is shown in the S’s journal below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scene or snapshot</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Guessed Answer from Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opening Scene: Lateness</td>
<td>How would you tell someone you were going to be late?</td>
<td>Say “sorry but I have some work to do, or I have a lunch appointment” [Apologies and give excuse] [Sorry is in form of 미안하는테]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If you have an appointment, is it strange to come late? How late is ok?</td>
<td>Maybe not strange, but you would wait only 5 or 10 minutes. If you were going to be late, you would ring ahead</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interview was still challenging, but the evaluation of the task by the students was positive. They regarded the interview as an index of their Korean proficiency levels and a good learning experience. They reported that the interview was good for showing them the level of their Korean, and they gained numerous communication skills in using intonation and body language in the interview. They also learnt to use more language strategies for the next time. This positive learning outcome was also shown in their final journals which were submitted at the end of the semester. They reported that they would definitely do a shorter interview next time, with anticipated answers prepared in advance, and conduct a follow-up interview to clarify what they have not understood in the first interview. This process clearly shows how learners construct a meaningful learning from their own evaluation.

The language proficiency determines the nature of the interviews, because different topics and interviewees require different levels of language proficiency. Student E also found the interview hard at first, but she became better at it as the project progressed. As a result, her interview skills and Korean have improved immensely over the course of the project. She evaluated herself that this project enabled her to engage in more in-depth conversations with her Korean friends. She usually conversed with them on light topics, but this project forced her to prepare the interview questions which required the use of more advanced vocabulary and grammar. This project also provided her an opportunity to enhance acquisition of cross-cultural competence by discussing Korean culture which she observed in Korean dramas or films. The most frequent topics of the discussions were about Koreans’ behaviors or the expressions Koreans used in the dramas, which she often compared with those of Japanese. “Learners are not usually challenged to think about their perceptions of other cultures” (Sercu 2002, 69), but this activity prompted her to acquire a deeper understanding of similarities and differences of the two cultures and refined her perceptive abilities, both of which were found in her final journal. Her self-evaluation about the interview activity was very positive, as she began to understand more deeply about the values, culture and customs of Korea.
3.3 Collaborative learning

Group work is commonly employed in many study areas as a means of promoting student-centred learning, collaborative learning, and intercultural understanding (Lee 1998, Zhou and Mo 2007). Furthermore, the value of group work is regarded as being linked to the function of developing teamwork skills, which is directly related to the students’ future jobs. However, the characteristics of group work and its linkage to its assessment often produces delicate issues such as fairness in the allocation of workload among group members and group cohesion. When there are one or more members who do not cooperate willingly, their group performance is affected. Therefore, interaction, negotiation and collaboration are important factors in promoting learners’ autonomy (Lee 1998, 238).

The team project in this study was evaluated favourably by the participants, as it provided an avenue to improve their language skills as well as to observe each others’ study habits and methods. In particular, writing the final report together was apparently an enjoyable experience, as they discussed everything they worked together in the semester. According to Zhou and Mo (2007, 41) students enjoy receiving feedback from their peers, which is regarded as useful, and their self-revision is also stimulated by peer revision. M and S also enjoyed the peer review and the benefit of the group project of correcting each others’ mistakes and sharing study techniques, resulting in the improvement of their Korean language proficiencies. For instance, M learnt from S how to transcribe the interview and S learnt from M how to check if his understanding of Korean sentences was correct by back-translating the English translations of the original Korean sentences into Korean with the help of online translators. Furthermore, they respected each others’ skills, cared about each others’ work and worked together to ensure overall project success. For instance, S was more active and led the project, but he also appreciated that M was very helpful in confirming ideas that he had about Japanese culture when they were brainstorming what to observe in the video in relation to Korean culture. This confirms that through social interaction processes learners are able to be more autonomous (Little 1999).

3.4 Project Based Self-learning Model versus Conventional Classes

The Project Based Self-learning Model was students’ preferred choice in contrast to conventional classes which was, although, seen as an avenue for building their foundation of their language acquisition. It was apparent from the students’ comments that the project enabled them to enhance their capacity of autonomy. The time they spent for this project, was 93.75 hours (Student E), 75.8 hours (Student S) and 45.5 hours (Student M) respectively.

I think the best thing about the project is that we are allowed to make mistakes which we learn from. For example, the teacher knew we would not be able to hear words that we didn’t already know on the tape recording, but because we discovered it for ourself, we were probably much more willing to try other strategies (like putting the work in to pre-guess answers) than if we had just been told so in class. I think that for this project I learnt more about the objectives we set… culture, body language, etc. (Student S)

This project was quite different from the usual class, it felt like a different way of learning and I felt that I learnt more than the usual classes. The journal was definitely a good idea as it requires regular work as well as a reflection on my own progress and valuable feedback as well. I think it might be a good idea to have the journals in class as well from perhaps level 4 or above. This project was very interesting as it not only focused on the language itself but also all the aspects that surround language in communication and it seems like something that every language learner should learn. (Student M)
According to Esch (1996) and Lee (1998), flexibility is one of the key factors for establishing a supportive environment which enhances independent learning. The students’ journals also indicated that “the role of teacher as a facilitator was important for strengthening their own autonomy” (Kelly 1996, Lee 1998). The consultations with the unit coordinator provided the students with a platform to express their difficulties and also encouraged them to be proactively committed to their own learning.

The students regarded the autonomy of their learning as one of the best outcomes of the project-based learning. However, they generally perceived that this type of learning was only suitable for highly self-motivated students who also had a certain level of language proficiency.

They also viewed the writing of the journals as an effective way of controlling the autonomy of their learning, which provided them with the opportunity to engage in various meta-cognitive processes such as planning, monitoring, reviewing, and writing.
The reflective journals were good to show us working consistently, and to make us think about the way we were learning. It also helped us to revise what we were discovering as we went, so I think we probably learnt more through doing the journals than if we didn’t revisit the observations and questions and answers that we had written down. It was good doing them fortnightly rather than just once at the end, and they also improved my typing! (Student S)

4. CONCLUSION

Contrary to some negative views on learners’ autonomy, which are “often wrongfully associated with lack of direction, learner laziness, loss of quality and omission of linguistic accuracy work” (Sercu 2002, 61), this study has revealed that the Project Based Self-learning Model can be more effective against or as effective as conventional classes in relation to the acquisition of language and cross-cultural competence.

The Project Based Self-learning Model used in this study has accommodated the diversity of students’ backgrounds better than the conventional classes because of its flexible structure, which is essential for the autonomous and collaborative learning. Being consistent with the findings of previous studies of the similar type, this model has also demonstrated that collaborative learning provides learners with meaningful and more authentic contexts for learning, thereby increasing the effectiveness of collaboration and enhancing their learning.

This model did not increase teachers’ workload significantly compared to those of the conventional classes. However, if the number of students is larger than five, it may not be the case, as the workload of monitoring students’ progress may exceed the normal teaching load. Therefore, with a large number of students, this Project Based Self-learning Model may be introduced partially. Another thing to consider is that, as the students in this study noted, this type of autonomous learning may not be suitable for learners with low motivation, as autonomous learning requires various meta-cognitive processes such as planning, monitoring, reviewing and writing.

Notwithstanding its limitations, the findings of this case study clearly show that the Project Based Self-learning Model can be an alternative way of offering a higher level course in Less Commonly Taught Languages.

REFERENCES


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