# Contextualized Culture Integration through Project-Based Learning in EFL Classrooms in Vietnam

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## Abstract

Integrating culture into language contexts in EFL classroom has been an issue of substantial concern for years. Different methods or approaches have been introduced for the integration of culture and language learning. Recently, project-based learning (PBL) seems to be a favorite choice among methodologists. This paper analyzes the syllabi of a drama project and a cultural project to address cultural aspects in PBL in EFL classrooms. The findings show that PBL provides opportunities to enhance and improve students' language skills and soft skills. More importantly, a wide range of knowledge of different cultural perspectives may be collected during the projects.

**Key words:** Project-based learning, cultural project, cultural awareness

## Introduction

Through the growing trends in communication and integration across countries, the need to learn foreign languages is increasingly important for large and growing numbers of people in the world. Although English is not the most widely spoken language in the world, it is an international language. Teaching and learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in non-English speaking countries is growing increasingly common. At the same time, the notion that English language learning is merely confined to mastering vocabulary, grammar, or language proficiencies is becoming outdated. The goal of learning English in EFL classrooms today is to equip learners with cultural knowledge in order to communicate successfully with people in different cultures. Thus, the integration of teaching culture into EFL curriculum becomes extremely important, and the selection of appropriate methods to incorporate cultural awareness in English classes becomes an interesting issue to explore.

In the recent years, the integration of cultural aspects within the context of English language learning at the School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University in Vietnam has been implemented in a number of ways. PBL implemented at this university has gained noticeable attention for identifying cultural knowledge and understanding in EFL classrooms. This paper focuses on the cultural issues in PBL in EFL classrooms at Thai Nguyen University.

### Culture in EFL Classrooms

Culture is defined and addressed in numerous fields of study such as communication, education, cultural studies, and sociology. In the study of integrating culture into Vietnamese

university EFL teaching, Nguyen (2013) reviews definitions of culture and summarizes five core themes. He then proposes his own definition of culture as "a system of patterned beliefs, values and norms that shape and guide the observable behavior of members of a community, created and transmitted by the members in social interactions. Such a community is considered a cultural group" (p. 19). This definition is used as the basic definition in this paper.

There is a large body of literature that explores the connections between language and culture. According to Brown (1994), "A language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture" (p. 165). Culture should be included in EFL context in providing learners with necessary knowledge to communicate effectively. In addition, the importance of integrating culture in EFL classrooms has been pointed out in a number of research papers. Turkan and Celik (2007) state that integrating culture into EFL teaching will help EFL learners "act flexibly and sensibly" when they interact with "the lines of cultural norms." On the other hand, insufficiencies of cultural knowledge may lead EFL learners to miscommunicate or misunderstand the target language (Tran, 2010). Interestingly, in Dema and Moeller's study (2012), they discuss the interrelation of the components of culture (products, practices, and perspectives), which will help teachers design cultural contents in EFL lessons. Similarly, in the recent research Frank (2013) again analyzes the three components of culture to emphasize how to integrate culture into EFL classrooms. He describes the model of culture as follows:

- Perspectives: what members of a culture think, feel, and value

- Practices: how members communicate and interact with one another

- Products: technology, music, art, food, literature, etc.; the things members of a group create, share, and transmit to the next generation)

He considers *products* to be easier to identify than *perspectives* and *practices* because *products* tend to be ingrained in a society.

The need of teaching and integrating culture into EFL classrooms is highly recommended by Liton and Madanat (2013). Their study shows that students' intercultural competence and effective cross-cultural communication skill which is a must in this era of globalization. This leads to a question of how to integrate culture into language contexts effectively. The utilization of PBL in EFL classrooms may serve as one of the appropriate methods to incorporate culture into language contexts. This paper focuses on this issue.

## Methodology

Given the information for the cultural aspects in PBL in EFL classrooms, this paper employs a content analysis approach to examine the syllabi of two projects – Drama and Culture – in the School of Foreign Languages at Thai Nguyen University. These projects offer students important opportunities to enhance language skills through the integration of cultural learning. The projects follow the proposed framework (Moss & Van Duzer, 1997) as presented in the following section. While the scope of this paper is limited to analyzing the opportunities to learn as revealed through the syllabi, other research (Tran & Do, 2014) shows students' improvements in cooperating, planning, communicating, and obtaining knowledge of various kinds through PBL.

## Project-based learning in EFL classrooms

Solomon (2003 as cited in Simpson, 2011) provides an explanation of PBL as a learning process where students work collaboratively to solve problems that are "authentic, curriculum-based, and often interdisciplinary" (p. 10).

The Arlington Education and Employment Program in the resource manual for teachers (Moss & Van Duzer, 1997) developed a project-based learning framework as described below:

**FRAMEWORK FOR PROJECT WORK**
**A project:**

- builds on previous work.
- integrates the four skills areas - speaking, listening, reading, and writing.
- incorporates collaborative teamwork, problem solving, negotiating and other interpersonal skills.
- challenges learners to engage in independent work.
- challenges learners to authentically use English in new and different contexts outside the class.
- develops life-long learning strategies.
- involves the learners in choosing the focus of the project and in the planning process.
- engages learners in activities where they need them to acquire new information that is important to them.
- has clearly articulated outcomes.
- incorporates self-evaluation, peer evaluation, and teacher evaluation.
- enhances the development of real-life skills.

Figure 1: Framework for Project Work (Moss & Van Duzer, 1997)

As is evident in the framework, students will have the opportunity to develop various types of skills such as language competence, interpersonal working skills, and soft skills.

The application of PBL in EFL classrooms has been considered an effective pedagogy for over twenty years although it is not a new method in language learning (Beckett, 2006). This approach in English language learning can be understood as students involved in doing a project themselves, from choosing a topic, solving problems, and generating products in the form of meaningful solutions. Poonphon (2011) indicates that learning through PBL not only enhances English proficiencies, but also helps leaners improve communicating abilities in real life contexts. For further information, Poonphon summarizes some of methodologists' evaluations of PBL as the combination of interdisciplinary practices and integrated skills, a student-centered approach where the teacher's role is a facilitator or coach. Moreover, adopting PBL "enables teachers to bridge academic instruction with real-life experience in communicating across cultures" (Kean and Kwe, 2014, p. 191).

In the progress of language learning and teaching, the School of Foreign Languages at Thai Nguyen University has implemented the PBL approach to help students achieve communicative competence and experience cultural issues in the target language.

### Drama Project

Drama is defined as any activity which asks the participant to portray himself in an imaginary situation or to portray another person in an imaginary situation (Holden, 1981, as cited in Sam, 1990). The drama

project can be considered as a typical sample for PBL because it provides a person's opportunity to express his imagination in verbal expressions and gestures.

This project is required for freshmen during their first or second semester, and it is divided into the following stages:

*Stage 1: Grouping and assigning tasks.* In the first week, students will join in groups of 4-6 members. Formally, a teacher/instructor will provide the project's guidelines and requirements in order that all students are able to complete their project.

*Stage 2: Locating materials and writing scenarios.* Students spend 4 to 5 weeks to complete this stage. Students are instructed to find popular literary work (such as a novel, or a short story) from English speaking countries. After deciding their favorite work, students have to write scenarios based on the chosen material. This stage is extremely difficult because students need to create a screenplay from the story or literary work. The students, as screenwriters, are responsible for their scripts and the formats of their plays that need to be consistent with the original version.

*Stage 3: Assigning roles and learning scripts.* Students will choose or be assigned one or more different roles in their play relating to their abilities. They have to learn the characters' lines and practice reading aloud every word in the scripts.

*Stage 4: Practicing and acting.* Students practice reading scripts and acting in scenes. Two language skills (productive and receptive) will continue to be improved through the repetition of scripts. Students, in this stage, learn to act naturally to express their characters. Following lines, expressing character's emotions, designing costumes and props, and reacting with other students' role in the drama are all important during this part of the project.

*Stage 5: Performing.* This final stage will be a show of students' products. Each group will perform their scenes and will be assessed by two instructors. Students in different groups will also participate in evaluating other groups' performance.

To evaluate students' efforts and achievements, there are different assessment rubrics for the stages of this drama project (see Appendix A). Each of the assessment rubrics provides numerous criteria to appraise students' work.

From the information in the implementation of this project and the assessment rubrics, it can be understood that in order to have a drama product, the issue of culture needs to be considered for two main reasons. First, students have to choose a literary work from an English speaking country, this means that there will be cultural values reflected in the document. Students will need to examine any cultural aspects in the content of their choice, which will assist them in developing scripts and scenes for their drama. Second, designing costumes and props earns extra points in this project since these things will be representative examples of distinctive cultures.

In brief, after considering the above-mentioned highlights in the drama project,

PBL approach could be an effective tool for incorporating culture issues into EFL contexts. Students will be motivated in exploring underlying cultural values in each product presented.

### Cultural Project

This project aims to provide students a chance to explore their motherland's culture, and approach some basic features and cultural perspectives of English-American countries. In this course, students will nourish their love for their motherland, and they will be encouraged to discover beautiful cultures from English speaking countries.

Students will work in groups of 4-5 to choose a cultural region to produce a brochure and organize an activity to introduce the culture in realistic context. The project is divided into two stages in accordance with two semesters.

*Stage 1: My homeland* - a study of cultural perspectives of a typical cultural region in Vietnam. The final products will be shown in a practical event called "A real museum visit" in the last weeks of the course.Students work as guides in the Museum of Ethnics in Vietnam to introduce their region. Some faculty members, staffs, foreign teachers, and students may be invited to join this visit. The information gathered will be presented in a brochure. The assessment rubric for the brochure is shown in Appendix B.

*Stage 2: The city I love* - a study of a famous city in an English speaking country. For the final product, there will be an in-class presentation event, "Travel Exhibition." Students work as guides to the cities; each group member is in charge of one perspective. The exhibition will be advertised to staff and students in the college for the public attendance. The assessment rubric for the presentation is displayed in Appendix B.

The timeline for this project is displayed in the following table:

Table 1: Culture Project Timeline

| WEEK | THEMES | OBJECTIVES |
|---|---|---|
| | introducing the project introducing *My Homeland* | introduction to the project grouping decision of groups' cultural regions |
| | field work | visit to the *Museum of Ethnics* in Vietnam |
| | cultural regions: a snap-shot | writing: description |
| | introduction of the cultural region | presentation by two group members |
| | clothes | writing: description |
| | food and drink | writing: process/recipe |
| | cooking class | instruction to make a typical dish with real objects: the whole-group work |
| | arts and architecture | writing: description |
| | place to visit | presentation by two members |
| | traditions and customs | writing: narrative |
| | folk game festival | each group introduces and holds a typical folk game of their region |
| | brochure production | the whole group gather the writings and edit a brochure on *My Homeland* |
| | field work | another visit to the museum to prepare for the guide |
| | field work | preparing for the museum guide |
| | museum visit | working as guides in the museum, each group introduce their region, each group member is in charge of one perspective |
| | reviewing *My Homeland* introducing *The City I Love* | reviewing the achievement of stage 1, drawing lessons introducing stage 2 |
| | introduction of the city | writing: description |
| | introduction of the city | presentation by two group members |
| | people/clothes | writing: description |
| | people/clothes | presentation by two members |
| | food and drink | writing: process/recipe |
| | cooking class | instruction to make a typical dish with real objects: the whole-group work |
| | arts and architecture | writing: description |
| | place to visit | presentation by two members |
| | traditions and customs | writing: narrative |
| | folk game festival | each group introduces and holds a typical folk game of their region |
| | spiritual life | writing: description |
| | brochure production | presentation by two members |
| | preparation for the exhibition | preparing for the exhibition |
| | exhibition | working as guides to the cities, each group member is in charge of one perspective |

For each stage, each group chooses a cultural region (stage 1) or a city (a typical one in an English speaking country) to produce their final products. A number of topics were recommended in this project:

- introduction of the cultural region (geographical feature, transportation)
- people (life, life style, work)
- clothes

- typical food and drink
- arts, architecture (attractive destinations)
- customs, traditions, festivals, folk games
- spiritual life (music, literature, folk songs)

To sum up, on the basis of the culture project's syllabus, students will experience culture in diverse contexts. This project will benefit students in acquiring cultural knowledge from their homeland to the outside world.

## Conclusion

From the outcome of analyzing the syllabi, it is possible to conclude that PBL is a method that helps ensure the integration of culture in EFL classrooms. The paper demonstrates that students will become involved in the process of real experience and good knowledge of culture, just as the spirit of the Chinese proverb: "Tell me and I will forget, show me and I will remember, let me do it, I'll understand." PBL changes the traditional methods of teaching culture and language with book and chalk. Hence, students can express their creativity and eagerness in examining different cultural values in EFL classrooms. Once again, cultural aspects included in EFL contexts through PBL help students learn the language effectively and develop communicative competence.

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## Authors' bios

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# Appendices

## Appendix A

Scenarios Assessment Rubric

| Criteria | Quality | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Excellent (9-10)** | **good (7-8)** | **Fair (5-6)** | **Unsatisfactory (below 5)** |
| Preparation | The scenario is well-written which shows that the students have read about the story very carefully and have some creativity | The scenario is quite well-written with some adjustment to meet the students' level of proficiency | The scenario is suitable for the students' level with few adjustments and creativity | The scenario is just the copy of the original one without any changes or creativity and is too simple |
| Language requirements | The scenario contains a good number of words just beyond the students' word stock and is challenging enough to develop students' competencies | The scenario contains some words just beyond the students' word stock and is quite suitable to develop students' competencies | The scenario has no new words but can help to improve some language skills | The scenario is too simple and easy or so complicated that it is of no help to improve any language skills |

Other comments:.................................................................................................................................

## Rehearsing Assessment Rubric

| Criteria | Quality | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Excellent (9-10)** | **Good (7-8)** | **Fair(5-6)** | **Unsatisfactory (below 5)** |
| Attitude | Prepare for the play carefully and thus fulfill the role satisfactorily; be self-confident | Prepare for the play carefully; be quite self-confident but unsmooth in some utterances | Do not prepare for the play carefully so forget some words; be quite timid and embarrassed | Do not prepare for the play so forget a lot of words; cannot fulfill the role |
| Acting skills | Play the role naturally; have good communication skill with suitable body language | Fulfill the role quite naturally; communication skill is quite good but still unsmooth in some details | The role is fulfilled but body language is not used sufficiently, which does not make the scene interesting enough | The whole role is boring because of no gestures, insufficient body language |
| Pronunciation | All the words are pronounced clearly and correctly | The pronunciation is good with few errors | Have a number of errors in pronunciation | Have lots of errors in pronunciation |
| Intonation | All the utterances are said in correct intonation, which can convey the speaker's feeling and attitude and which can make the conversation interesting | Most of the conversation is completed naturally but few utterances are produced with irrelevant intonation | A number of sentences are uttered with incorrect intonation, which cannot express some states of emotion | The whole scene is boring because of incorrect intonation |

Other comments:....................................................................................................................................

## Performance Assessment Rubric

| Criteria | Quality | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | **Excellent (9-10)** | **Good (7-8)** | **Fair(5-6)** | **Unsatisfactory (below 5)** |
| Acting skills | Play the role naturally; have good acting and communication skill with suitable body language | Fulfill the role quite naturally; communication skill is quite good but still unsmooth in some utterances | The role is fulfilled but body language is not used sufficiently, which does not make the scene interesting enough | The whole role is boring because of no gestures, insufficient body language |
| Pronunciation | All the words are pronounced clearly with correct stress position and final consonant clusters | The pronunciation is good with few errors of stress position and consonant clusters | Have a number of errors in pronunciation | Have lots of errors in pronunciation |
| Intonation | All the utterances are said in correct intonation, which can convey the speaker's feeling and attitude which can make the conversation interesting | Most of the conversation is completed naturally but few utterances are produced with irrelevant intonation | A number of sentences are uttered with incorrect intonation, which cannot express some states of emotion | The whole scene is boring because of incorrect intonation |
| Fluency | All the utterances are said smoothly and naturally with normal speed and without any hesitation or being stuck | All the utterances are said smoothly without hesitation or stuck but more slowly or faster than usual | Some utterances are said with much hesitation or being stuck | Much hesitation and being stuck make the role difficult to understand and cannot convey the ideas clearly enough |

# Appendix B

## Brochure Assessment Rubric

| Criteria | 1 – 4 | 5 – 7 | 8 - 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Information | The writing contains some information; but most of it is redundant or unnecessary; information has low accuracy and is not updated | The writing contains a lot of information; but a lot of it is redundant or unnecessary; information has adequate accuracy and is quite updated but there is a lot of wrong information | The writing is rich of information; some redundant or unnecessary information; information has high accuracy and is updated but there is some wrong information | The writing is rich of information; none or little redundant or unnecessary information; information has high accuracy and is updated |
| Content | Most of the articles focus on the main topic of the brochure; content is too long or too short | Most of the articles focus on the main topic of the brochure; content is longer or shorter than expected | All the articles focus on the main topic of the brochure; content length matches the description of the project | All the articles focus on the main topic of the brochure; content length matches the description of the project; new and interesting real life information added |
| Language use | Inappropriate writing style in most articles; repetitive and limited vocabulary with a lot of mistakes; a lot of grammatical mistakes | Inappropriate writing style in some articles; varied and accurate vocabulary, a lot of mistakes when it comes to difficult terms; correct grammar with some mistakes | Appropriate writing style in most articles; various and accurate vocabulary, some mistake when it comes to difficult terms; correct grammar with a few mistakes | Appropriate writing style in all articles; various and accurate vocabulary; correct grammar |
| Design | Clear and suitable design; most of pictures are incorrect and/or of low quality | Clear and suitable design; a lot of pictures but some are incorrect and/or of low quality | Clear and suitable design; a lot of demonstrative pictures | Clear, creative, and suitable design; a lot of clear and highly demonstrative pictures |
| Improvement | No improvement at all during the semester, repetitive mistakes | Some improvement during the semester; make a lot of mistakes but improve some of them | A lot of improvement in writing during the semester; make some mistakes but improve most of them | A lot of improvement in writing during the semester; make no mistake or some mistake but improve all of them |

## Presentation Assessment Rubric

| | Excellent | Good | Fair | Poor |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Organization | The presentation is logical and well designed; it is easy to follow from the beginning to the end | The ideas are logically arranged but it is not very attractive | The ideas are quite logically arranged but the speakers should have been able to make it better | The presentation is difficult to follow and understand |
| Non-linguistic techniques | The presentation shows mastery of non-linguistic techniques, such as gestures, eye-contact, etc. | The presentation shows a good command of non-linguistic techniques but it is still not professional | It is acceptable but lacks the use non-linguistic techniques | Lacks the use of non-linguistic features |
| Visual aids | They know how to use visual aids and examples and the presentation shows careful preparation | Visual aids or facts support their ideas but they still do not know how to use it sometimes | It is acceptable but they do not use many visual aids or examples | There is no visual aids used |
| Vocabulary | They show a wide range of vocabulary | They show a wide range of vocabulary but there are still few minor mistakes | They seem to have made an effort to prepare proper vocabulary but they mostly use routine words | They have a poor vocabulary and make numerous mistakes |
| Grammar | Speakers make no grammatical mistake and they use varied structures | Their grammar is correct and structures are varied | It is acceptable but there are still some grammatical mistakes made; they could have done better | There are too many mistakes and the structures are too simple |
| Pronunciation | Really excellent at pronunciation, nearly like native speakers; no mistakes are found | Pronunciation is good; only a few mistakes are found | Pronunciation needs to be improved as mistakes are found | It is difficult to understand what they say as their pronunciation is unintelligible |
| Fluency | They speak in a natural, vivid and striking way; the level of fluency they show is higher than expected | They speak fluently most of the time | Tt is acceptable but they need to improve their speaking skills more | They speak like a-b-c learners; it is not acceptable for a tertiary level |

# Appendix C

**Culture Project Photos**