"The Work Is Tangible So You Can Actually See What You've Learnt": Pedagogical Rationale and Student Evaluation of a Project-Based Learning Module

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the "I am an author" project, which was integrated into an upper-intermediate/advanced Italian L2 university subject to redefine the assessment of writing skills while also offering a novel experience of authorship. In the project, students delve into writing genres that appeal to young readers and craft an illustrated story in Italian, which can serve as a literacy resource for the local Italo-Australian community. The project draws on principles of Project-based Learning (PBL), insights from the Deep Approach to World Languages Education, as well as research on well-being in L2 learning. Data collected from two studies to examine students' evaluation of the project show that students particularly appreciated its novelty as an assessment task, and the opportunity to tap into their creativity to create a finished product that was personally relevant and socially meaningful, with these perceptions contributing to their commitment to the task and their overall well-being. The results confirm the effectiveness of PBL in fostering skill development and in providing identity-enhancing learning experiences.

Keywords: *Project-based learning, creativity, well-being, engagement.*

1. Introduction

Project-based learning (PBL) is widely acknowledged as an effective teaching method, which can enhance both language skills and essential soft skills [3], [4]. Nonetheless, more research is needed to investigate how students perceive projects as a means of assessment and to understand the impact of teaching activities influenced by PBL on students' well-being.

The 'I am an author' project is an integral component of an upper-intermediate/advanced university Italian L2 course in Melbourne, Australia. In this project, students are tasked with crafting and illustrating a short story in Italian, which they subsequently self-publish in book format. Selected books may be offered online to a wider audience, addressing the dearth of easily accessible reading materials for young Italian-speaking children, especially in areas with substantial Italian migrant populations, such as Melbourne. This scarcity presents a specific challenge to Italian diaspora communities everywhere, including in Melbourne and elsewhere in Australia.

Throughout the duration of the project, students are introduced on a weekly basis to the conventions of storytelling through a blend of reading and writing exercises. Additionally, they receive instruction on pertinent grammar and textual elements that should be incorporated into their final narratives, encompassing aspects such as narrative tenses, textual connectors, typical structural elements of short stories, and storytelling norms in Italian as a second language. At the conclusion of the semester, students are expected to submit a self-published book, accompanied by a final written reflection that explains their creative journey and their authorial decisions.

As part of the project, students are assessed on their creativity (20%), on their storytelling abilities and adherence to their chosen genre (40%), on their grammatical accuracy (20%), and finally on the structure and content of their final reflection (20%).

2. Theoretical background

The design of the project drew on the principles of project-based learning, was influenced by the Deep Approach to World Language Education [6] and was also informed by previous research on well-being

in language learning (see [2] for an overview). Oxford [7] defines well-being as an umbrella term that encompasses several constructs relevant to language learning: emotions and empathy, meaning and motivation, perseverance, agency and autonomy, positive appraisal over time, hardiness and effective habits of mind, intelligences, character strengths and positive self-factors.

The project aligns with the key standards of PBL outlined by the Buck Institute of Education [3]:

- **Challenging problem or question:** As previously observed, the project tasks students with addressing the need for bilingual literacy resources in Australia, a challenge that advanced language students can tackle using their language skills.
- **Sustained inquiry:** Students engage in experiential learning throughout the course by being exposed to texts and textual conventions of narrative writing. They assume a more active and autonomous role in their education, with the teacher acting as a facilitator.
- **Authenticity:** Students' finished work at the end of the project directly addresses the shortage of learning resources in Australia (see section 1).
- **Community engagement:** The local Italo-Australian community is the primary target of students' work.
- **Student voice, choice and agency:** Students are given freedom in choosing their own topic and are autonomous in creating and producing their work.
- **Reflection:** Students have to submit a reflective journal at the end of the activity.
- **Critique and revision:** Feedback is mostly received at the end of the project, but students are encouraged to discuss earlier drafts of their work with other students and the teaching staff throughout the semester.
- **Public product:** Selected short stories can be chosen for publication and made available online.

The project's emphasis on personal relevance, authenticity, and meaningfulness aligns seamlessly with the central principles of the Deep Learning Approach to Language Education. This approach values students' unique voices and perspectives in the language learning process, promotes critical reflection, encourages meaningful language usage, and aims to establish a profound connection between learners and the language. By incorporating these aspects, the project also seeks to positively impact their overall well-being beyond the confines of the language classroom.

3. An overview of key findings from two studies

This section summarises and integrates key findings from two mixed-method studies examining students' evaluation of the project [1] and its impact on well-being [2], which were conducted with the 2017–2018 and 2019–2020 cohorts, respectively. These findings may be useful for teachers interested in implementing the project in their classrooms. Due to space constraints, we focus solely on qualitative data here, both because we wish to give voice to participants' experiences and because qualitative data allow us to capture the complexity of the findings in a way that quantitative data alone cannot. The integration of the data sets from both studies led to the development of three key macro-themes, which will be used here to present the findings. The notations S1 and S2 are used to label quotes from the first and second study respectively.

3.1 A novel assessment task fostering creativity and skills development

The first study showed that most students viewed the project as an engaging way to assess their Italian skills:

> Overall it was a really positive experience that allowed me to explore and show my knowledge of Italian in a different, more creative way (S2)

Students had positive attitudes towards PBL and more broadly towards learning by doing. Most students also viewed the project as an engaging way to assess their writing skills, while also helping them develop other non-linguistic skills such as creativity, time management, organisation skills, problem solving and critical thinking, in keeping with previous studies on PBL [4].

> The project gave me creative freedom as well as practical knowledge and skills (S1)

> I felt content as I love writing, drawing and being creative. It was refreshing to be able to use different skills in tertiary education (S2)

Many students described the project as memorable and expressed that it continued to resonate with them long after its completion:

> I still remember completing it and exactly what I wrote about, not to mention the feeling of handing it in (which was great). I often find myself asking other younger students of Italian if they too have to do the same task and what they chose to write about (S2)

3.2 Tangible, meaningful, and personally relevant learning
The first study unveiled, among other things, that students particularly valued the opportunity to employ Italian to address a real-world concern, i.e., the scarcity of literary resources, and took pride in their ability to effect change by leveraging their language skills and producing something tangible through their work:

> The work is tangible so you can actually see what you've learnt (S1, see also [1])

> It was a more tangible example of my work that combined creativity with language knowledge and it was something that I knew could be enjoyed or at least interacted with by a larger audience. (S2)

These findings were corroborated in the second study on well-being, which demonstrated the project's effectiveness in enhancing multiple dimensions comprised in this construct, such as positive emotions, engagement, meaning, and motivation. More specifically, students' investment in the project was closely tied to its real-world relevance and intrinsic value, with both aspects contributing to students' intrinsic motivation [5] and investment in the project. The project was also found to have a positive impact on their overall perceptions of the value of language learning:

> This project had a significant influence on my perception of the power of language learning beyond the classroom, and I credit part of my strong affinity for the language to this experience (S2)

> I put more care and attention into it than I would any other piece of academic work, because it was more than just an assignment for me, it was a project both personal and academic (S2)

Comments like those above underline how the project ignited their enthusiasm for language learning by demonstrating its real-world applicability. It opened their eyes to the broader possibilities offered by language acquisition, reinforcing the importance of meaningful and relevant language education experiences.

3.3 An identity-enriching transformative experience
Both studies showed that the project touched upon several identity-related constructs. More specifically, it was associated with a notable increase in self-confidence and a higher sense of accomplishment derived from creating a product which could be enjoyed by others:

> I think having to hand in a hardcopy strengthened this sense of accomplishment as it is something that can be seen and held in hands (S2)

For some students, engaging in the project was a way to discover new skills and talents, and led to changes in their perceptions of themselves:

> I didn't consider myself a creative person prior to the project. My brain is maths/science oriented and I generally don't get to do much creative stuff at university. The project went some ways towards changing my perception of myself - I think I do have the ability to be creative and the project made me realise that it's something I really enjoy. (S1)

4. Conclusions

The findings from both studies point to the effectiveness of the project as an assessment task aimed at promoting the development of a variety skills as well as students' general well-being. The data collected so far show that the project was perceived as a novel and creative way to assess their language skills. It provided a platform for creative expression, generated self-confidence, and a sense of accomplishment, and created a meaningful identity-enhancing learning experience (see also [1] and [2]). Our findings suggest that the project can be tailored for other languages and in various educational setting and pave the way for more research examining student-centred, creative, and real-world projects in second language education.

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