# Strengthening Project-Based Learning with Genre Checkpoints

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## ABSTRACT

Project-based learning (PBL) is a learner-centered approach that integrates all the language skills as students work on addressing a particular question, issue, or problem. PBL combines academic knowledge with real-world applications, developing both language and content knowledge. For English language learners, PBL offers benefits related to English language development, motivation and engagement, critical thinking, and academic content knowledge. Despite the advantages, there have been some criticisms of PBL in terms of a lack of structure during the preparation phase and a disproportionate focus on summative assessment compared to formative assessment. In this paper, I discuss an action research project aimed at addressing these two concerns that have been raised regarding PBL. This action research took place in a university-level ESL class in Hawaii, where students were introduced to genre awareness checkpoints. A genre awareness checkpoint is a point during the preparation phase of a project where students are introduced to a relevant academic genre, investigating its move structure and linguistic features in a structured mini-lesson. Students are then required to produce the genre in order to move through the checkpoint and continue with a project. In this action research project, the implementation of genre checkpoints in PBL  did not only help to add structure and opportunities for formative assessment in PBL, but also offered the added benefit of supporting students' developing genre awareness.

KEYWORDS: Project-based learning, genre awareness, action research

## Introduction

In this paper, I discuss an action research project aimed at addressing two concerns that have been raised regarding PBL. The intervention in this action research project involved incorporating genre awareness checkpoints into the preparation phase of a project in a university English for academic purposes (EAP) bridge course at a private university in Hawaii. The majority of students in the course were from Asia (Japan, Korea, Malaysia, and China), and most planned to continue as degree-seeking students upon completion of either one or two semesters in the university bridge program, of which this course was a part. The 14-week course met three days per week, for 50 minutes each day.

The EAP course focused on developing students' academic language skills and study skills needed for studying at the university level. The course also aimed to develop students' understanding of cultural norms and expectations in U.S. higher education. One of the specific stated objectives in the course was the development of genre awareness. However, an explicit focus on developing genre awareness never seemed to extend into the project work that was required as the midterm assessment portion of the course. The midterm assessment was a multimedia presentation project.

In the project, students were required to critically examine and introduce one contemporary, educational issue/controversy from their own country in order to continue to develop their understanding of the similarities and differences between the academic environment in their home countries and in the U.S. It was during this midterm project, then, when the action research intervention took place.

## Literature review

### *Project-based learning*

PBL is a learner-centered approach that integrates all the language skills as students work on addressing a particular question, issue, or problem. The result of a project is a culminating product, often incorporating multiple modalities and technologies that address the question, issue, or problem. PBL combines academic knowledge with real-world applications, developing both language and content knowledge. PBL can be considered a type of task-based language teaching (TBLT), but broader, and more ambitious, in scope (Larson-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). The term TBLT itself is a generic one, which includes both a) a task-based version of language teaching where tasks define curriculum development; and, b) a task-supported version of language teaching where tasks support other curricular objectives (Jackson & Burch, 2017). As such, in some teaching contexts, projects may be built into a curriculum. In other teaching contexts, projects may be incorporated alongside, or in addition to other prescribed curricular objectives.

Project work generally follows three stages (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). First, students collaborate in class, together with the project team members and teacher, in planning the scope and focus of the project. Second, students gradually assume more autonomy and may begin working outside of class, collecting and analyzing information, and planning/organizing the information into the project's final product. At this stage, the four skills are used in an authentic and natural manner. The third stage involves the submission and/or presentation of the project's culminating product. At this stage, students receive feedback from the teacher and have opportunities to review their own performance and the performance of project members.

PBL offers many benefits to English language learners. For example, PBL has been shown to promote motivation and engagement, as students are often personally invested in a project, researching and preparing an aspect of the question or issue that interests them (Dornyei, 2001; Lee, 2002). Another benefit reported in the literature relates to students' enhanced language skills as they engage in purposeful communication with other students and the teacher in preparing and completing the project (Levine, 2004; Stoller, 2006). When project work is undertaken in collaborative groups, the work is able to achieve "a rare synthesis of academic and social goals" (Dornyei, 2001, p. 101). Thus, students' group cooperation and social skills have also been shown to develop through PBL (Coleman, 1992). In addition, in a review of over a dozen PBL studies in the literature, Stoller (2006) noted further benefits of PBL for English language learners in terms of developing critical thinking skills, self-confidence, and academic content knowledge.

On the other hand, some concerns have been raised with PBL. One concern involves a possible lack of structure in the preparation phase when students assume more autonomy. For second

language learners, this may be particularly evident, as it may be one of the first times where students need "to adapt to sustained communicative engagement in the target language and to fully discern their role in student-directed learning" (Greenier, 2018, p. 2). Without proper structure, or without the teacher checking in at times, there is potential for all students, not only English language learners to drift off-task. Furthermore, students who are accustomed to more traditional styles of learning (such as many of the English language learners in Asia) may resist PBL, and the autonomy that comes with it, because they fail to see connections between the project preparation work and the development of various language skills through this preparation work (Beckett & Slater, 2005).

Another concern that has been raised involves assessment, in particular the tendency to focus solely on summative assessment while neglecting informal, formative assessments throughout the process (Steinberg, 1997). The purpose of summative assessment is to measure student learning at the end of a particular learning period or unit. Summative assessments are sometimes referred to as "high stakes," meaning the weight, or points, associated with the assessment, is high. Examples of summative assessment include a midterm exam or a final research paper in a course. The purpose of formative assessment, on the other hand, is to monitor student learning and provide feedback in order to understand students' strengths and weaknesses. With formative assessment, teachers are able to address areas where students are having trouble by making necessary changes in instruction. Examples of formative assessment include teacher observations and classroom discussions, both of which help teachers identify student weaknesses. Homework is another type of formative assessment. As Boston (2002) notes, "homework can be used formatively if teachers analyze where students are in their learning and provide specific, focused feedback regarding performance and ways to improve it" (p. 2). Despite often being considered less important that summative assessment, the role of formative assessment is critical in PBL. In fact, incorporating formative assessment is "one of the most powerful ways to improve student performance" (Larmer, Mergendoller, & Boss; 2015, p. 122).

*Genre awareness*

Genre awareness involves the understanding of the relationship between patterned language use (including rhetorical moves and linguistic features that realize those moves) and the norms of particular discourse communities. In other words, it is based on the understanding that individuals adapt and use language in ways that are socially acceptable to particular discourse communities. An introduction to genre awareness helps develop students' sensitivity toward the notion that academic genres often exhibit patterned structures and features that are expected by members of the discourse communities for which the genres are employed (Hyland, 2004; Hyon, 2016; Yasuda, 2011). By developing this sensitivity, it is hoped that students will develop the rhetorical versatility needed to engage with multiple academic and professional genres in their futures. As Millar (2011) states: "If [students] can better notice and describe similarities and differences among genres, then they may be better equipped to write in a wide variety of contexts" (p. 9-10).

Among the approaches to genre that have been identified in the literature and the approach that informs this action research is English for Specific Purposes. This approach is often associated with John Swales, who, in his seminal work on genre analysis (Swales, 1990), emphasized the notion of rhetorical move structures (having to do with the overall organization, or rhetorical

patterning, of particular texts) and their relationship with the expectations of particular discourse communities (including academic discourse communities). In other words, an ESP approach to genre understands that individuals adapt and use language in ways that are socially acceptable to particular discourse communities. As such, the approach analyzes texts with an eye toward the particular discourse communities for which they were produced. The purpose of applying such a genre analysis in a content-based course is to help students become aware of the expectations of academic discourse communities, so that they will be able to function competently in a range of academic genres. In fact, Hyland (2004) notes that an advantage of an ESP approach is in its "description of the typical features of key genres that students can draw on for their own communicative purposes in their professional or academic lives" (p. 47).

An ESP approach to genre-based pedagogy does not only look at typical move structures, but also at the linguistic features that help realize those moves. For example, in an undergraduate technical communication class in Hong Kong, Flowerdew (2000) and her students, focusing on the genre of engineering project reports, analyze the key lexical phrases that help to realize the "aims" move in an "Introduction" section as well as the key phrases that help to realize the "offering explanation" move in a "Results Analysis" section. Considering move structures and linguistic features across multiple genres, rather than focusing on one particular genre, is a distinguishing characteristic of the development of what is called genre awareness (Millar, 2011; Yasuda, 2011).

## Action Research in PBL

The aim of action research is to identify and address a particular classroom issue or dilemma in a systematic way so that informed changes and improvements in practice can take place. In the following sections, I will discuss this action research project in terms of the four overlapping phases of action research: planning, action, observation, and reflection (Burns, 2015).

*The Plan*
The planning phase of action research involves identifying a classroom problem or dilemma and developing a plan of action—with support from the literature and/or discussions with colleagues— to address it. As a result, the teacher should have a specific research question to answer.

As mentioned above, there have been criticisms of PBL, including its lack of structure during the preparation phase and a disproportionate focus on summative assessment compared to formative assessment. Reflecting on the projects that I have assigned to students, I began to realize that these criticisms were justified in my own case. Often, I felt that project work lacked structure during the preparation phases—some students weren't sure where to start and some students had trouble with time management. In addition, I found that my own assessment practices focused exclusively on the project's final product. These initial reflections were the impetus for this action research project.

In thinking more about the issue, I began to speculate that the context of PBL might provide an ideal, authentic context for the production of various academic genres. Requiring the production of an academic genre during PBL would also fit with one of the stated course objectives: the

development of genre awareness. Thus, the following research question was formulated and addressed in this project:

- Can an explicit attention to genre awareness in the preparation phase of a project help address concerns regarding lack of structure and opportunities for formative assessment in PBL?

It was decided that explicitly addressing genre awareness in the project would be carried out through the integration of genre awareness checkpoints. A genre awareness checkpoint is a point during the preparation phase of a project where students are introduced to a relevant academic genre, investigating its move structure and linguistic features in a structured mini-lesson. Then, students are required to apply what they have learned in an authentic way with the production of the genre shortly after completing the mini-lesson.

It is necessary, then, to first choose a genre—either spoken or written—that will fit into the context of whatever particular project students may be working on. In other words, producing the genre must become a required part of the preparation phase. For example, if a teacher selected an office hour consultation genre, students would be required to visit the teacher's office and ask for help regarding an aspect of their project. There is an endless range of academic genres that students need to understand, so teachers can choose whatever is best for their students. The relevancy of any of these genres for a particular group of students depends on the students' local context and academic goals/objectives. The genre should be a short one, however (i.e., office hour consultation; short summary of a newspaper article; email request to a teacher; etc.), so the mini-lesson can be completed in one class.

In this project, I selected the academic email request genre. This genre is a typical academic genre that many students—in both EFL and ESL contexts—have difficulty with. Many students new to higher education may be unfamiliar with the formal conventions of emailing a teacher or professor. This genre could be implemented into any project in that students would simply be required to email their teacher requesting something related to the project (for example, requesting approval for a topic choice).

Next, I needed to provide a level of scaffolding for the students' production of the selected genre. To do this, I developed a mini-lesson that focuses on the typical move structures and one representative linguistic feature of the academic email request genre (see Appendix A). The mini-lesson is adapted from a mini-lesson framework described by Ferris and Hedgcock (2014). The framework incorporates both an inductive, discovery activity along with a brief, deductive explanation of the genre's move structure and a key linguistic feature. After the brief inductive and deductive activity, the mini-lesson includes a practice activity. Practice activities, such as a model manipulation task, the editing of a short text, or the rewriting of particular sentences using genre-appropriate language, are particularly effective in building genre awareness.

The mini-lesson was designed to be completed within one 50-minute class and served as the scaffolding for the subsequent production of the genre. Students were required to email me later that evening, requesting approval of their topic choice for their project.

*Action*

The action phase involves the logistics of when and how a specific intervention will be implemented into a course. I decided that the mini-lesson described in the previous stage should be integrated into the project quite early. Rather than using class time to brainstorm ideas and select a topic for the project, students would spend that class time on the mini-lesson. Outside of class, they would make their decision on topic selection.

Then, in order to gain approval for their topic selection, they would be required to send me an email request—the authentic production of the genre—that same evening. This production of the academic email request provided an opportunity for formative assessment. As a type of formative assessment, the teacher does not need to assign a specific grade or point value. What is most important and consistent with the principles of formative assessment is to offer immediate and specific feedback to students.

Therefore, I planned to gather several examples of appropriate email requests, as well as examples of email requests that need improvement in a particular way. Then, with all names removed, I would review the examples in the following class on an overhead projector in which both the students and I could offer feedback on the strengths and weaknesses (and ways to address those weaknesses) of the selected examples.

*Observation*

The observation phase of action research involves monitoring and recording the effect of the proposed intervention. In this phase, data is also collected in order to help evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention. In action research, there are generally three main categories of data: a) observations and recordings of the participants; b) interviews, which may include face-to-face (individuals or groups) or written (surveys or questionnaires); and c) existing documents and records (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003).

In this project, I recorded written observations in a diary throughout the project. Throughout the 50-minute mini-lesson in class, I recorded my observations in a journal, when possible, while monitoring students. Furthermore, I added to these observations in the journal at various points, both inside and outside of class, throughout the rest of the project.

The mini-lesson began with pairs of students working on part one, the guided discovery portion, which consisted of two short examples of an email request from a student to a teacher. Students were asked to review the examples, discuss the similarities, and then attempt to identify the purpose of each individual sentence. At first, many students struggled to find the correct words to label the different functions of an email request. Therefore, I provided some guidance by writing the six functions on the board (salutation; identification; context or reason for request; specific request; additional details, including options for recipient; closing) to help scaffold this guided discovery activity. This is true with any inductive, discovery activity. Depending on the level of students, and the activity itself, a teacher may choose to provide guidance to help "nudge" students to the appropriate discovery.

I wrote the two examples myself and it only took a few minutes. For other genres, it may be necessary to spend a little time searching for an authentic text to use and/or adapt. Furthermore, depending on the teacher's familiarity with the selected genre, it may be necessary to gather information about its genre conventions (move structure and linguistic feature). As pairs of students worked on identifying the purpose of the numbered sentences in the model examples, I was able to walk around the room, making a mental note of students with correct answers that I could call on, if needed, when we discussed the answers together as a whole class. As it turned out, with the help of the six functions written on the board, all the student pairs were able to correctly label the purpose of each sentence. So, there were many volunteers willing to speak when we reviewed the exercise as a whole class.

After discussing part one of the mini lesson, a deductive explanation followed in part two of the mini lesson. Here, I followed the lesson materials closely in discussing the move structure of an academic email by providing a simple chart with each of the six moves: salutation, identification, context/reason for request, the specific request, additional details, and closing. I also provided information on one linguistic feature—in this case the indirect expressions, for example, "I was wondering…", that is often used to open a request. For each move, I asked the whole class for further examples of possible language, writing down correct suggestions on the board. Because my teaching style is largely student-centered, whole-class deductive explanations such as this are not so common for me. However, this teacher-led section of the mini-lesson was a nice complement to the inductive portion in part one. In fact, the inclusion of a deductive, teacher-led pedagogical task is useful for students with different learning styles who may have prior experience learning from deductive teaching methods. Furthermore, it is possible for a teacher to adjust the level of teacher-centeredness in part two of this mini-lesson, or in any deductive classroom activity. A clear-cut dichotomy between inductive and deductive teaching may be a somewhat false one. In my case, I encouraged students to offer additional language samples throughout the teacher-led explanation. Therefore, a carefully balanced approach, between student-centered learning and a level of deductive explanation, worked well with introducing students to the particular features of the academic email request genre.

Part three of the mini-lesson required students to work in pairs again, rewriting direct requests using polite, indirect expressions. After the teacher-led discussion in part two of the lesson students were eager to work on this practice exercise together. After the pairs of students completed the task, I asked some of them to write one of their examples on the board, so this created a much livelier and invested class.

After discussing the examples on the board as a whole class, I assigned a homework task, requiring that students successfully produce the genre. That evening, then, each student was required to send an email to me requesting approval of their topic choice. This provided further structure within the project preparation phase. In addition to the structure within the class in the form of the mini-lesson, an element of structure now existed outside the class in the form of the required task. Moreover, this homework requirement provided an authentic context for the genre's production. In other words, continuing with the preparation of the project is dependent on the teacher's approval. And the request for approval is sent through email.

On the following day, I took 20 minutes of class time to comment on the strengths and weaknesses of the email requests I received. First, we discussed three examples I chose of emails which all contained either a language-related or organization-related point that needed improvement. The discussion was lively and various students pointed out ways to improve the minor issues that I pointed out in the examples. Second, I introduced one email which I thought was notably successful in both language and organization. Again, students were attentive and engaged during the discussion. After the 20-minute discussion, I returned all the emails to students. I included one or two brief comments on the emails, and no formal grade was assigned.

*Reflection*
The final reflection phase in action research involves evaluating the effects of the intervention and formulating a plan for further action. Returning to my original research question that guided this action research, it can be said that the implementation of the genre awareness checkpoints in PBL helped strengthen the PBL in my course by adding structure in the preparation phase and providing an opportunity for formative assessment.

In terms of structure, the actual design of the mini-lesson was a key factor in building that structure into the beginning of the project. As stated above, the mini-lesson was adapted from Ferris and Hedgcock (2014), who suggest that good mini-lessons be narrowly focused, brief, and contain combinations of discovery, deductive, practice, and application activities. Indeed, the inclusion of inductive, deductive, and collaborative practice activities in my own adaptation led to a high level of student engagement during the mini-lesson. My own involvement throughout the mini-lesson, in different capacities, led to further degrees of structure in class. In addition, the structured nature of this first class in the preparation phase of the project seemed to set a particular tone for the rest of the project work. I noted in my journal that in subsequent classes, students seemed to be using class time effectively. In addition, in my own case, it felt more natural for me to "interrupt" students occasionally, to check on their progress or to address any issues with the whole class. Compared to previous project work, I felt my role was more hands-off in this case. After the first structured mini-lesson, I felt it was natural to continue with that consistent level of engagement with students throughout the project. Therefore, the actual design and the timing of the mini-lesson were crucial in its success.

In terms of formative assessment, the production of the genre allowed me to informally assess the emails I received from students. The discussion of the emails, in the class following the mini-lesson took 20 minutes, which may be too long, in retrospect. Since I had used the entire previous class for the mini-lesson, I wonder whether using an additional 20 minutes in the following class is appropriate. Furthermore, I had used about 30 minutes to write brief comments and point out strengths and weaknesses on the emails I received and printed from students. Considering this, in the future I am inclined to skip the whole class discussion in the class following the mini-lesson. Instead, my formative assessment will focus more on the written comments I included on the emails I received.

Finally, Burns (2015) notes that the reflection stage of action research should also consider any unintended outcomes. Although I hadn't considered a third category of data—documents or records—prior to the start of this action research, it became a consideration after the completion of the project. In other words, long after the mid-term project was completed, the emails I

received from students were remarkably more appropriate than the ones I received at the beginning of the year. It was clear that students had developed a level of genre awareness through the short mini-lesson in the context of their mid-term project. The records of emails I received from students confirmed this.

## Limitation of the study

After this action research project results were shared with colleagues and eventually, curricular modifications were integrated. However, in those discussions with colleagues, another valuable lesson was learned about my action research. Essentially, my action research was a project that I designed myself with limited input from colleagues. I learned that it is better to involve colleagues and other relevant stakeholders (such program directors and colleagues) at the planning phases of action research. In fact, Burns (2015) notes that one of the key actions in the planning phase of action research involves the collaboration with others (such as colleagues and students). In fact, when more significant people are involved in the process, teachers may be in a stronger position to initiate important bottom-up curricular changes.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have suggested a way to strengthen PBL. Specifically, I suggested incorporating genre checkpoints into a project in order to address two common concerns with PBL: a lack of structure and a focus on summative rather than formative assessment. The most important implications that can be drawn from the project include the following practical suggestions for classroom teachers.

First, for teachers who use PBL, it is important to build in levels of structure into the preparation phase so students are able to manage their time appropriately without drifting too far off task. This paper suggests that genre awareness mini-lessons are one option for providing a degree of structure. Teachers must remember, however, to consider the needs of their own students when choosing a genre. What is appropriate in one context (i.e., an academic email request) may not be as appropriate in another.

Second, teachers must not forget about the importance of formative assessment in the learning process. Informal written or spoken feedback, not tied to a formal grade, is important for student learning. Therefore, short mini-lessons like the one introduced in this paper can be an effective way for teachers to introduce more formative assessment measures in a class.

Third, although the original purpose of this project was to address two concerns I had with PBL, the project also uncovered the usefulness of introducing students to the concept of genre awareness. Thus, it is suggested that teachers try to continually help develop this awareness with students. This can be done with short mini-lessons, like the one in this project. Or, it can be achieved with a teacher simply pointing out, when possible, particular moves and/or structures of certain genres in the course of their daily teaching.

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## Appendix A: Mini-lesson: Academic Email Request

**Part One**

a Read the following email requests. Complete the task that follows.

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**From**: Student name <name@university.edu>
**Sent**: January 01, 2019
**To**: Professor Smith
**Subject**: Recommendation request
(1) Dear Professor Smith,
(2) This is <name> from your ENG 100 class. (3) I'm applying for a tuition scholarship for the fall semesters. (4) They asked me for a letter of recommendation from one of my professors. (5) The deadline for the letter is in 3 weeks. (6) If you're not too busy, would it be possible to write a letter of recommendation for me? (7) If you can help, I'll send you the format for the letter.
(8) Thank you,
Student name

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**From**: Student name <name@university.edu>
**Sent**: January 01, 2019
**To**: Professor Smith
**Subject**: Topic approval
(1) Dear Professor Jones,
(2) This is <name> from your ENG 100 class. (3) I've been thinking about my topic for our class project, and I have decided on school bullying. (4) Is this a suitable topic for my project? (5) I look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience.
(6) Thank you,
Student name

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Task:

1. With a partner, discuss some of the similarities in the two emails.

2. What is the purpose, or function, of each numbered sentence in the two emails? (for example, numbered sentence one in each email serves as an opening/salutation).

## Part Two

a Typical move structure

One common sequence for the organization of an academic email request is as follows:
1. salutation
2. identification
3. context or reason for request
4. the specific request
5. any additional details, including options for recipient
6. closing

| Move | Description | Example language |
|------|-------------|------------------|
| Salutation | A standard phrase used at the beginning of a letter and/or email. | • *Dear Professor ____:* |
| Identification | A brief sentence identifying yourself to the recipient. | • *This is _____ from your BIO 100 class.*<br>• *I am in your MATH 150 class this term.* |
| Context or reason for request | A few details regarding the reason for the request. | • *I was sick last class.*<br>• *I am applying for a scholarship and I need to submit 2 letters of recommendation.* |
| The specific request | A sentence that begins with indirect expression followed by the specific request. | • *I was wondering if I could interview you for a project I'm doing in another class.* |
| Any additional details, including options for recipient | A sentence providing additional details, if necessary, and at least two options for recipient. | • *I am available to meet after class or during your office hours.* |
| Closing | A standard phrase used at the end of a letter or email immediately before your name. | • *Thank you,*<br>• *Sincerely,* |

b Representative linguistic feature

In order to make a request seem polite, and to avoid the request sounding like a command, it is a good idea to use an expression that is less direct.

| An indirect expression | + | request |
|------------------------|---|---------|
| Ex. *I was wondering…* | + | *…if it would be possible to meet tomorrow after class.* |

Examples of indirect expressions:
- ✓ I was wondering…
- ✓ Would you be able to…
- ✓ Do you happen to know….
- ✓ Would you possibly have time to….

**Part Three**

a Practice: Using indirect expressions in a request.

Directions: Rewrite the following requests using an expression that is less direct at the beginning of the sentence.

1. Please send me a copy of the handout.

2. Will you meet me tomorrow to talk about the test next week?

3. Can you write me a letter of recommendation?

4. Would you give me your feedback by tomorrow?

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