

EBL for EBL: Enquiry-Based Learning for an End to Boring Language Learning

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Abstract

In French Studies, an EBL project was designed by the discipline's three Teaching Fellows to run within our first-year core language module in an attempt to address the twofold problem of students finding independent language work boring and thus not engaging in it, and tutors finding students' work inaccurate yet not having enough class-time to address their deficiencies! The project concentrated on two key areas of language learning: phonetics and grammar. A separate project was developed for each area with different levels of colleague and student involvement: the full teaching team and student cohort in phonetics; a small volunteer group working with the Teaching Fellows in grammar. Evaluation of the project through feedback questionnaires shows convincingly that students feel more engaged in their own learning process through the EBL approach and benefit enormously from their experience of team-working and acquisition of other transferable skills. Some ambiguities remain concerning the extent of linguistic improvement, but the overall outcome is highly positive and it is hoped that, notwithstanding certain practical difficulties, EBL can be implemented on a wider scale in French Studies in the future.

Background

In 2006, the Teaching Fellows in the discipline of French Studies embarked on a project to adopt an EBL approach to language learning for students in the first-year compulsory core language module (see Figure 1, Appendix 3). The project was divided into two sections, phonetics and grammar, each of which was handled separately for reasons of staffing logistics: the phonetics part of the project was run within the existing module in

semester two and involved both the entire cohort of students and the discipline's full team of language tutors; the grammar part involved only the Teaching Fellows and a voluntary group of students.

Following an initial planning stage in semester one, it was decided that the requirements of language accuracy were better met by employing a TBL (task-based learning) mode rather than a pure EBL one, but which still introduced students to independent enquiry in the form of research. We have based our use of the term TBL on the definition given by Songhori (2005) as used by Baron (2003): 'The purpose of the task is not to solve a problem but to be a carrier for the language items to be taught which have been specified by the teacher'.

Rationale

For some time, the final year examiners' board meetings in French Studies have noted expressions of dismay at the disappointing standard of accuracy in both spoken and written French achieved by many students. Bearing in mind that the language module in each year forms only a single 20-credit unit among the total of all modules taken within French Studies, it has become increasingly apparent that the students need to take their independent language learning much more seriously. But how to encourage them? Informal questioning revealed that most students considered additional independent learning and practice of French, whether oral or written, to be boring and/or unnecessary. So, our starting point was not only how to encourage them to work independently, but how to overcome this perception of it being boring to do so. This was clearly necessary in order to enable them to improve their standard – not only for an outcome of more accurate language production by the students themselves but also, importantly, for an enriched experience of the other cultural modules they undertook during their degree programme. Thus our hope and project objective were that a clearly guided EBL approach would enable both outcomes, i.e. better French and a better overall experience.

Approach

In detailing the approach taken, as well as the assessment, we will discuss separately the phonetics project and the grammar project.

EBL for Phonetics and Pronunciation

In oral classes, we train students to develop their listening skills through the exploitation of audio and video documents and their speaking skills through debates and presentations and through the study of phonetics. Students work on sounds which are problematic for English speakers. Our aim is to help them improve their pronunciation, which is crucial for effective communication in the target language, but also to become more autonomous and be able to use phonetic transcriptions in dictionaries as they learn new words.

Our teaching method (Ur 1996, pp. 5-6) - involving participation from students through discrimination and repetition exercises - produced mixed results, with mistakes being carried forward to the final year, despite a period abroad. A reflective model of learning (Ur 1996, p. 8) would therefore encourage students to absorb information in a durable fashion by 'placing [them] in the active role of problem-solvers' (Songhori 2005) with a task-orientated method.

We embedded the EBL aspect into the existing course, so that it became a minor but compulsory part of it. Thus, this project was done on a large scale as it involved all first year classes, enabling us to try different scenarios on multiple groups and to compare results. Students received a group mark which counted for 10% of their oral mark (2.5% of their overall language mark); this we hoped would incite them to work seriously, but would not penalise them if the EBL project proved inconclusive.

The project was planned for semester two only, as we wanted our students to acquire principles in phonetics in semester one and to inspire them in terms of types of exercises they could propose. Students formed groups, decided on a team leader and then were given two weeks to research their given topic. They produced a presentation during which they explained the problem to the rest of the class, presented exercises found in varied sources (books, internet, CDs, cassettes) and created a short exercise to prove

that they had fully understood the problem. This peer-teaching was done in French and lasted around 20 minutes; students were free to choose the format and style of the presentation. They also had to produce a dossier with self-reflection sheets, their proposed exercises and a full bibliography.

We offered students direct guidance through consultation with language tutors in class and particularly through designated EBL consultation hours (six in total). Moreover, guidance through Web CT was available as all necessary information on the project was posted there as well as research tips such as information on the John Rylands Library's phonetics resources and also useful Internet sites. Only a small sample of possible resources was provided, encouraging students to find, exploit and share their own, thus creating a feeling of ownership of the resulting knowledge.

We also used this virtual learning environment for overall reinforcement lessons. As all students were to be examined on all the topics seen during semesters one and two, we felt that it would be unfair to expect their knowledge to come merely from peer-teaching and the preparation of their own EBL projects. Therefore phonetics lessons with exercises (text and recording with Audacity software) were created and posted on Web CT; they were accessible two weeks after each presentation. Tutors had also reserved time at the end of each presentation to correct mistakes and add any important information that had been missed.

The topics for the projects were as follows:

- The pronunciation of word endings;
- Liaisons;
- The sounds [s] and [z];
- The difference between [in] and [ɛ̃] at the beginning of a word;
- The letters 'qu', 'gn', 'gu'.

The language team wrote scenarios (two examples are found in Appendix 1) to prompt students to find precise answers to the problem given and find and understand more general rules. They reflected authentic problems (Fischer 2006) and were formulated following precise criteria for EBL stimuli (Hutchings 2006).

Evaluation

Assessment

- **The phonetics exam:** this was taken in May; 80% of its content reflected the points seen during semester two. The results were overall positive (Figure 2, Appendix 3).
- **The presentations:** We assessed students on the quality of the presentation, the understanding of the problem, the efficiency of the exercises proposed and the quality of the research they had done, partly through the dossier (Figure 3, Appendix 3). A large majority of students were able to understand the problem given in detail and presented it in an efficient manner, managing to verbalize it with a precise target audience in mind. Fellow students gave written feedback on each presentation; however, these comments are not conclusive, as most of them were overly positive and rarely contained critical comments – but they certainly suggest that students enjoyed being taught by their peers.

Students' Experience

We asked students in self-reflection sheets (136 were handed in and analysed) what they thought of the experience:

- *How did you find resources?*

64.2% used the John Rylands Library, 2.3% of them for the first time. 64% used internet and 9% the Manchester University Language Centre. 10.7% used their own dictionaries and 3.5% consulted French native speakers.

- *Did it enhance your phonetics skills?*

73.8% answered positively. 20.2% students thought they understood only their given EBL topic, but generally felt more comfortable within this area. 2.3% did not think they had improved. Overall, automatization and in most cases autonomy seem therefore to have been achieved (Ur 1996, p. 19).

- *Did it enhance your transferable skills? (research, presentation, group-work)*

94% felt more confident with finding books in the JRUL and relevant documents on the Internet: 'it encouraged me to use the resources around me instead of relying on a given list', one student wrote.

96% felt they had improved their presentation skills, especially since peer teaching involves bearing in mind the students' target audience rather than the 'all-knowing' tutor.

96% felt they communicated, negotiated and shared workload more efficiently.

- *Did it improve your spoken French?*

52% said yes, 32.5% slightly and 15.4% answered negatively.

- *Did you enjoy the experience?*

66.6% answered positively, with comments such as: 'It was a fresh challenge'; 'I took in more than I would perhaps in a lesson'. 8.3% found it enjoyable but too difficult and 25% did not like this method as the scenarios were confusing and they prefer traditional teaching.

The experience was, therefore, globally positive, especially in terms of transferable skills; and we hope to have helped students develop certain life-long learning skills.

Tutors' Experience

They expressed mixed feelings as they worried about students being taught incorrect facts; also, they were not comfortable with this innovative method and it was difficult to determine their role as facilitators. They also worried about having extra work imposed upon them. However, the positive outcome of the project reassured the team, which is happy to engage in improvements for next year

Further Development

The EBL phonetics projects will continue next year with a few changes:

- **Increased use of Web CT:** for 2007-08, a selection of exercises created by students will be put on Web CT to show new students the types of exercise they can create. We thus hope to encourage students to take pride in their work.
- **Semester one EBL exercise:** students will study an individual scenario with their tutors reflecting a phonetics topic seen in class to help them understand what we expect of them in semester two.
- **More precise scenarios:** in the light of comments from tutors and students, changes will be implemented.
- **Training for tutors as facilitators:** our team will continue through meetings and workshops to familiarise themselves with EBL methods, using resources within the University of Manchester and other institutions (University College Dublin and University of Sheffield).
- **New projects?** An interesting possibility would be an EBL project during the compulsory period abroad to encourage our students to discover their socio-linguistic environment, with interactive research on topics such as registers and accents.

EBL for Grammar

The Teaching Fellows had originally submitted a project proposal which involved the participation of our whole team of language tutors but, for a number of reasons including proposed increased workloads from elsewhere in the School, the tutors felt unable to collaborate on the grammar project. We therefore modified our original plans and proceeded in semester two with a more modest version, working with a number of student volunteers on Wednesday afternoons. Over semester one, we decided to use the grammar topic of Adjectives and Adverbs as one which is not covered by the current first-year programme, thus avoiding any possible unfair advantage to the project students at the time of module assessment. Within this topic, we worked out a logical progression of the complexity of rules to be covered and once we had this as our base, we then spent time creating nine scenarios illustrating the various rules. Please see details of the scenarios in Appendix 2. An end-of-topic test was also adapted from a test currently used in Year two.

The project schedule (see Figure 4, Appendix 3) began with a meeting calling for volunteers, at which we gave students information about what EBL means, and once a group of 22 was finally confirmed, we handed out pre-project evaluation sheets to help us understand why these students were prepared to take part. Their responses and comments will be referred to in the later Evaluation section.

The volunteers were randomly allocated to three groups: two EBL groups, subsequently divided into smaller teams A-D, and one control group. The control group was established for reasons of research integrity so that we could assess any differences in language performance between the achievement of those following a conventional mode of learning and those following the EBL/TBL mode. A common grammar test would be taken by all volunteers at the end of the project schedule.

The control group of six students followed our current discipline mode of learning i.e. three hours of tutor-led delivery of grammar with practice exercises and an end-of-topic test. The EBL students were divided into four groups of four. Over the subsequent weeks of the project, the following three-week cycle was adopted: in week one, group teams A and B were given a scenario each; in week two, the Teaching Fellows were available for consultation/facilitation; and in week three, the students gave their 15-minute presentations. This was repeated for group teams C and D.

The four presentations given by this point were all well-researched, but of varying quality in terms of delivery. We were especially impressed by some of their own exercises or interactive activities devised by them for their peers. The presentations made use of delivery methods varying from PowerPoint, to overhead transparencies and even blackboard and chalk.

For the final scenario analysis, we decided to adopt a different mode of preparation for the presentations. All the EBL group students were given a scenario (one of two) but told not to prepare a presentation, merely to research the grammar illustrated. There was a week of tutor consultation available in the middle if required (no-one took this up); and then in the final week of the cycle when students arrived at the class session, we gave them paper and pens and allowed them 15—20 minutes, with ourselves present as facilitators, to prepare a short presentation lasting five minutes. This different approach actually proved immensely successful and feedback suggested it was the preferred mode of delivery for the students.

The project concluded with a final week after the Easter vacation, during which we invited students to complete a comprehensive evaluation questionnaire and at the same time enjoy a buffet lunch. We also gave the EBL students the opportunity to answer the end-of-topic test: this proved to be something of a mistake because the students did not take the test very seriously after a glass of wine; and therefore, the results cannot be deemed truly representative in terms of comparison with the control group results.

Evaluation

Full details of the student responses on the evaluation questionnaires can be found in the appendix.

A starting point for our evaluation is a comparison between the wishes of the student volunteers at the outset of their involvement in the project and their feedback after their experiences of EBL: the majority admitted they currently spent very little time independently on language learning and simply wished to see an improvement to their French grammar (see Figure 5, Appendix 3). Few expressed interest in gaining other general skills. At the end of the project, however, all the participants stated clearly that they had gained both skills and confidence in precisely those general, transferable skills – team-working, giving a presentation and researching information. Although the final evaluation session of the project was attended by relatively few volunteers, the questionnaires completed (eight in total) showed an overwhelmingly positive response to the project as a whole. Interestingly, the responses indicated that “improvement to their grammar” was not the main outcome of their involvement and indeed some comments revealed that the presentations were felt to be of varying standards in terms of helpfulness for the others in the class, but every single respondent claimed to have learned more deeply from his/her own research for their own presentation. These responses would seem to feed typically into the debate within EBL practice surrounding process versus product.

Evaluation of the project from the tutors’ perspective includes both positive and negative aspects. On the negative side, we need to provide clearer tasks based on the scenarios; and the issue of what constitutes effective facilitation remains an area to be revisited – again, the relative importance of product versus process inevitably sees different people attaching more significance to one or the other. On the positive side, all three Teaching Fellows feel professionally encouraged by the students’ engagement in

their own learning process and also motivated to engage with exciting new teaching practices.

Further Development

The overwhelmingly positive reaction of our student volunteers to their EBL grammar experience has confirmed that we should continue working on this aspect of language provision. However, the current university context will require us to modify our plans in the short term. In addition to the reticence of certain colleagues on the language team mentioned earlier, we find ourselves in a situation of budget restrictions and resultant staff shortages. Grammar class sizes will increase next year in a bid to keep numbers down in oral classes. This situation would make it unfeasible to formally embed the group-work projects that we had envisaged for the language module, because we can not guarantee equality of facilitator engagement for the whole cohort. This said, the students themselves had some excellent ideas as to how to proceed. Favouring the 'in-class preparation' approach, they suggested using scenarios for revision sessions leading up to the grammar assessments at the end of each semester. Taken a step further, such sessions might run in addition to tutor-led classes and be facilitated by second- or final-year students, perhaps initially in the context of an EBL/TBL project designed for a more advanced level of language learning. Further CEEBL or other funding could be sought to enable the Teaching Fellows to move forward with such plans with a view to embedding the independent, open-minded approach of EBL into our future language programmes.

References

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Appendices

People wishing to consult the full details of the project documents in French and English are invited to contact the authors of this study.

Appendix 1

Examples of scenarios for EBL phonetics projects (originally in French):

- **Scenario 1:** You work in an export company. You have noticed that even if your colleagues somehow master the French language, they make important mistakes in their pronunciation which stops them from being fully understood by their French speaking customers who do not speak English. Your boss has asked you to help improve your colleagues' pronunciation. You have noticed that they particularly mispronounce the groups of following letters: 'qu', 'gn', 'gu'. During a short presentation you will explain the pronunciation of these letters and their phonetics transcriptions, and produce a series of exercises to help your colleagues to recognise and work on these letters.
- **Scenario 2:** Your friend hears you read a text in French. She has noticed that you pronounce the ending of the following terms differently: *leader* [lidœR], *particulier* [partikylje] and *particulière* [partikylieR]. Find out why the endings of these words are pronounced differently. To which phonetics and grammar points is this linked? You will present a series of exercises to help your classmates recognise and pronounce correctly these word endings.

Appendix 2

Examples of scenarios for the grammar projects:

- **Scenario 1** illustrates basic rules governing adjectival agreement with gender/plurality of the noun described.

You've come home from university for the weekend and your neighbour's son, who is taking his AS level in French this year, shows you his homework and his French is appalling! You are going to have to not only correct his mistakes but also explain the grammar rules to him. You are also going to make up an exercise for him to practise what you've explained and to check that he has properly understood, as well as providing a reference list so that he can continue to work on this topic on his own.

- **Scenario 2** illustrates how adverbs are formed from adjectives but that many adverbs are spelt with deviations from the basic form.

Here is a magazine article describing a charity ball at l'hôtel Glitzy... from the description of the famous guests at the event, identify the rules governing formation and positioning of adverbs, including exceptions to the rules, and write an article yourself which illustrates that.

Appendix 3

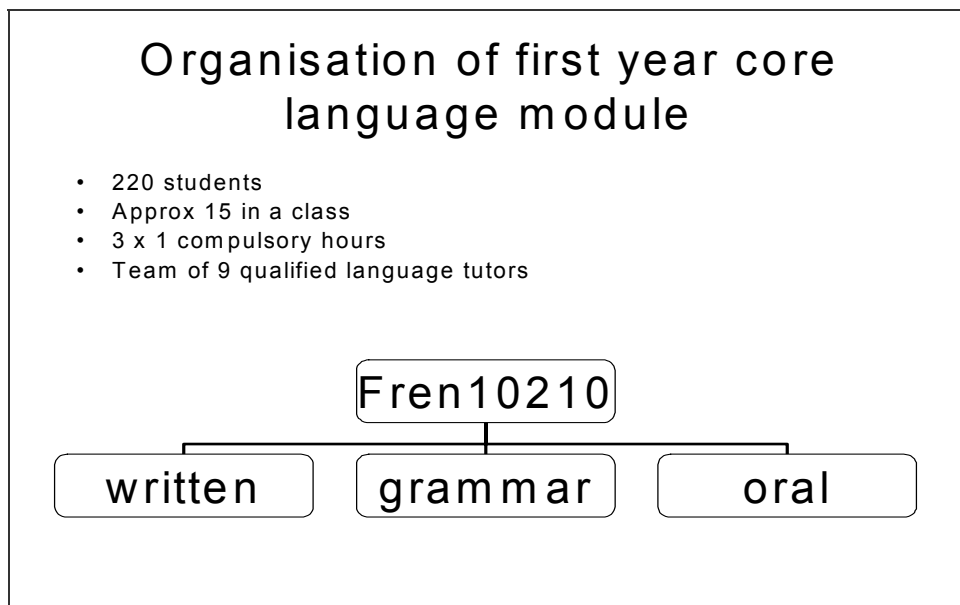


Figure 1 Organisation of First-Year Core Language Module.

Assessment (1)

- The phonetics exam

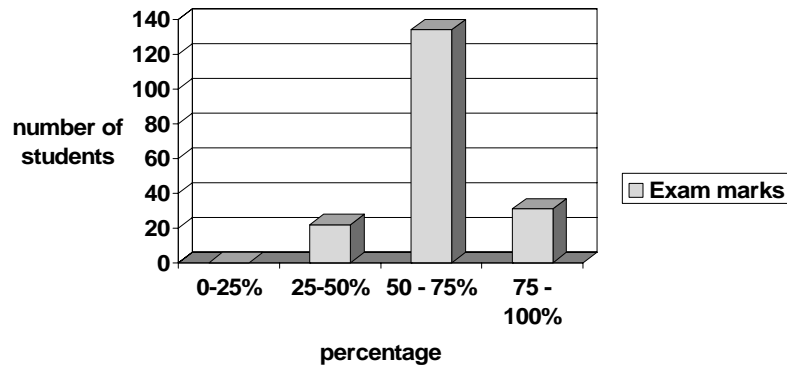


Figure 2 Results of end of semester phonetics examination.

Assessment (2)

- The presentations

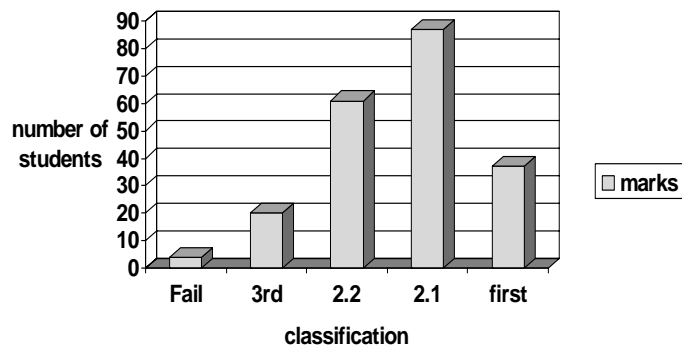


Figure 3 Marks for EBL phonetics presentations.

The Grammar project (Semester 2, 2007)

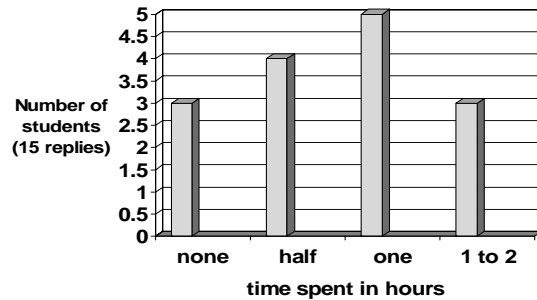
Call for volunteers and pre-project evaluation		
Control group	Week	EBL group
	3	Consultation hour
1hr	4	Presentations A and B
	5	Consultation hour
1hr	6	Presentations C and D
	7	Consultation hour
1hr 30 Class and test	8	In-class mini presentations (all groups)
After Easter: Evaluation session and test for EBL groups		

ORGANISATION

- 22 volunteers
- 6 in control group (3 x 1hr) + test in final week
- 16 in EBL group
- 4 sub-groups of 4 for presentations
- Scenarios distributed so all groups 2 weeks to prepare and 1 consultation week
- Evaluation week at end + same test

Figure 4 Organisation of the EBL grammar project.

How long do you spend on independent grammar learning each week?



WHY SO LITTLE?

12/14 Its too boring and/or too hard

13/14 There's no point – I can do it in the dossier, but know I can't apply the rule when I write

Figure 5 Time spent on ILP grammar learning.