

Abstract

The pedagogical experts' search for the ideal approach to teaching a foreign language has actually resulted in the emergence of a variety of methods. The present article aims at analyzing project work as a promoter of meaningful student engagement with language in the process of learning. Being a student-generated action research, it enhances the learners' communicative skills as well as their creativity and ability to cooperate. In this article, guidelines as to how to organize project work are provided on the example of a project conducted with students from Alecu Russo Balti State University.

“Learners must no longer sit there and expect to be taught; teachers must no longer stand up there teaching all the time.

Teachers have to learn to let go and learners have to learn to take hold” (Brian Page).

It is generally acknowledged that the foreign language acquisition is a long and complex undertaking where the role of the teachers is to maximize learning opportunities for their learners. One way to do it is to involve students to carry out a project, “an in-depth investigation of a topic” [1, p. 5].

The Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics defines project work as “an activity which centers around the completion of a task, and which usually requires an extended amount of independent work either by an individual student or by a group of students. Much of this work takes place outside the classroom” [4, p. 428]. As a rule, projects are assigned to groups or even to a whole class as this is the best way to make the students collaborate.

However, project work should not be viewed only as mere group work but also as “a versatile vehicle for fully integrated language and content learning”, which “represents a natural extension of what is already taking place in class” [5, p. 109]. It does not stand for a teaching method; it is rather “an approach to learning which compliments mainstream methods and which can be used with almost all levels, ages and abilities of students” [ibid.].

Projects are engaging and at the same time meaningful as they “involve hands-on investigation, finding the answers to questions, reading about the topic, visiting sites or places, and talking to other people who know something about the topic. Projects also involve documentation – collecting information and preserving the experience by writing about it, taking photographs, or videotaping” [1, p. 5].

Here, like nowhere else, teachers are regarded as those who “can only try to create the conditions necessary for learning to take place” [2, p. 45]. They are not directly involved in the project work; they guide the students by offering them their help when needed.

Actually, project work can be regarded as collaboration between the students and the teacher, especially at the beginning when the aims of the project are established. They discuss the content and scope of the project, and their needs.

As a rule, the students move out of the classroom to complete their planned tasks (e.g. conducting interviews, collecting information). When the project is completed it is reviewed and monitored. This includes discussions and feedback sessions by the teacher and participants, both during and after the project. Thus, project work has a process – product orientation as the way in which the project has been conducted is as important as its outcome.

The expert in content-based instruction, Fredericka L. Stroller, proposes a 10-step sequence of activities for orchestrating project work [5, p. 112]:

STEP 1: Agree on a theme for the project

STEP 2: Determine the final outcome

STEP 3: Structure the project

STEP 4: Prepare students for the language demands of STEP 5

STEP 5: Gather information

STEP 6: Prepare students for the language demands of STEP 7

STEP 7: Compile and analyze information

STEP 8: Prepare students for the language demands of STEP 9

STEP 9: Present final product

STEP 10: Evaluate the project.

The language intervention steps are optional. However, these interventions may help the students complete the project successfully. The project itself offers the needed context for the specific language use. The students are supposed to interact with each other and by doing so they „Strategii actuale în lingvistică, glotodidactică și știință literară”, Bălți, Presa universitară bălțeană, 2009.

are encouraged to use language to learn something new about the theme of the project. Interaction in a project implies, above all, collaboration. Here, the teacher also teaches students collaborative or social skills so that they can work together more effectively as “cooperation is not only a way of learning, but also a theme to be communicated about and studied” [3, p. 164].

Following the above mentioned suggestions can make the English–language classroom “more vibrant environments for learning and collaboration” [5, p. 117].

For example, last February I assigned my students to work on a Black History Month Project, which was meant to challenge the students to get to the core of this delicate issue. We agreed that the theme of the project should deal with the cultural and historical significance of this month. At first, students brainstormed issues that might figure in their project. Through discussion and negotiation, they decided to dwell upon the controversy of the month, historical background and three most significant representatives in Black History.

We viewed the final outcome in the form of a poster where the most significant search results should be exhibited. The project was thought in black and white which was supposed to represent the present-day harmonious coexistence of the Black and White races.

While structuring the project it was decided what kind of information was needed and where to find it. Then the students devised the tasks among them.

As February was chosen to honor Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln I assigned another task for them which would involve both creativity and concrete historic data. Thus, the students were asked to take an imaginary interview from Abraham Lincoln. They should think of two questions they would like to ask the 16th president of the USA. The third question took into consideration the modern context and said: "Mr. Lincoln, what do you think of the 2008 presidential elections and of the 44th president of the USA?" Then the students were supposed to think of possible answers. In this way several important events were mentioned, i.e. *The Gettysburg Address*, *The Emancipation Proclamation* as well as some information concerning the president's political career and personal life. This was a proof that the students had done some research before answering the questions.

After the information was gathered, it was thoroughly analyzed. The students decided upon what to preserve in group. After a fruitful discussion we agreed that we should place in the center of the poster Langston Hugh's poem *Dreams*. Students made a parallel between the poem and Martin Luther King Jr's famous speech *I Have A Dream*. Thus, we came to the conclusion that Black History is a history paved with dreams. We decided that if the Cherokee had a “Trail of Tears” then the Black people in the USA followed the Trail of Dreams.

At the end, the students were asked to "have their say" and express their opinion whether there is still the need to have such a month. Afterwards I asked them to evaluate themselves.

I enjoyed working on this project together with my students as it enabled me to see how they perceive the Black History Month. Besides, it appears to be the best way of combining creativity with specific information in the acquisition of English as a foreign language.

The project work described in this article was well-received by the students who thought it engaging and meaningful. They found the process rewarding, intrinsically motivating, and educationally useful.

To sum up, project work is an activity which promotes cooperative learning, reflects the principles of student-centered teaching, and promotes language learning through using the language for authentic communicative purposes.

REFERENCES:

1. Harris, J., Berg ,S., Scranton P. *Teaching your Child to Love Learning : a Guide to Doing Projects at Home*. Teachers College Press, 2004
2. Kumaravadivelu, B. *Beyond Methods: Macrostrategies for Language Teaching*. Yale University Press, 2003
3. Larsen-Freeman, D. *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching*. Second Edition. Oxford University Press, 2008
4. Richards, J. and Schmidt, R. *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics*. Third Edition. Pearson Education Limited, 2002
5. Stoller, F. *Project Work: A Means to Promote Language and Content in Methodology in Language Teaching. An Anthology of Current Practice*. Ed. Richards, J., Renandya, W. Cambridge University Press, 2002
6. <https://vickycondrat.wordpress.com/>