

Project Work and Information and Communication Technologies in the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract The incorporation of project work and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in the teaching of English as a foreign language can have many beneficial outcomes. Research has shown that it can enrich the teaching and learning process, increase student motivation, collaborative skills and foreign language performance. Educationalists argue that it provides opportunities for authentic use of the English, increases willingness to participate in the teaching and learning process, as well as enjoyment. In addition, it develops language skills and critical thinking skills. Bearing the above into consideration, in this article we present a case study of project-based learning for the teaching of English as a foreign language in a primary school. We present the project organization, the stages we followed in sequencing the project activities, the expected challenges and difficulties and the beneficial outcomes. We conclude that the incorporation of Information and Communication Technologies and collaborative project work should form an integral part of the teaching of English as a foreign language.

Keywords: *project-based instruction, ICT, teaching English as a foreign language*

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1. Introduction

In recent decades much of the literature on the teaching of English as a foreign language points to the need for students to engage in authentic language activities that require using the English language to carry out "real life" communicative tasks [1]. It is also suggested that students should participate in language learning activities that necessitate student collaboration. Educationalists have also provided strong arguments in favour of the fact that a major concern of English teachers should be to foster their students' critical and creative thinking skills [2]. At the same time, English teachers should implement measures in order to create a supportive and non-threatening classroom atmosphere, as it can have a positive impact on students' motivation to learn and, consequently, their communicative ability in the English language. Moreover, the successful incorporation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) is considered as a factor that can enrich the teaching of English as a foreign language and increase the students' motivation levels and foreign language performance.

The above considerations led us to consider the impact of incorporating project work and ICT in the teaching of English as a foreign language. In this framework, we present and describe a case study of project-based learning for the teaching of English as a foreign language in a

primary school setting. We also purport to provide English teachers with a connection between theory and practice; a link between the relevant literature and knowledge base on the one hand and teaching practices on the other, supported by real-life, practical suggestions.

2. Project-based Instruction

Project work is part of a broader mode of instruction, problem-based instruction (PBI). Problem based instruction is a student centered model, which involves the teacher posing real-life, authentic and meaningful problems and situations to students, with the aim of promoting collaboration, investigation, inquiry and dialogue, while at the same time increasing students' "higher level thinking in problematic situations, including how to learn" [3], p. 348]. Problem-based instruction has the following characteristics [3,4].

(a) problem-based instruction is organized around questions and situations that have meaning and value for the students, addressing real-life situations that require critical and creative thinking

(b) problem-based instruction is interdisciplinary in nature, so that students see the connection among the different subjects taught at school. Cooperation among teachers who teach different subjects is similarly encouraged

(c) problem-based instruction entails authentic, meaningful investigation, away from "artificial" activities or situations

that are far away from the students' interests. Problem-based instruction necessitates students to make definitions, hypotheses, predictions, make inferences and draw conclusions [3].

(d) problem-based instruction has an end product that can be a research report, but also artifact or some kind of action

(e) problem-based instruction necessitates collaboration among students, with students working in pairs or small groups in order to carry out the research

Researchers argue that problem-based instruction can help students develop higher-order thinking skills, such as critical and creative thinking skills, foster student independence and autonomy.

Project-based instruction is a "constructivist approach that encourages learning by allowing students to use inquiry-based methods to engage with issues and questions that are rich, real and relevant to their lives. It emphasizes learning activities that are long-term, interdisciplinary, and student-centered" [[1], p. 39]. It has been described as "the part of the curriculum that encourages children to apply their emerging skills in informal, open-ended activities that are intended to improve their understandings of the world they live in" [[5], p. xii]. It is a method which allows students great autonomy to pursue their own interests by engaging in an activity within the larger framework of the curriculum [6].

In the next part we focus on the benefits of incorporating project-based instruction in the teaching of English as a foreign language. We briefly present the findings of research that addresses specifically project-based instruction in the teaching of English as a foreign language.

3. Benefits of Project-based Instruction in the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language

Being a highly student-centered strategy, project-based instruction has widely been recognized as an effective means to promote learning, as it accomplishes several important goals. In the field of foreign language learning it offers students the opportunity to interact with authentic texts and communicate in a real-life like context [2]. This stems from the fact that for the implementation of projects students are required to use the target language to communicate in small groups with the aim of fulfilling tasks. Apart from increased language learning, the implementation of small and long term projects has often been associated with such beneficial outcomes as increased student participation and motivation to engage in activities. Part of its appeal is attributed to the fact that projects are of an open-ended nature, which makes students think creatively [7]. Students learn "how to frame problems, to organize and investigate problems, to collect and analyze data, to marshal evidence, to weigh arguments for and against particular solutions, and to work both independently and with others" [[8], p. 165].

Research has also shown that students who engage in project work are more likely to display increased critical and creative thinking skills and metalinguistic awareness,

while at the same time they learn to cooperate and with each other, in comparison to students who do not engage in project work. Project work also promotes the natural integration of all language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) and provides teachers with ample opportunities to integrate the information and communication technologies (ICT) in their teaching. What is of primary importance is the fact that project work can provide weaker students with the opportunity to take up an active role and increase their confidence in using the foreign language.

In recent decades Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have been widely used in education. These technologies now form an integral part in most English language teaching settings. Information and Communication Technologies can also be used for the implementation of project work.

4. New Technologies, Web 2.0 Tools and Project Work

It is now widely accepted that the implementation of project work in the foreign language classroom can be facilitated by the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). Information and Communication Technologies can be used in sound pedagogical ways at all stages of a project, from planning through presentation. More specifically, the World Wide Web can be used as a means for finding and collecting information necessary for the implementation of the project. In this way students also learn how to evaluate their information sources and select only those that are objective and contain reliable information. In the presentation stage, students can use an array of Web 2.0 tools, which "herald a new era of teaching and learning" [[9], p. 54] in order to present their work. In addition, web-based tools allow students to communicate easily and at low cost (web 2.0 tools are free programs) and collaborate with the world outside the classroom. Finally, Web 2.0 services add the ability for students to create social networks to interact, share information and learn collaboratively [6].

In the next part we describe and analyse the project work we showcase, which can be used in the teaching of English as a foreign language in primary school settings.

5. The Case Study

The above beneficial outcomes of project work cited in much of the relevant literature provided the stimulus for the case study we present in this paper. Thus, in this part we showcase a real-world project designed for pre-intermediate students (A2 level in the Common European Framework of References for Languages), aged 12 years, in the sixth form of primary schools in Greece. It has to be noted that the teaching of foreign languages in Greece has a prominent position. Students are taught English as a foreign language from the first grade of primary school. Apart from English, while students are taught a second foreign language, German or French, from the fifth grade of primary school [10]. The unified curriculum for foreign languages in Greece has adopted the policies implemented

in the European Union concerning foreign languages. The curriculum's primary orientation is towards promoting multilingualism and providing students with opportunities to acquire communication skills, and to help, in this way, young people become active European citizens who are able to take advantage of the opportunities (educational, professional and financial) available in the European context [11].

Teachers who would like to undertake the project we showcase in the next part will be able to examine the following issues and get useful insights into the process of organizing and implementing project work. First, to determine whether and to what extent the benefits of project work reported in the international literature apply in the teaching of English as a foreign language in their own setting. In other words, they will be provided with opportunities to link theory with everyday classroom practice and examine whether research findings in other educational systems apply to the specific characteristics of the educational system of their country. Second, to identify potential challenges and difficulties in organizing and implementing a real-life project. In this way, they will acquire a set of useful guidelines on how to effectively incorporate projects in the teaching of English as a foreign language.

Teachers who will make use of the proposed project work, need to evaluate it using classroom observation techniques, since classroom observation offers the investigator the opportunity "to gather live data from naturally occurring social situations", as the researcher can look directly at what is happening in situ, instead of relying on "second-hand accounts" [12], p. 396]. In other words, teachers need to conduct structured observation, observing the students while they are working on the project, using an observational schedule to note down the factors and parameters being studied. In this way, they will be able to focus on the strengths and weaknesses of the process and the techniques used, so that that can rectify any weaknesses the next time they intend to use project-based learning.

The rest of the article is organized in the following way. We start by describing the teaching context and the details of a real-world project designed for pre-intermediate primary school students. We describe the rationale and the process for selecting the topic of the project and the stages of project completion. We then describe the expected beneficial outcomes, which the teachers can observe from their own classroom observation during the stages of the implementation and completion of the project, but also from a discussion and feedback session held with their students. We believe that the teachers who will implement the suggested project will discover that the incorporation of project work in the English language classroom can bring about an array of beneficial outcomes, both at individual and classroom level. Students are more likely to display increased motivation to learn, develop collaborative skills, while they improve their language skills. As regards the expected challenges, the greatest difficulty teachers are likely to encounter concerns the effective organization of heterogeneous student groups in which each student will have a meaningful role, and will contribute equally for the successful implementation of the project.

6. Organizing the project

The topic we showcase is entitled "My future job". It is worth noting that the topic of the project, together with the aspects chosen to investigate is based on students' interests and is connected to the school textbook used in the sixth grade of primary schools in Greece. This is considered significant, as "the most important qualification for students about to begin work on a project is genuine interest" [13], p. 64]. A brainstorming session can be organized in which students could propose a topic, based on the topics that had already been explored in the classroom, as students will have already read about the topic of the project in their English textbook and watched educational videos on that issue. It is expected that they will express their interest in investigating the above topic. The topic can be chosen because it is quite easy for the students to collect information, making use of internet sources of information and the school library. They could also consult their parents, who could give them invaluable information about their jobs, how they selected them, their advantages and disadvantages and so on.

The subtopics the students are going to explore could include the following. A description of what students believe can be regarded as the advantages and disadvantages of certain jobs. Apart from doing so, students will be told that they have to provide adequate explanation of how they reached their decision. Students will be told that they have to devise their own criteria by which to determine the advantages and disadvantages of certain jobs. The aim is to have students search for information, but then to apply their critical thinking and creative skills in order to successfully complete the project and answer the research questions posed at the beginning. In other words, the project is structured in such a way as to make students not just copy information from different sources (e.g. the internet), but critically analyse and evaluate the collected material. In addition, students have to apply the knowledge about certain jobs they will acquire in order to link this knowledge with their own experiences. They will be asked to describe how they see their future in terms of their future educational trajectories and jobs. Again, students will be asked to justify their opinions with arguments, so as to promote the development of their critical thinking skills and their creativity.

In relation to the formation of groups, students will be given the opportunity to form teams consisting of four members. When the formation of the group is not possible, the teacher will intervene to make sure that conflicts are resolved and that the teams formed are heterogeneous.

As far as the stages followed in sequencing the project activities are concerned, we select the following eight-step process, since it is often used in project work [14].

The first stage involves topic selection. More specifically, the teacher and the students select a suitable topic for the project that will sustain their interest, as it stems from their interests and experiences. This stage includes "choosing the project topic, generating interest and helping students develop a sense of commitment, responsibility and ownership towards the project" [15]. The second stage of the project work revolves around deciding the final outcome of the project. It is at this stage when the students and the teacher determine the final

outcome of the project, such as a board display, brochure, newspaper, theatrical performance (making use of Web 2.0 presentation tools), and the audience for the project, such as their classmates, parents, the wider community.

Stage three involves the students and the teacher structuring the project. They determine the information and the facts that will be selected, compiled and analyzed, ways and sources of data collection, student roles, and timing for the project. In the following stage the teacher prepares the students for the demands of the information gathering. The teacher determines the language demands of the information gathering stage, and structures instruction activities to prepare students for the data gathering tasks and the presentation of the final outcome. If, for example, the students will write a questionnaire to collect information, the teacher will prepare activities about the format and language of questionnaire. In the fifth stage the students collect the information using the sources that have been determined at previous stages, such as the internet or the school library. In the sixth stage, after data has been collected, the students compile and analyze the information, selecting and organizing the useful information for the completion of the project. Stage seven involves students presenting the final outcome, on the basis of what has been decided in stage two. Finally, the students and the teacher evaluate the project. The students reflect on the language and the subject matter acquired during the process, and make recommendations regarding future projects, while the teacher provides students with feedback concerning language and content learning.

In the next part of the paper we critically discuss the project work proposed and implications for the successful planning and implementation of project-based teaching and learning activities that will benefit all students and increase their English language proficiency and collaborative skills.

7. Discussion

Teachers who will attempt to implement the project work showcased above, will gain first-hand knowledge concerning whether and to what extent the beneficial outcomes of project work in the teaching of English as a foreign language reported in the international bibliography apply in their own teaching situation and context with its unique characteristics. We believe that the outcome of the project work will provide strong evidence that students benefit from the incorporation of project work and that their English language performance increases. More specifically, beneficial outcomes will be observed both during and after completion of the project. First, students are given opportunity to use the English language in a natural context, in the sense that they will be using it to communicate, exchange information and opinions necessary for the implementation of the project. In this way, students working in groups will actually have more time and opportunities to use the English language than in an ordinary classroom arrangement. Weaker and shy students are expected to benefit more, since small groups constitute non-threatening environments that create a climate conducive to creating a classroom climate in which students work with a sense of security and self-confidence [16]. In this way, less self-confident students, or those will

lower levels of proficiency can take risks in using the English language. Second, searching information from the internet is likely to provide a real stimulus and motivation for the vast majority of the students. We consider this as a very important aspect, since motivation, that is, “the process by whereby goal-directed activity is instigated and sustained” [[17], p. 4] is closely related to learning and school performance.

As far as the benefits observed after the completion of the project are concerned, the greatest of them will concern increased social and collaborative skills. In other words, students are expected to be more willing to participate in activities that require cooperation and will be able to find ways to communicate more effectively in order to organize their activities or to solve problems. In addition, we believe that the majority of them students will show improvement in all four language skills, particularly, in relation to their speaking and listening skills. This is because during the course of the project work they will be provided with opportunities to participate in real-life, authentic communicative activities.

In relation to the challenges and the difficulties we expect teachers to face, the greatest challenge in the completion of the project is likely to be that some students may fail to meet the requirements. For example, some students may not do the work required, so other students will have to intervene and do their work. This is an issue that can be dealt with in a meeting of the whole classroom, in which it will be made clear that each team depends on its individual members for the completion of its work. If students do not their part and the work they have been assigned, this will have a negative impact on the successful implementation of the project and the teams will not be able to complete their work.

Another challenge will concern the tendency of some students to use their mother tongue, instead of the English language. Using the English language during the implementation of the project is crucial, since it will provide students to use the English language in a non-threatening context. This problem is expected to be more pronounced at the beginning of the project, but while the project work progresses, it is expected that the students will be more willing to use the English language. The teacher can attempt to remedy this problem by completing a task while thinking aloud, modeling and illustrating effective strategies and procedures for the completion of the project.

At this stage it is important to note that the project work we showcase here is just indicative. The topic, the process of project implementation and the results are not necessarily transferable to other settings and educational contexts in which the teaching of English as a foreign language may be based on a different curriculum and theoretical framework. This means that English teachers may need to adapt the implementation process to suit the characteristics of the educational system and their students' needs. The basic features of project work, though, can be transferable to other settings.

8. Conclusion

Project work accomplishes several significant goals in the teaching of English as a foreign language. It provides

opportunities for authentic use of the English language [2], increased motivation, willingness to participate in the teaching and learning process, as well as enjoyment [18]. In addition, it develops language skills [19], promotes students' ability to collaborate in a group [20] and promote critical thinking skills [2,21].

However, its beneficial outcomes may take long to appear. Moreover, having students to cooperate for the implementation of project work is not always as easy as it may sound.

We therefore believe that students need to be provided with ample opportunities for teamwork, as they need to familiarize themselves with the demands of working in a group. Teachers need to carefully plan and provide assistance when necessary. Since project work constitutes a discovery-learning and problem-solving teaching method, teachers need to "clearly formulate the problem which is to be undertaken, explicitly foster the types of information-gathering skills which are required, and systematically debrief pupils on the learning which should have occurred" [[22], p. 48].

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