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RUSSIAN DOLLS:USING PROJECTS TO LEARN ABOUT PROJECTS

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This article will discuss the development of a teaching unit designed for Initial Secondary Teacher Training (specialising in foreign languages) which not only exemplified the theory of project-based learning (PBL) for the students, but also involved the student-teachers in a hands-on experience, thus fully engaging them in the development of the necessary management skills to be able to implement PBL in their own future classrooms. The unit was designed to help shift student-teachers' understanding of teaching approaches towards pedagogies that promote autonomous language learning and collaborative problem-solving. In this article we consider how English language teachers can capitalize on the language learning benefits of project work by first examining the characteristics of project-based learning and then, with the presentation of a case study designed for future foreign language teachers, we consider how this can be integrated into EFL training.

WHAT IS PROJECT-BASED LEARNING AND WHAT ARE ITS BENEFITS FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING?

It is becoming an increasingly common expectation that teachers adopt pedagogies that promote collaborative learning and independent problem-solving into their teaching, especially as these factors are more and more widely-recognised as an effective means of learning. This is also true for foreign language teachers as different frameworks for cooperative learning (e.g., Slavin, 1990; Sharan and Sharan, 1992; Cohen, 1994; Johnson, et al, 1994) are incorporated into language teaching. Studies in project-based learning (PBL) show that it is an effective means of promoting pupil learning (Bennett and Dunne, 1992; Sharan, 1999), furthermore research into language teaching show that PBL results in authentic communication and fosters collaborative language learning (Kitao and Kitao, 2001; Kitao, 2002).

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It might be pointed out that project-based learning is fast becoming a “buzz term” in the realm of education and in language teaching. Although the exact timing and duration of project-based language projects vary, a project is generally considered to be “a long-term (several weeks) activity” (Beckett, 2002: 54) which is integrated into the language teaching is such as way to “*promote the simultaneous acquisition of language, content, and skills*” (Beckett and Slater, 2005: 108). The basic concept hinges on the idea that the language learning should be designed in such a way that it engages students and empowers them with the responsibility of their own learning. Their learning is engendered through an approach that connects the content and target language to their own lives through activities that are intellectually and emotionally challenging, set within the framework of collaborative projects. According to Sharan (1998), PBL is a type of contextualised cooperative learning framed within phases (student participation in the phases is essential). These phases are: selection of a topic, planning of the project, finding information about the topic, developing and implementing the plans and presenting and evaluating their output and own efforts.

One of the main goals (and justifications) for PBL in language learning is the opportunity it provides for ‘situated learning’. The idea behind situated learning is that in order for learners to come to know and understand something requires tasks that are embedded in the target context and incite thinking that is similar to what would be done in real life (Brown et al., 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991). This is a move away from language instruction based on pre-defined goals (without taking into account either the learners or the situation) and which attempts to reinforce the chosen language content through decontextualized practice. In decontextualised language learning, students often end up knowing about the language but not how to use it (Short et al, 1996). In contrast, through situated language learning contexts -as occurs in PBL- teachers can bridge the gap between language learning and the need to create authentic use of the target language, thereby constructing an understanding of language as it would be used in realistic, outside-the-classroom contexts.

Inevitably, this shifts the focus away from the language form and on content. Moreover, apart from the ‘content’ learning that takes place, students experience the opportunity of taking the initiative and assuming responsibility – thus promoting learner autonomy. Project-based learning also affords ‘social learning’ (e.g. group construction of knowledge, collaboration, etc.) and students are exposed to ‘higher-order thinking skills’ of synthesizing and analysing information, how to derive knowledge from it and how to communicate their new knowledge.

Language is not ignored in PBL, however. A relevant factor of project-based instruction is comprehensible output (Swain, 1993; 1995), which generally occurs both during the project and as the final product of the project, which in some way or the other, focuses the students’ attention on the language used (Beckett, 2002). In terms of the final product, Stoller (1997) outlines several variations such as production projects, performance projects and organizational projects, all of which yield qualitatively different end products. However, no matter which variation is selected, several studies into effective project-based learning (e.g., Tomei et al, 1999; Lee 2002; Ho 2003; Allen 2004; Gu 2004; Levine 2004) reveal that the project should focus on real-world subject matter (e.g. in the case discussed herein, student-teachers creating and implementing their own video-based teaching materials) and should implicate the students and ensure collaboration (e.g. the distribution of roles in all the process of video-making). Furthermore, effective project-based work will promote individual student autonomy and independence; accommodate a purposeful use of the target language (e.g., brain-storming, discussing and writing, filming, editing and producing the video in English); and focuses on integrated skills and end-of-project reflection (both of which were components in this project). As Fried-Booth (1997) has pointed out, PBL can play a particularly important role in language teaching because the learners must use the language communicatively to plan, organize, negotiate, design and implement the desired output, etc.

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WHY IS PROJECT-BASED LEARNING IMPORTANT FOR TEACHER TRAINING?

As has already been discussed above, a critical aspect of Project-based learning (PBL) for language teaching and learning is the way in which activities are highly interactive and integrated so that while students are practising and developing language skills in the five macro language learning areas (reading, writing, speaking, listening, interaction), they are also developing intrapersonal skills such as team-work and organization. This concept of integrated language teaching – with its focus on communicative purpose- is hardly new to language teaching, nor is the idea of using PBL in the language classroom. Significantly, despite the fact that project-based learning is not a new concept to language teaching, the acceptance of PBL as a teaching approach is often met with scepticism, especially by novice language teachers. Research shows it is difficult to change teachers' established practices and beliefs (Lortie, 1975; Florio-Ruane and Lensmire, 1990; Mayher, 1990; Schmidt and Kennedy, 1990; Rogoff, 1991; Agee, 1998; Kennedy, 1998; Porter and Brophy, 1998) and that, to a large part, student-teachers' previously held knowledge and assumptions about teaching are based on their own learning experiences (Pajares, 1992). Evidence also shows that the 'beliefs' teachers may say they have are not always consistent with the way they teach (Hart, 1999), and, that it takes considerable time for teachers' beliefs to change (Richardson, 1996). As Porter and Brophy (1998:76) have written, *"Personal experiences, especially teachers' own experiences as students, are represented as important determinants of how teachers think and what they do."* This creates an intriguing challenge for teacher training: how to get student-teachers to adopt teaching approaches that they themselves have perhaps not experienced as learners?

There are other challenges facing teacher training, not least of which is the fact that teachers are under increasing pressure to use new information and communication technologies (ICTs) in order to teach students diverse knowledge and skills of the 21st century. This is especially true for language teachers as the prices of technology become more accessible they are able to use videos and computers in the classroom in order to provide opportunities for students to engage in authentic and purposeful language use whether through video-making or with other speakers of the target language through computer-mediated communication (or both, as in podcasts). Again, research demonstrates that only those student-teachers who learn to use technology during their pre-service studies are likely to incorporate technology in their future classes (Goldsby and Fazal, 2000). Indubitably, project-based learning is easily compatible with the use of new technologies but at the same time, for education to reap the full benefits of ICTs in learning, it is essential that pre- and in-service teachers are able to effectively use these new tools for learning.

Thus, when asking ourselves how teacher educators can address changing paradigms in language teaching and learning, we felt it was also important to help the students see the relationship between their teaching practices -which are often focused on language and teaching concepts developed in the 1980s and 1990s- and the 21st century literacy practices and context of their students. For this reason the project presented to the student-teachers was based on the use of videos and movie-making in the language classroom. This decision was, in part, influenced by our previous experience in the use of videos in teacher training and our participation in a European Minerva project (Project 223249-CP-1-2005-1- NL - Minerva- M) whose target goal was to study how digital video is used in teacher training programmes.

Research shows that the use of video in teacher training can provide significant input to the overall development of future teachers (Cullen, 1991). Considering the fact that several studies on this field have proved the effectivity of using video with language learners (e.g., Dodson, 2000; Carkin, 2004; Hardison & Sonchaeng, 2005), having 'teacher knowledge' of how to use student-produced video is crucial. This type of work provides an excellent framework for foreign language learning

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because it requires learner participation in a variety of ways. It is our belief that within the framework of PBL, mixed media (e.g. videos combined with Information and Communication Technologies) in educational contexts can further increase the possibilities of improving the teaching-learning process as well as preparing student-teachers for the educational system of the future.

Just as adopting the new pedagogical approach of PBL often meets resistance because of lack of knowledge and personal experience on behalf of the student-teacher, the use of technology is often met with reservations because student-teachers are unfamiliar with the pedagogical implementations of ICT (whether they routinely use technology in the personal lives or not). Considering that research shows that the teacher is key to effective use of technology in the educational system (Zhao, et al., 2001), a mixed-media PBL experience for the student-teacher can help them make the connection between the underlying language learning theories and constructivist instructional strategies they can implement.

En bref, language teaching is more than transmitting information about the target language and organizing activities for its practice, implying that language teacher training requires more than knowledge about the language and theoretical knowledge of teaching. Through PBL in language teacher training, student-teachers can gain the type of leadership skills required to “help a group of learners to move in the direction that they want to go, pointing out potential pitfalls or making suggestions without getting defensive when students decide they like their own ideas better” (Spruck Wrigley, 1998:1). Student-teachers must learn to do more than ‘lip-service’ to the concept of communicative language teaching (CLT) which emphasizes interaction as opposed to grammar instruction; they must begin to focus on interactive approaches that develop their students' ability to understand and to express themselves in a foreign language, and to foster students' positive attitude towards communication in the target language. Considering the difficulties inherent to changing teaching paradigms which are largely based on one's own previous experience as a student, getting student-teachers to move from more common teacher-centered strategies requires a powerful strategy, such as introducing PBL in an EFL learning environment. Doing so can help student-teachers discover the need to teach not only language but also how to use it for their purpose. Sarwar, when discussing the use of PBL in EFL teaching, has described the advantage of such a student-centered approach with the following words:

It's like a person discovering that she can walk without a crutch - She will never want to use a crutch again and give up freedom to walk independently. The same paradigm can be used for a language learner released from the shackles of rote learning. (Sarwar, 2000: 51)

DISCUSSION OF THE PROJECT AND RESULTS

The project-based teacher training unit was implemented in the module for integrated language skills in the Masters in Didactics of Language and Literature for Secondary Education, taught at the Faculty of Education, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. Within this framework, it was our intention to get our students to contextualise how to teach integrative language skills through video clips, how to make their own teaching materials and how to implement project-based learning with their students. Additionally, the student-teachers were asked to reflect on their own learning experiences in an online forum and to consider how all of these diverse skills can help them work with their own pupils in the future. Finally, they were required to write their own lesson plan, based on the newly acquired knowledge of PBL in EFL.

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In the first part of the project (see figure 1), students, in groups of three, worked together to create a three-minute video clip to be used in their lessons during their school placements. It was decided to devise the plans for the project-based unit on the competencies outlined in the Catalan National Curriculum for secondary students, based on the assumption that the teachers should have a complete mastery of the competences that their students are expected to achieve. The three areas listed in the curriculum that we felt we could cover most efficiently were communicative competences in English ICT competences and Inter- and Intra- personal competences. As the target group was composed of student-teachers with a good command of the English language, it was not necessary to focus the project on developing their communicative competence and since they were mature students we took for granted that they already possessed inter- and intra-personal competences required for project-based learning. As a consequence, we principally designed the tasks to enable our target students to acquire ICT competencies (movie-making and material design) and project-based learning methodology.

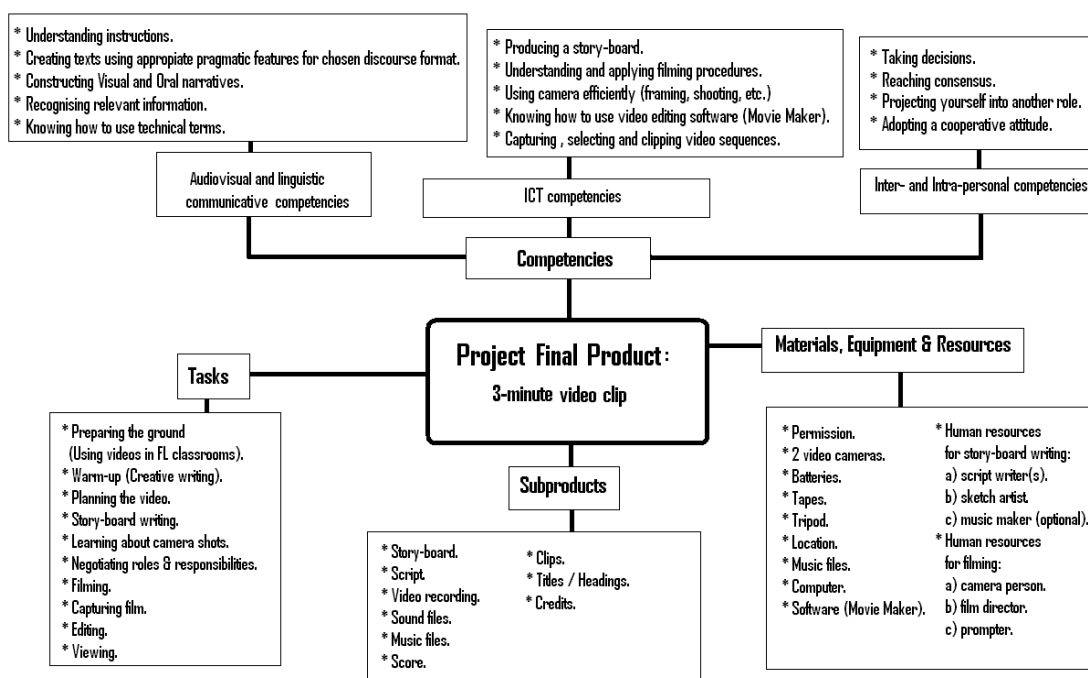


Figure 1. Phase 1: Creating a video clip to be used as a class material

Contrary to common practice in project-based learning, we did not want to reveal our real objective of the teaching unit (learning how to plan projects through the experience of participating in a project) since we wanted them to ‘live’ the project as students participating in a project, not as student-teachers ‘learning’ about the theoretical use of projects. This meant proposing a secondary objective – learning to make their own short clips to fit the exact needs of their own classes. Thus, for the student-teachers the general project aim had to do with developing materials – not learning about PBL. Nonetheless, in the second phase of our project, students viewed a video about how they had created their own clips and the objective of understanding and knowing how to implement PBL in their teaching was eventually revealed to them, as part of the reflection and assessment on what they had done and learnt.

As it can be deduced from the above description, all the project sessions were recorded and relevant extracts transcribed. These were consulted when creating the video used to get students to reflect upon what implementing a project entails, but, perhaps even more importantly, the transcripts provided insight and led to additional knowledge for the teacher trainers. Preliminary analysis of the data from those recordings indicates that there was a noticeably positive effect on the trainees’ attitudes about project-based learning. The evolution of the student-teachers’ attitudes and general engagement was evident – indeed, the students were reticent at the beginning of the project.

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Through peer interaction and teacher feedback and support, the student-teachers could see that they were synthesising practical and theoretical knowledge and became more engaged and enthusiastic as the sessions went on.

Finally, each student had to develop a lesson plan based on the clip produced by his/her team and put it into practice during their subsequent school placement. At the end of the practicum period, student-teachers and their trainees met again to discuss the work done. At this point, they all stated that the clip-making project had been interesting to do but it was not until they were required to reflect upon how to use the clip in their lessons and provide a rationale for doing so that the entire project-based learning really made sense to them. Interestingly, the groups had discussed these topics (e.g. how they could use the videos they were making in their own classes) when they were creating their storyboards, but it was only at the completion of the project, when the purpose of the final product was fulfilled, that it became relevant and generated knowledge.

One of the challenges of PBL work is reaching a balance between excessive teacher control versus an absence of teacher feedback and guidance during the process. In order to avoid dictating each step of the process, the entire project procedures were carefully designed to give freedom and student voice in defining the final video product, thus ensuring a sense of ownership and engagement. At the same time, providing enough support at different stages in the project was essential in order to avoid producing a feeling of being lost. This was not always easy since the main objective could not be revealed to the student-teachers until after their video had been completed. Still, through the end-of-project discussion, reflection in the forum and integration of socially constructed knowledge about project-based learning methods, the end result for these future teachers was authenticity of experience, and increased metacognitive awareness of what integrated teaching really signifies.

In essence, the teaching unit can be understood through a simile of Russian nesting dolls – several projects packed within a main project. Once unpacked, it is evident that the teaching unit consisted of an overall project of providing student-teachers with the opportunity to learn about and experience PBL, but this project was carried out through another project implemented by the student-teachers – the construction of their own teaching materials. Thus, in parallel to acquiring knowledge about PBL, upon completion of the unit, the student-teachers were able to create a storyboard for their video clips; understand and apply filming procedures; use a camera effectively; capture, select and clip video sequences and use video editing software (Movie Maker). This knowledge, in turn, can be taught to their own students in similar video-producing projects. Additionally, the student-teachers acquired subject content knowledge related to the development of ICT competencies such as story boards as a text genre and types of shots and camera moves. Finally, they were asked to design a learning unit of their own, based on the knowledge gleaned from their experiences.

An essential part of PBL is to encourage student to reflect on their own learning experience. In this case the student-teachers could comprehend what it means to be a language learner in a project-based learning context and to gain an awareness of the management skills, sensitivities and confidence that they need in order to implement similar approaches. Importantly, the student-teachers came to have seen that, as teachers, they can share some of the responsibility of teaching with their students. They now comprehend that they can propose self-directed tasks and let their students choose for themselves, just as the student-teachers were given the liberty to choose the content and type of the materials that they wanted to produce.

While the use of student-produced video can be considered an enjoyable activity, it is important to underline that the project work was not considered to be merely a source of entertainment. The focus was on real-world subject matter (the creation of their own teaching materials which they had

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to use for lesson-planning) and at the same time, the student-teachers achieved significant gains in specific language knowledge (related to teaching and video-making) and content learning (also related to teaching). The integration of the video they produced into their own lesson plan also reinforced the idea that, as future language teachers, they must pay attention to content and language in their project-based lessons.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Previous research supports the positive experience described herein, that is, project-based language learning (PBL) has the potential to provide foreign language learners with optimal conditions for language learning. It offers the possibility of enhancing student motivation by engaging them in a task of interest to them. To the numerous advantages of PBL in language learning (exposure to authentic materials, plentiful opportunities to use the target language, and plausible, authentic reasons for using it, etc.), we should add that in a teacher training course such as ours, the student-teachers were immersed in a context in which they used the target language meaningfully but at the same time, they were learning how to use technology and how to implement projects by being active participants in the development of a real project. Thus learning was possible because it was situated and allowed linguistic, technical and pedagogical knowledge to emerge from practice.

In our project, the combination of individual work, group discussions and the use of technological resources signified moving away from a traditionalist perspective of using new technologies as mere complements of existing classroom practices and curriculum content. PBL in teacher education, particularly at masters' level, is not widely used methodology but we felt that, as teachers, we must be prepared to adapt our teaching styles and methods according to new developments in technology in education, especially since they will inevitably have repercussions in the classroom (Masats and Dooly, 2007).

Indeed, the preliminary analysis indicates that the unit design was successful in achieving the intended learning outcomes. It is hoped that the experience will result in future implementation of project-based learning by our student-teachers. Admittedly project-based learning presents challenges for both teachers and students (Beckett, 2002), nonetheless, we feel that the underlying idea is worthwhile and merits further research and implementation in teacher training, especially considering the multiple benefits that the incorporation of innovative teaching paradigms can provide student-teachers for their professional lives ahead.

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