

Project-Based Learning as an Effective Teaching Approach to Promote Learner Autonomy

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ABSTRACT

This article aims at investigating project-based learning (PBL) as an effective modern approach to develop learner autonomy. It mainly focuses on benefits of project work activities in TFL context which have been approved to play a significant role in fostering communicative competence of learners. It suggests effective tips to implement them in a modern fun class learning environment.

A project is an extended piece of work on a particular topic where the content and the presentation are determined principally by the learners. The teacher or the textbook provides the topic, but the project writers themselves decide what they write and how they present it. This learner-centred characteristic of project work is vital, as we shall see when we turn now to consider the merits of project work. It is not always easy to introduce a new methodology, so we need to be sure that the effort is worthwhile. Students do not feel that English is a chore, but it is a means of communication and enjoyment. They can experiment with the language as something real, not as something that only appears in books. Project work captures better than any other activity the three principal elements of a communicative approach.

These are:

- a) a concern for motivation, that is, how the learners relate to the task.
- b) a concern for relevance, that is, how the learners relate to the language.
- c) a concern for educational values, that is, how the language curriculum relates to the general educational development of the learner.

A project is an extended task which usually integrates language skills through a number of activities. These activities combine in working towards an agreed goal and may include planning, gathering of information through reading, listening, interviewing, discussion of the information, problem solving, oral or written reporting, display, etc.

Learners' use of language as they negotiate plans, analyse, and discuss information and ideas is determined by genuine communicative needs. At the school level, project work encourages imagination and creativity, self-discipline and responsibility, collaboration, research and study skills, and cross-curricular work through exploitation of knowledge gained in other subjects. Successful use of project work will clearly be affected by such factors as availability of time, access to authentic materials, receptiveness of learners, the possibilities for learner training, and the administrative flexibility of institutional timetabling.

Project work leads to purposeful language use because it requires personal involvement on the part of the students from the onset of a project, students, in consultation with their instructor, must decide what they will do and how they will do it, and this includes not only the content of the project, but also the language requirements. So from this point project work emerges as a practical methodology that puts into practice the fundamental principles of a communicative approach to language teaching. It can thus bring considerable benefits to our language classroom, like:

- ✓ Increased motivation - learners become personally involved in the project.
- ✓ All four skills, reading, writing, listening and speaking, are integrated.
- ✓ Autonomous learning is promoted as learners become more responsible for their own learning.
- ✓ There are learning outcomes -learners have an end product.
- ✓ Authentic tasks and therefore the language input are more authentic.
- ✓ Interpersonal relations are developed through working as a group.
- ✓ Content and methodology can be decided between the learners and the teacher and within the group themselves so it is more learner centred.
- ✓ Learners often get help from parents for project work thus involving the parent more in the child's learning. If the project is also displayed parents can see it at open days or when they pick the child up from the school.
- ✓ A break from routine and the chance to do something different.
- ✓ A context is established which balances the need for fluency and accuracy.

Project work involves multi-skill activities which focus on a theme of interest rather than specific language tasks. In project work, students work together to achieve a common purpose, a concrete outcome (e.g., a brochure, a written report, a bulletin board display, a video, an article for a school newspaper, etc). Haines identifies four types of projects:

1. Information and research projects which include such kinds of work as reports, displays, etc.
2. Survey projects which may also include displays, but more interviews, summaries, findings, etc.
3. Production projects which foresee the work with radio, television, video, wall newspapers, etc.
4. Performance/Organizational projects which are connected with parties, plays, drama, concerts, etc.

Examples from Project Work Activities

The Happiness Cake

1. Ask everyone to think for a moment about the ingredients for happiness. Tell everyone to imagine they are going to bake a happiness cake. What ingredients and what spices would they put in? Ask them to work alone and write down the ingredients and spices for their cake. Allow five minutes for this.
2. If you have a small class, ask each member in turn to tell the others about the ingredients and spices for their cake. You tell them your list last. If you have a larger class, divide it into groups

of six to dozen, and get them to do the same. Monitor the groups and when they have finished, ask them to report back to the whole class. Again tell them your ingredients and spices last.

What Went Right? What Went Wrong?

1. Talk to your students about your own good and bad learning experience and the extent to which these correlated with good and bad relationships with your teachers.
2. Tell your students to draw two columns. In the first they are to list teachers they remember getting on well with and in the other those they got on badly with. Divide the class into groups of four or five and ask them to tell one another about these teachers and effect they had on their learning.
3. Bring the students back together as a whole class and ask them what they feel are the main things that contribute to a good relationship between students and their teacher. The most important thing is regular, honest communication, because everything else both depends on this and can be remedied through this. Your students may come up with other points but be sure to emphasis the importance of regular, honest communication.

If a Table Could Speak

1. Draw an object, e.g. a table, on the board. Tell the students that your object is the starting point for a picture you would like the class to create and that you would like them to come up to the board one at a time and add more things to it. Tell them that they can draw absolutely anything except people and that quality of the drawing does not matter. The picture is finished when there are about a dozen items in it.
2. Put the chalk or board pen where everyone can reach it easily – make sure they know where it is. Then get out of the way and let them draw the picture.
3. When the picture is reasonably complete declare the picture ready. If your class has had to come out to the front, send them back to their usual places.
4. Divide the class into pairs. Ask the pairs to choose any two items. In the picture write a dialogue between them of about ten lines. Tell your students they must not mention the name of their items in the dialogue. For example, if it is a dialogue between the table and a plant, the plant must not say, ‘Hello, table. How are you today?’ but just, ‘Hello, how are you today?’ Give a time limit of fifteen minutes. First reaction to this task would usually be a gasp of shock, but they should quickly get used to the idea. Keep out of the way for about five minutes while they settle. Then be available to help with vocabulary, etc. If you are not needed, do not hover, just sit down out of the way. As they are finishing, go round and check they have not mentioned the names of the ‘speakers’ in their dialogue as this will ruin Step 5.
5. When they have finished, ask the pairs in turn to read aloud their dialogue, each partner taking a part. The others in the class must guess which item is talking to which. This phase is very good for making students read loud and clearly as colleagues will not otherwise understand.

These specifications shed light on effective means of project work activities can be used extensively in any language classes. From my experience, it has always been approvable to use, especially, poster presentations and conducting small-scale surveys with our current educational context that is limited to an extent that it cannot enjoy full usage of technology in remote areas. For instance, we can simply assign our students to design a poster presentation about kinds of parties they usually celebrate around the year. In my own classes, I frequently require my students to make a poster presentation about New Year holidays, birthday parties which they extremely enjoy to talk about. There are several factors that make these kinds of project work activities enjoyable and fun for learning. First of all, students find real boost for their performance via working in groups as they communicate with

each other laughing and recalling their past memories while working on the project. Secondly, it raises confidence of some shy learners who feel very embarrassed about public speaking when put alone on the stage. As a result, while presenting in a team those learners can feel secure and can express themselves freely. Another good point about them is that you can easily observe how well your students are making progress, especially, regarding their spoken performance. In addition to this, we should bear in mind the importance of four cs skills in teaching language that facilitate learning successfully. Recently, on New Year eve our learners were assigned with the task of creating their own poster presentation about this holiday. The day the students presented them everybody was in their best of performance due to putting much effort in designing, collaborating with each other, preparing their speech for presenting it to the audience. To one's big surprise, the learners were really excited about telling and sharing their opinion to others about their best New Year holiday as it was obvious from how keen eyes they had towards doing that task. What really stood significant was how fluent and natural they sounded while speaking in English. It all revealed to the teacher that collaborating, communicating and creating together certain piece of information can give learners extra push for developing their language proficiency and handy opportunity for the teacher how learners are putting into practice their received input from the studies covered during the lessons.

In summary, it can be deduced from this article that project work activities can give hands-on practice with a particular focus on improving speaking skills. In addition, they develop collaborative learning, critical thinking and creativity too. The most obvious fact that has been revealed in the analysis of this article is that project works are very effective for being motivating, encouraging and learner-centeredness. What is more important that they foster collaboration through a range of different activities such as surveys, role-plays, colouring, filling in the charts and etc. What these different types of projects have in common is their emphasis on student involvement, collaboration, and responsibility. In this respect, project work is similar to the cooperative learning and task-oriented activities that are widely endorsed by educators interested in building communicative competence and purposeful language learning. All in all, they build confidence of learners with involving them variety of tasks that are based on interesting challenging topics in accordance with age group and level of learners.

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