LIVING THE IMAGINARY – APPROACHES TO PROJECT WORK

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Abstract: *In supporting tertiary education engineering students to develop their communicative competence in English, project work has consistently been used, with a range of benefits as far as the students' capacity to work in a team, assume new roles and responsibilities and feel more and more involved in their own learning process are concerned. The study looks at the various facets of project work in an advanced level class of English for Professional Communication. The approach to teaching project work is described, and the various types of student response, due to variability in terms of cultural group, previous background and other features of their individual profile, are analyzed. The students' performance was filmed and projected in class for further group discussion. Moreover, the analyzed project work was used as a mid-term test; therefore, evaluation criteria and their application are also presented.*

Keywords: *project work, imaginary roles, ESP.*

Motto:

'The classroom is no longer four walls and a ceiling occupied by a tiny sliver of the population. It is the beginning of a cosmically interconnected journey toward the future.'
Rita J. King, EVP of Business Development at Science House

1. Why project work in ESP? - Theoretical background

When the importance and value of *project work* in developing a person's *imagination* is under focus, one cannot disregard the literature opinion (Hutchinson, 13), that emphasizes the fact that it encourages an array of features such as initiative, independence, self-discipline, co-operation and other useful research skills. Within language courses for engineering students it is therefore paramount to find time for curricular slots meant to develop their creativity, power of enquiry and self-expression – all these aspects will be needed later on in the students' professional development.

A similar correlation between the ability to develop imaginative innovative thinking and your chances of professional and personal success can be found with other authors who approached this issue (Churchill, paras. 2- 3). The mechanism taking place points out the possibility that one's imagination should expand and strengthen more if the person takes into consideration not the reality already existing around but mainly potential features of the analyzed context, as progress results from "delving into our own ignorance to find new opportunities". That project work is able to "ignite students' imagination" is confirmed in the literature by many voices (Patton, 58, quoting Sir Ken Robinson).

The engagement of the learners in a dynamic manner is the key towards fostering their triad consisting of: imagination, creativity and enquiry. Moreover, as pointed out frequently in the literature on the human imagination (Hamilton, in his

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volume), working together with peers and discussing ideas, solutions and alternatives for solving a problem will develop the team members' interests and natural talents to a higher extent than individual approaches.

We are now preparing our students for the "Imagination Age", as put by experts (Hansen, paras. 4 – 8, interview with Rita J.King), and it is precisely the role of educators to identify the best ways to achieve that, by helping the learners to "collectively imagine and create the future we want to inhabit".

The stages of the intricate process of building up an idea into a successful working plan may prevent some people from trying to make the effort of innovating; therefore, it is part of the *teacher's role* to systematically try to educate the trainees' imagination and have it put at work in teams, thus preparing them "for the reality of a collaborative future" (Hansen, op. cit.)

2. Preparing project work - various components

Project work meant to stimulate the students' imagination is a line of the instructional process that requires serious *preparation* from various perspectives, as well as a considerable amount of time devoted to it – which is, we believe, worth giving as the approach can thus become really useful against the general course background objectives.

The project work described in this study is conducive to obtaining 40% of the term grade, therefore in the general economy of the course a three/four-week preparation time is well justified. The *pre-teaching* involved is briefly described below, together with the paradigm of principles underlying the rationale for it.

The activity was initially suggested by the course book in use (Blându, Catană, S., et al., 38), but it was considerably amended from two perspectives:

(i) it involved several seminars devoted to preparing the learners in view of facing the various aspects of project work from the linguistic point of view, as well as from aspects such as

(ii) presenting one's business; preparing written materials of the company advertising type (brochures, leaflets); working on the project as a group; presenting one's project orally; being aware of the evaluation criteria for project work.

The format of the project work task - as it was amended - is given below:

Company - Project Work

•*You are a group of four engineering graduates about to start your own company which will have at least four departments.*

•*First, decide on: company name, location, logo, and line of business.*

•*Second, decide on the structure of the company and draw its organigram.*

•*Finally, appoint a position to each member of your group and establish their responsibilities.*

•*In each group, the student holding the highest position in the hierarchy will introduce the new company to the whole class.*

The *pre-teaching stages* consisted in a spate of tasks/chains of tasks focused on each of the elements presented above in point of topic, with the four integrated skills of reading, writing, listening and writing in turn under stress. The key features that were taken into consideration in selecting the task input were based on key ideas to be found in the literature of each of the aspects.

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To begin with, the students were suggested *tips for presenting one's business* (Vercillo, paras. 2 – 6): "1. Get organized. 2. Practice what you are going to say. Out loud. To an audience. 3. Research the client. 4. Anticipate questions and concerns. 5. Trust your business." They were actually given a larger list with possible tips and they were asked to reduce it to the ones they consider really important, discussing in groups and justifying their options – a good preparation stage for their further team cooperation.

In the second place, as they were to *design their advertising materials* for the company, they analyzed samples of such materials from the point of view of their form, use and content (Wu, Cadence, paras. 1 – 2). The main skill under focus was listening to a description of various brochures and matching them with the images at their disposal. Also, they were asked to extract the main features associated with high quality written materials of this type and generate a checklist for their design. Both the linguistic aspect and the visual one were discussed, and the materials generated by the students as homework at individual level were remarkably attractive visually, while being at the same time original products, and not copy-pasted ones from online sources. Issues such as the ethics of creating their concepts and the risks they would assume in case of plagiarism were made known to the students.

Another aspect that was pre-taught was that connected with developing and refining the students' *oral presentation skills*. A range of important aspects to be considered in making a presentation in front of an audience were reviewed, based on a selection (Storz et al., 2) covering preparation, structuring, visual aids, audience connected issues, nonverbal communication, voice and pronunciation. We started from the so-called *off-the-cuff presentation*s, which were filmed and then (critically!) analyzed by the students themselves, and passed to assigning a topic and giving each student time enough to prepare in order to make a longer presentation – in fact the various parts of a presentation were assigned to a group of four students, as a preparation phase for the project which maintained the same group structure.

Collaborative work was also under focus, with the students working in groups on activities meant to raise their awareness of *group work values* (Australian Universities Teaching Community & Centre for The Study of Higher Education, 1 – 2): "educational benefits, development of analytical, collaborative, organizational, cognitive and time management skills". Moreover, as shown in the literature (University of Wollongong, para.1 - quoted in Australian Universities Teaching Community & Centre for The Study Of Higher Education), under proper conditions group work "encourages peer learning and peer support". Having read and discussed input materials on these topics, the students were asked to write an opinion essay listing *pros and cons of individual vs collaborative work*.

The last pre-teaching session was devoted to deciding on the best way of *evaluating team project work*. Various possibilities were briefly analyzed and negotiated upon, and the favoured option (Australian Universities Teaching Community & Centre for The Study Of Higher Education, Table 1, quoting Winchester-Seeto) was selected. It consisted of a combination of group average and individual mark. It allows for an amount of adjustment for individual contributions, with the main advantage that it is seen by the learners as more fair than the shared group mark. Adversely, the teacher has a higher responsibility in setting the very clear procedures and in negotiating the adjustment quota.

An additional aspect referred to the criteria used for *assessing the team work quality* (Galileo Educational Network, 1 – 2). Thus, a set of good practice rules were

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prompted to the students before they embarked upon the actual project work, which stressed the rights and/or duties of all team members in the activity, decision-making options, necessity to "adjust to unforeseen circumstances" and last, but certainly not least, particularly with students coming from a variety of cultural backgrounds – as the groups in the educational context described are, i.e. first-year engineering students of the Faculty of Engineering in Foreign Languages of the Bucharest Polytechnic - that it is a positive thing that "team members should use their diversity to build strength".

It was only the pre-teaching period was over that the students were asked to produce the materials within the project, and each group was given the necessary time to *present their company*. The presentations were filmed and the brochures were printed, and the teacher checked all the materials against plagiarism.

3. Analysis of students' filmed oral presentations and written materials

After the oral presentations in groups and the analysis by the teacher of the written materials designed within the projects, a range of *topics for further class discussion*, based on the presentations and the quality of the material designed, was put forth, at the team level, as contrasted with the individual level:

- in point of each *team*: relationships of coordination and subordination; decision making; precise share of responsibility; consistency between work/quality of written materials produced and presentation/delivery style and quality against the established grading criteria; originality vs plagiarism;
- at *individual* level, viz. per each student: personal involvement; preparation time allotted; personal processing of team decisions; originality seen as the *personal touch*.

To synthetically present the results of the discussions and of the teacher's remarks, there were several *main features* that emerged as typical from the analysis of the *written materials* – brochures and/or leaflets of the company created by the team (see samples in Figure 1), as follows:

- cases in which the entire written material had been copied-pasted from online sources available, in one case – see bottom right in the figure – without even bothering/knowing how to design the format in order to make it look be credible;
- cases in which parts of the written material had been 'inspired' or directly copy-pasted from online sources (organigram – see top left in the figure, logo, slogan or the share of one (or more) team members – see bottom left in the figure), while the rest was original material – as confirmed by the presence of errors of language in most of the cases;
- cases, quite numerous in fact, of original ideas embedded in 'borrowed' formats – a good example – see top left in the figure – being the brochure in which the students replaced the photos from the copied source with their own photos, and in fact nobody actually blamed them for that, as it was considered that, since they maintained an expected format of the organigram, they should not be blamed for that, provided that their own contribution were visible from the other components, which happened in that particular case.

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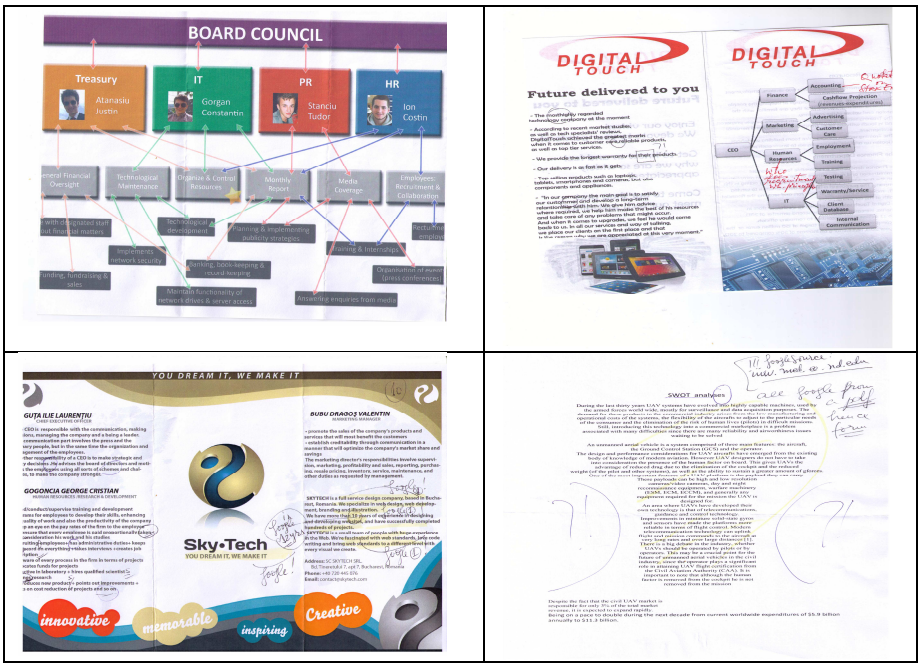


Figure 1. Samples of group generated written materials

To conclude on the results of the teams in point of the written materials, few – if any – were purely original, highly imaginative, creations. On the other hand, the really original parts had errors, generally due to causes such as: language level, cultural differences among the group peers, mere negligence a.s.o.

There were about 50% of the cases in which there was not a unique conception of the material. A good example (see bottom left in the figure) is that of a group in which two students had two opposite approaches, viz. while the one on the left copied-pasted almost all his share of the text, the right side text comes from the student – the rather numerous language mistakes are good evidence for that – regrettably!

As the written materials were analyzed and graded in conjunction with the evaluation of the filmed oral presentations, we should remark that there was not real substantial consistency between the quality of the work on the written materials and that of the oral presentations at both individual and team level. Therefore, we were quite unable to precisely correlate the variables to be taken into consideration when it came to grading the students, as there were cases, for instance, of groups that had a lower level written material, but they somehow compensated it with a qualitative delivery of the presentations.

Therefore, due to the limited space available, we will discuss oral presentations quality, and, implicitly, their potential role in developing the learners' imagination, only in very general lines.

Thus, in those cases where the leader elected had a stronger, more definite personality, the team was stronger as well, which was conducive to better presentations, whether that happened in a relaxed style, or in a more formal, controlled manner – in

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any case, all the members entered the imaginative game proposed by the leader and tried hard to adjust to the created context as much as possible.

Moreover, to add credibility to the performance, two groups even came to the class adequately dressed for a business presentation, thus enhancing the plausibility by means of the appearance and formal dress code, consistent with their delivery style.

Students from other cultures (for example from Asian or Arabic countries/cultures) generally integrated well in group work with the Romanian colleagues, although in most cases their performance at individual level was imbued with cultural connotations, which added value and by no means diminished the quality of their work.

4. Conclusions – importance of project work

Two perspectives should be mentioned as conclusive remarks - that of the *teacher* and that of the *students*.

The latter emerged from the post project presentation discussions, as they were asked to write a reflection text on the good and 'not so good' points in their project work in teams, as a follow-up to the module. In general, the students estimated that the project work had been well guided and that they had received plenty of support. One aspect they required more information about was the one connected with the ethics of the profession, deontology and anti-plagiarism. They appreciated that they had worked without major problems and that the experience could be useful to them in their profession collaborative approaches. They considered that the grades they had received observed the pre-established criteria.

The teacher's perspective confirmed the usefulness of the decision to allot around 40 % of the course time to the activities meant to enhance the students' imagination and creativity, features which are significant items on the list of *soft skills* the future engineers really need to possess at the stage when they get their first employment. If this happens while at the same time the trainees are developing their skills of English, it means that the educational objectives of the trainer have been fulfilled.

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