FOSTERING CREATIVITY AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS THROUGH PROJECT WORK

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Abstract

One of the important desiderata of tertiary level engineering education is the correlation between the technical and the humanistic components. From among the activities that can create a bridge between these two components, while also fostering the students' cooperation, creativity and research skills is project work. In the foreign language class, project work is perceived as a complex activity that involves the skills of reading, speaking, listening and writing, at the end of which a certain 'product' is obtained: a leaflet, a brochure, a newspaper article, a report, a poster, a video clip, a series of slides, a real technical device.

The advantages of cooperative projects in the foreign language class are many and have been highlighted in the literature: they help students learn and foster their creativity, autonomy and responsibility; projects combine work in class with research and surveys performed in the 'real world', thus replicating genuine investigation processes; since learners work in groups, this activity contributes to the creation and development of a team spirit; such activities reduce the students' anxiety associated with communicating their ideas in the foreign language to an audience, thus contributing to the development of their public speaking skills.

This paper will present an overview of the literature on the use of project work in the English classroom and will share the author's experience regarding the implementation of projects in the English seminar, focusing on the steps followed.

Keywords: project work, oral communication skills, creativity, autonomy, team spirit.

Introduction

One of the important aims of the English syllabus is the development of the students' ability to participate in international social and professional interactions. This aim is in accordance with the demands of the present-day world, in which ability to work in multi-national teams has become a must. To communicate with their fellow professionals all over the world, the graduates of tomorrow need to use an international language, such as English, both in social and professional interactions. Therefore, it is very important to develop our students' general communication skills and particularly their speaking skills and

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to create a climate in which they can cooperate, generate, share, defend and test their ideas, take responsibility, develop research skills, create various end 'products'. One way of doing this, experimented in some of my classes is the introduction of cooperative projects.

The idea of using project work in the foreign English class in our universities emerged in the mid 1990's during one of the meetings of the materials coordinators as part of PROSPER (Project for Special Purpose English in Romania), a project that involved several (technical and business) applied English departments in Romanian universities under the coordination of the British Council.

During that meeting it was decided to introduce project work as a complex, integrated-skills activity, involving reading, speaking, listening and writing. From a pedagogic point of view, this type of activity refers to a modality of learning and research through practical action, the purpose of which is the creation and presentation of a theme-project: a leaflet, a brochure, a newspaper article, a report, a poster, a video clip, a series of slides, a real technical device.

Why Project Work?

Foreign language projects can come in different forms: a) information and research projects;
b) survey projects; c) production projects; d) performance projects. Irrespective of their type, projects in the foreign language class come with a series of advantages over other activities, which have been pointed out by many authors, either in a theoretical, sometimes even prescriptive manner, or in a practical way, starting from one's own experience (Fried-Booth 1986; Olsen & Kagan 1992; Papandreou 1994; Sheppard & Stroller 1995; Iftimie 2007):

1. *Project work helps students learn*. While gathering data for the project, students need to gather and find out information or data they did not know before from printed or electronic sources, from their teachers or from peers. At the same time, each project is required to bring some degree of novelty to the audience; therefore, projects will contribute to the overall learning process.
2. *Projects increase the students' autonomy and responsibility.* The students work for their projects both in and out-of-class, but the main weight falls on their out-of-class work. This means that they take the main responsibility for deciding on the final 'product', for gathering information, deciding on the manner in which they introduce and conclude their presentation, the visual aids (realia, slides, poster, leaflet, etc.).
3. *Projects foster the students' creativity.* Such projects offer them the opportunity to put their talents to work. This is especially true in the last two types of projects presented above, i.e. production and performance projects: production projects have an original end product (an electronic device, the scale model of a building, a brochure. a newspaper page, a

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technical advertisement), which is the tangible result of the students' ingenuity and creativity; performance projects are finalized through the presentation of a brief show by the group members, in the course of which they display their creativity and artistic talent. Even the first two types – research and survey projects – foster the students' creativity because the presentation of their project is accompanied by a visual – slides, a poster – which is the result of their creativity.

4. *Project work increases the students' motivation and their involvement*. If students are free to choose the topic of their project out of several broad areas, they will be motivated to pursue their special interests, tackle a puzzling area or satisfy a curiosity; as such, they will be more involved in what they are doing. This is different from the usual classroom activities, which are established by the teacher and/or the course book used.
5. *Projects contribute to the creation of a team spirit.* Most projects in the foreign language class are cooperative projects, i.e. they are carried out in teams of 2-4 students. By working
in teams, students establish and/or develop interpersonal relations with other group members.
6. *Project work is more authentic than other tasks.* In order to carry out their project, students go out into the world to make surveys or gather information which is analyzed, evaluated by all the team members and is finally presented to an audience. In case the end result is a technical device, the main features of the 'prototype' are presented to a knowledgeable public (other students), entitled to ask questions about the parameters or the functioning of that particular device and about its originality.
7. *Projects offer a break from the usual classroom routine.* Each step in the unfolding of such projects brings something new and unexpected for the participants.
8. *Project work is a challenging activity.* Students generally dislike routine and like to be challenged. If the topic chosen is in conformity with the students' interest, they will try to do their best to successfully complete the task.
9. *Projects develop the four language skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening*. In the first three types of projects, students need to gather, read and select information from printed or electronic sources. Then they need to write an outline of their presentation and create their visual aids. During the presentation of their project, they speak, listen to their peers' questions or comments and answer them. The only exception is represented by performance projects, in which the skills developed are speaking and listening.
10. *Project work reduces the students' anxiety related to communicating*

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their ideas in front of a class and develops their public speaking skills. Since all group members participate in the project, each knows what the project is about. Part of the teacher's task is to raise the students' awareness on various delivery styles and train them on effective public speaking techniques. Moreover, since they are supposed to rehearse the presentation, before they actually deliver it to an audience, the students feel much more secure and less threatened by stage fright. They can then transfer these presentation techniques onto other oral presentations, be they in Romanian or in a foreign language.

While preparing their projects and oral presentations, the learners develop a number of skills, such as:

1. *Research skills*. The information presented in projects needs to be accurate, and this involves doing some research. This may be done in various ways: browsing through the materials that can be found in the library – reference materials, periodicals, books –, surfing the internet for sources of information, using firsthand observation. Students may also need to devise research instruments (questionnaires or interview questions) and sometimes statistical methods for analyzing and interpreting results.
2. *Organizational skills.* After gathering information, the students need to arrange the material they want to present in a clear and coherent manner, using the traditional tripartite structure (introduction, body and conclusion). They also need to decide about the order in which they deliver the presentation (who is going to speak about what and in which order). In this way, they acquire and/or develop organizational skills, which are very important for the success of any project and also for their professional career.
3. *Interpersonal skills.* These skills are developed through working in a team and cooperating with the other team members in order to carry out the project. Cooperation means dividing responsibilities, sharing ideas, accepting criticism and contrary opinions, having a flexible mind, making the transition from 'mine' to 'ours'. As shown by Iftimie, the "success or failure of a group project depends to a great extent upon the cooperation and coordination level within the team and upon the individual preparation and effort of each participant" (2007: 277).
4. *Communication skills.* Presenting one's project in a clear and attractive manner involves effective public speaking techniques. Such techniques refer to verbal, paraverbal (volume of voice, speed, pitch, clarity of pronunciation, energy level) and nonverbal elements (eye contact, posture, facial expression, gestures). While planning and practicing their presentations, the learners develop the ability to speak to an audience in a clear, coherent, attractive and enthusiastic manner.

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The Context

I am currently teaching students from the Faculty of Electronics, Telecommunications and Information Technology from Iași Technical University. All freshmen and sophomore students in this faculty study English as a compulsory subject, for one or two hours a week, depending on the semester. They are divided into two levels of proficiency: advanced (ranging in fact from intermediate to advanced) and beginners (ranging from real beginners to lower intermediate). Project work has been introduced to sophomore students as part of their assessment for the second semester, in the course of which we meet for the English seminar every other week, on Wednesday afternoon. Many students have had no experience in doing project work and/or in delivering oral presentations during the foreign language class. That is why I take a step-by-step approach in teaching them how develop projects, as well as how to plan, organize, prepare and deliver the oral presentations by means of which they present the projects.

As pointed out above, delivering a presentation to an audience presupposes communication on three planes: verbal, paraverbal and non-verbal. Therefore, when teaching our students how to develop projects and make efficient oral presentations we need to take into account all the factors concerning preliminary search strategy, generating ideas, planning content, organizing information, developing the project, delivering a presentation, using appropriate language functions and exponents, using visual aids.

Opinions and recommendations regarding the number and the sequencing of steps involved in developing projects differ in the literature (cf. Fried-Booth 1986; Haines: 1989; Dumanova: 1993; Sheppard & Stroller 1995; Iftimie: 2013), depending on the context in which it is implemented. In what follows I shall present the steps followed and the procedure applied in developing projects at "Gheorghe Asachi" University in Iași.

The Process: Stages in Project Development

Providing a stimulus

This stage is one of the most important in setting up a project: if the initial idea is given by the teacher at the right time in a convincing manner, it will gear lots of other ideas in the unfolding of project work. Without sounding patronizing, it is clear that our persuasive ability depends in fact on how much we, as teachers, believe in the advantages of project work.

This stage involves several aspects:

a) *Introducing the concept of project work and oral presentation*. This is done starting from the learners' previous experience: the students discuss in small groups about their previous experience (if any) in developing projects and/or in making oral presentations in English or Romanian. During their discussion, they are required to cover the following aspects:

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type of project, topic, subject matter, type of end product, number of students per group, type of presentation (Power Point presentation, a written report that was read aloud, etc), audience, the pleasures and pains of such an endeavour. Each group is then invited to name a spokesperson who will present a brief report of the group's experience in making project work. This is followed by a class discussion on the short and long term benefits of developing communication skills through project work.

b) *Number of students per group.* This number (2-4 students) is given by the teacher, but the students themselves can choose their partners.
c) *Amount of time.* Each project presentation should be limited to 10 minutes.
d) *Type of project.* Students can choose from among: information and research projects, survey projects or production projects. Performance projects are no longer included in the second semester because, for about three years now, they have been materialized towards the end of the first semester in a short Christmas play interpreted by a group of students who are part of the Electronics English Club.
e) *Type of end product.* Depending on the project type, the end product may be an electronic or electrical device, a scale model, a brochure, a questionnaire-based survey, a series of slides, a poster.
f) *Timescale.* At the end of each seminar, 15-20 minutes are allotted to project work. A whole seminar is allotted for the presentation of projects. In-class activity is correlated with work out-of-class, which represents, in fact the greatest bulk of project-devoted work.
g) *Assessment procedure.* Each project presentation is assessed by the teacher and a committee of students from a different year of study. The students in the audience will also have a say: they can ask questions or make comments that will be taken into account in the evaluation of projects.
h) *Assessment criteria.* The assessment criteria include the end product and the oral presentation as such: delivery, content, organization, language (accuracy and fluency), visual material, integration of the visual with the presentation as such. If for the end product and the visual all the students in one team will get the same grade, the elements which refer to the oral presentation may be graded differently for different students belonging to one and the same group).
i) *Themes.* During this initial stage, learners are also suggested a choice of possible themes: *Electronic Product Presentation; The City of the Future (Underwater City Project; Outer Space City Project);The Car of the Future; Student Life (Life in the Hostel; Sports Practiced by Students; Students' Shopping Habits; Students' Food Habits).* They can choose other themes, as well. A major requirement for each project is novelty, which means that mere compilations from various sources are not welcome.

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The 'incubation' period

The initial stage is followed by a period of 'incubation'of two weeks (until the next seminar), during which the learners form their groups and decide on the topic of their project. From my experience, I believe that this is the optimum interval: if the thinking period is longer, students tend to forget about the need to take this decision in due time. During this period they can also note down any queries they have regarding various aspects of project work.

Identifying the theme and topic

The 'incubation' period proves to be fruitful for the students: the freedom of choice of the topic increaseas the learners' motivation and creates a feeling of 'ownership', which makes the students in each group become more involved and committed to carrying out this task.

From the point of view of the type, the students' projects fall under the three categories mentioned above: a) information and research projects; b) survey projects; c) production projects. Within each type, the main themes identified are:

a) Information and research projects: *Car of the Future (Hybrid and Electric Vehicles, Electric Smart Car, Car Technologies, Self-Driving Cars); City of the Future (Architecture in the city of the Future, The House of the Future, Transport in the city of the Future); Energy (Solar Power, Wind Power); Technological Advances (Upcoming Technologies, Innovative Technology, The Future of Electronics, Wireless Power Transfer, Quantum Computing);*
b) Survey projects: *Student Life (Students and Jobs; Students in My Town/Students in Another Town; Students Today and before 1989);*
c) Production Projects: *Product Design and Presentation* (*Electronic Devices, Automatic Temperature Control System).*

The existence of different types of projects and different themes in one and the same English class renders the teacher's task more challenging, both as a consultant and as an evaluator. However, the similarity of the project presentation framework (an oral presentation supported by slides), as well as the existence of a clear set of evaluation criteria are meant to help the teacher overcome such difficulties.

Organizing project work

The next step consists in making an action plan: the members of each team identify the problems they have to solve in order to reach the desired outcome. As such, they decide upon:

a) steps to be taken;
b) ways of collecting information (library search, the Internet, discussions with specialized subject teachers, interviews, questionnaires);
c) the role of each group member;
d) an agreed time frame (corroborated with the one given by the teacher).

The teacher's role at this stage is that of an organizer, consultant and monitor: she supervises the students' activity and offeres them advice and information

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when necessary. Once the students have agreed upon the instruments for collecting data, they start devising them with the help of the teacher (questionnaires, interview questions, tables, grids, charts).

Gathering information

In order to collect data for their projects, the students are 'sent out into the world': they go to the library, various institutions, speak with subject teachers, employers, graduates or colleagues or surf the Internet. Information is gathered both in class – the teacher and the students bring books, magazine or newspaper articles, technical advertisements – and out-of-class, the main weight falling on the out-of-class activity, performed by students in their spare time.

Determining subject, purpose and audience

The students are presented the three important elements of any oral or written text, reunited under the acronym SPA (subject, purpose and audience). In other words, the learners are advised to select and limit their subject, identify their purpose and analyze their audience (Iftimie, N. M., & Chang, Wan-lih 2008). When the subject is not imposed in advance (the case presented in this article), it should fall into the speakers' area of expertise, be interesting for the potential listeners and should be covered in the given amount of time (10 minutes). The purpose of any presentation, either oral or written may be that of informing, persuading, entertaining, or a combination of these. In the case of technical or scientific presentations, the main purpose is generally that of informing; however, even in such presentations, persuading and/or entertaining can appear as related purposes. In order to make my students better understand these purposes, I ask them to read some fragments of oral presentations, decide which purpose/purposes is/are displayed by each fragment and give reasons for their decision. The third element, the audience, is generally neglected by teachers because in the case of school or university projects the audience is generally representad by the teachers themselves and by students. In real life, however, the audience becomes an extremely important element each speaker should take into account and adjust his/her presentation accordingly. The audience characteristics will influence our choice of subject, the vocabulary we use, the amount of technical information, the examples and details meant to prove a point. That is why I always ask the learners to take into account the characteristics of the audience and draw the listeners' profile in terms of age range, gender, nationality, education level, occupation, technical background, level of English, number, seating arrangements. After having agreed on their audience's profile, the students work in groups to devise a list of project topics that might be suitable for an oral presentation delivered to their class, including the topic they have already chosen. Then they swap their lists with another group and evaluate their peers' topics against the framework provided by the audience profile. If the topic they have thought of is considered unsuitable by the peers, it will be reformulated.

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Organizing the presentation

The next step consists in planning and organizing the project and the oral presentation according to the three part structure: introduction, body and conclusion. For each part sample texts are used, discussed and analyzed in terms of functions, specific techniques and language patterns. Taking into account the fact that in order to get the listeners' attention and create common ground it is necessary to build what may be called a 'strong' introduction, students are offered some tips on how to introduce their presentation by using various attention getters – a personal story, a surprising or unusual fact, an interesting example, a quotation from an authority or expert, impressive statistics (Matthews & Marino 1990: 6). The conclusion is also very important and should leave a strong impression on the audience. Therefore, I recommend my students to devise a conclusion that could reinforce the main ideas, while at the same time giving the audience some 'food for thought' by asking a puzzling question that might be answered to in a follow-up presentation, by inviting the listeners to reflect on the past and speculate about the future, or by inviting the audience to take a course of action (in the case of topics dealing with environmental issues). As practical activity, the students read several opening and ending passages of oral presentations and decide which technique is used in each fragment. In what concerns the central part of any presentation, the body, starting from the ideas presented by Matthews and Marino, I give the students examples that display different patterns of organizing information: *topical order* (classification); *chronological order* (giving instructions, explaining a procedure); *spatial order* (describing a building, describing an object); *problem-solution* (describing the problem, giving solutions) *cause-effect* (explaining causes, explaining effects); *reasons for and against*; *comparison/contrast* (1990:101-105). At this point, I also introduce the specific language functions and corresponding exponents. In order to facilitate the students' intake, two types of tasks are used: one is a matching activity – the learners have a list of topics and match them to the appropriate pattern of organization; in the other task the students are given several large subject areas and are asked to work in groups and develop each subject into two different topics, each with a clear central idea and a different pattern of organization.

Preparing the presentation

In order to prepare and rehearse their oral presentation, the students are first presented the various types of presentations (manuscript, memorized, impromptu, and extemporaneous) by means of short video clips. While watching the short video exemplifications, the learners are invited to note down the characteristics of each style of delivery, and make comments on possible advantages and disadvantages. The notes made by the students represent the basis for a comparison of the various formats and a discussion about their pluses and minuses, starting from criteria such as preparation time, natural delivery, eye contact, keeping the audience's interest. After comparing the characteristics of

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each style, the students become aware of the effectiveness of extemporaneous presentations, which are carefully planned and well organized, but not learned by heart. Among the advantages of such presentations, mention can be made of the following: natural, conversational delivery; eye contact with the audience; the potential of permanent feedback from the listeners; the possibility to adjust one's presentation according to this feedback.

The same session is devoted to the presentation of the other elements involved in oral presentations that can convey meaning and reveal one's emotions and attitude: paraverbal elements (volume of voice, pitch, clarity, speed of delivery) and nonverbal elements (posture, facial expressions, gestures, eye contact). Some short videos are used to show the students that paraverbal and nonverbal elements can be very helpful in making an effective delivery, or, if misused, can damage a whole presentation. After watching the video clips, the students are required to write some guidelines or instructions for effective delivery. This is followed by a class discussion during which a common list of guidelines is agreed upon. The students are then asked to work in small groups of four or five and deliver a two-minute presentation on a topic of their choice. Their presentation is discussed and evaluated by the other group members on the basis of the list of guidelines. The rationale for this activity is that it allows the learners to put to practice what they have just been taught about effective delivery in a non-threatening, friendly environment.

The final touch

There is an element that has not been yet spoken about: the visual aid. In the case of the projects made by the engineering students from our university, the visual aids are represented by slides (Power Point presentation), by a poster and/or by realia. The role of the visual is to reinforce, complete, clarify and make more interesting and pleasant the information presented in speech. Some recent studies show that an audience generally takes in less than 25% of what a speaker says. Visual aids can increase the rate of the listeners' intake and comprehension.

This does not mean, however, that we should use visuals for their own sake. I always tell my students that visuals have to have a purpose, and that their purpose is not to repeat the speakers' words. if the slides, for example, include the very words the speakers are uttering, it means that either the speakers or the slides are redundant. The visual material needs to be integrated naturally in the presentation so as to help the speakers make their points clear.

The final step of the project preparation consists in devising an evaluation checklist with the help of the students themselves. In broad lines, the list includes the following: novelty of end product, delivery, content and organization, language (accuracy and fluency), visual aids. All these aspects are graded from 1(unsatisfactory) to 5 (excellent).

Students are advised to rehearse their project presentations, both individually and as a team. While doing this, they should take into account both

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the vocal and the visual elements. In order to cover all aspects, students can take a step-by- step approach: first rehearse what they are going to say, then how they are going to say it and finally combine both aspects. If a video camera is not available, students are advised to use a tape recorder and to rehearse their presentation in front of an "objective eye" or at least in front of the mirror. The aspects that should be taken into account are the following: language (correct and fluent); voice (volume, speed, pitch, clarity, energy level/enthusiasm, sloppy speech habits); body language (posture, facial expressions, gestures, eye contact).

Conclusion

The paper has focused on the fostering of creativity and communication skills through project work. It discussed the benefits of project work as presented in the literature and the skills developed by this complex activity. The author then focused on a specific context and shared her experience regarding the implementation of project work in a task-based, step-by-step approach. The philosophy that underpins this approach is that project work is a multi-faceted activity that develops the learners' research, interpersonal, organizational and communication skills, while also fostering their creativity in a friendly, collaborative environment.

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