Project Work at All Levels

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This article focuses on project work as an alternative for language learning and teaching at all levels and in all types of educational programs. It tries to present, in an orderly manner, key aspects teachers should take into consideration to incorporate project work into their teaching, to go online with the process, student-centered, integrative and participatory trends in teaching that our present society requires.

Key words: project work, tasks, language skills, integration, areas, process, curriculum, autonomy.

Este artículo está enfocado en la discusión del Trabajo por Proyectos como una alternativa en el aprendizaje y la enseñanza de lenguas a todos los niveles y en todos los tipos de programas educativos. Se intenta presentar, de manera ordenada, todos los aspectos que los profesores deben tener en cuenta para incorporar el Trabajo por Proyectos a su enseñanza, con el fin de ser partícipes de las tendencias actuales de la enseñanza que enfatizan los procesos, son integradores, están centradas en el estudiante y, como consecuencia, le brindan a este la oportunidad de participar activamente en su enseñanza.

Palabras clave: trabajo por proyectos, tareas, habilidades lingüísticas, integración, áreas, proceso, currículo, autonomía.

1. Introduction

The Communicative Approach and of some of the humanistic approaches to language teaching emphasize the student as the center of the learning-teaching process. One change associated with theses approaches is the active role students play in the classroom. Together with this important change is the growing emphasis on research, contextualization, integration of different areas and the use of language as a means to knowledge. All these aspects are represented in project work, a "mode of teaching" that has found its way into our classrooms and educational institutions, establishing a link between classroom life and life outside.

Legutke and Thomas (1991) describe projects, in the educational field, as

> "a collection of a large variety of tasks, each with a specific objective, focusing on either topic information, or 'real - life' operational skills, or contacts with native speakers, or practicing language in terms of structure, lexis and skill, or planning and monitoring the process" (p. 167).

The same authors (1991) express that project learning entails the emphasis on tasks around a theme and the participation of students and teachers in the whole process, from goal and procedure definition to evaluation. The authors emphasize the autonomous, dynamic, experiential and holistic characteristics of this type of learning and teaching, which, in their own words, "bridges the dualism between body and mind, theory and practice" (p.160).

In the national context, project work has also been considered as a desirable educational option. The Colombian General Education Law, in its regulating decree 1860 (Art. 36 of decree 1860, Aug. 3, 1994), proposes among its curricular orientations the use of pedagogical projects, which it defines as

> ...una actividad dentro del plan de estudios que de manera planificada ejercita al educando en la solución de problemas cotidianos seleccionados por tener relación direc- ta con el entorno social, cultural, científico y tecnológico del alumno. Cumple la fun- ción de correlacionar, integrar y hacer activos los conocimientos, habilidades destrezas, actitudes y valores logrados en el desarrollo de diversas áreas, así como de la experiencia acumulada. (p. 202)

1.2 Origins and evolution

Although project-based work has become popular in our academic environment fairly recently (in the last two decades), its origins lie in the work of Dewey and

Kilpatrick (1916-18) in the USA, and in the work of some German educators at the end of World War II. Project work was adopted by several countries and expanded in Europe in the 60's and 70's. Nowadays, although project-based learning is not a natural part of mainstream education, it is often found in the curriculum of many educational institutions.

1.3 Characteristics

Project work is a collaborative instructional approach. It is an interdisciplinary way of learning because it goes beyond the limits of academic subjects and areas. In the words of Kagan and Kagan (1998), projects are "real life extensions of the curriculum" (p.20). They are an opportunity for students to use and expand their knowledge and apply skills developed earlier in their educational experience.

Some authors and practitioners think that project work is most appropriate in the early stages of instruction, probably with more guidance on the part of the teachers. This has become a common practice at the elementary level, usually in private institutions. Others advocate the use of project work at all levels, as an informal part of the curriculum in which students exercise autonomy and carry out their work without much involvement on the part of the teacher and as a complement of systematic instruction. The use of project work with advanced students and adults involves a higher degree of freedom in terms of topics and possibilities of integration because there are fewer curriculum limitations. In any case, project work should not be treated as a short- lived fad but as an important and vital option in active learning and integrative teaching.

Stemming from its more salient characteristics (its interdisciplinary nature, the fostering of collaborative work and research and the promotion of autonomous work) and from its contact with life outside the classroom, project work exhibits some other characteristics such as freedom of the settings because learning, and tasks in general, happen both inside and outside of the classroom, adding variety to the learning process. To this, we can add the authenticity of activities, which leads to the use of language in real and unpredictable situations that permits the students to integrate all their skills and experience real needs for language use. Finally, the variety of perspectives with which a topic is developed because of its cross- curricular nature allows an integration of areas and tasks and a holistic view of learning and increases the opportunities for research.

Projects provide the learners with opportunities to solve problems or develop products through processes they plan and carry out; these processes demand from them skills to plan, organize, negotiate, express their viewpoints, reach agreements

on tasks and procedures, assign roles and decide what and how to present results or products. As a result, academic and life skills are practiced and enhanced. Kilpatrick (1918) states that projects were the ideal opportunity for materializing ideas, enjoying experiences, solving problems and developing knowledge.

Project work may contribute to learner autonomy by making learners responsible for the planning, development and evaluation of their projects; all this contributes to their empowerment because it gives them control and responsibility for their own learning. Another advantage of project work is that it combines the strengths, learning styles and strategies of all members of the groups, thus enriching the work with the best contribution from everyone.

Projects can be of different lengths, according to the role they play in the curriculum. Small-scale or short-term projects are usually less demanding than longer projects; they may take a class session, a few hours or a couple of weeks and are usually class projects, developed by the whole group of students in a class, all working on the same topic. Full- scale or long-term projects, on the other hand, may take a few weeks, one class every week for several months or half a school year and may involve more than one teacher and more than one group of students; therefore, they are a perfect opportunity for cooperation among teachers conducting English courses and those teaching subjects in other areas. Moreover, such interdisciplinary cooperation is beneficial, not only by contributing to students' language development and to the production of teaching materials, but also to better relations among teachers and a better comprehension of facts, happenings and concepts from the perspective of other disciplines. In any case, projects may be flexible in time, and open to modifications according to the development of activities on the part of the students.

One of the obvious advantages of project work in language teaching is the integration of skills; specific types of projects, specific stages, and different levels involve the use and integration of particular skills. In most cases, however, project work requires a considerable amount of speaking and listening in the form of discussion, negotiation and interviewing. Furthermore, reading and writing play a very important role in researching, interview design, observation recording and report writing.

Fried-Booth (1986) presents a clear overview of skills used at all stages of project work. She considers the **input** or **stimulus**, in which students and teachers decide on the topics by discussing ideas, comments and suggestions. This stage uses mainly oral skills (speaking and listening), although reading may have an

important place, especially in whole language projects in which the stimulus usually takes the form of a reading text.

In the next step, the **definition of the project objective,** the main language skills in use are speaking and listening for discussion and negotiation; writing will probably take the form of note-taking. Before and while the students engage in the tasks that actually develop the project, **practice of language skills** takes place. It is important that teachers do not overlook this stage, in which the language the students and the teacher feel is needed for the initial part of the project is studied or reviewed overtly or implicitly. This stage usually involves the four skills because students will probably need help to review specific vocabulary items or specific grammar structures to use orally or in writing.

In the **Design of written material** needed for data collection such as interviews or surveys, or in any other activity in the development of the project, such as researching in the library or on the Internet or making notes of observations, reading and writing skills will be predominant. In the development of **group activities** in which students gather information, solve tasks or start producing parts of the project, all four skills are put into practice. Next, depending on the nature of the project, students may have to **collate information;** the most useful skills in this step of the project are reading, speaking and writing, which may involve the use of graphic organizers and graphs for statistics. As the projects are near their end, the **organization of materials** will require much speaking as the end products of projects are developed. Finally, the **presentation or socialization** of projects will undoubtedly require mainly speaking and writing, although listening will also have an important role. Not all projects have the same steps because the type of project determines the way they are framed and developed.

2. Types of projects

Different kinds of projects have been presented which correspond to different focuses such as the type of exchanges or activities involved, the degree of control of the participants, whether students work in them individually, in small groups or as a class, or the type of objective they pursue. Legutke and Thomas (1991, p.161-166) classify projects into the following three categories according to the types of exchanges involved: **Encounter projects,** "…which provide learners with the opportunity to make direct contact with native speakers. " These projects can take place in a FL or a SL environment and the students have direct involvement in the selection of the guests, the choice of topics of conversation, the preparation of interviews and any other activity required for the group to act as hosts . Text

projects, in which "... learners come face to face not with native speakers directly but with the latter's experience and reactions to the world as revealed through text." Most book projects belong to this group; however, books are not the only source of texts used to develop them for short stories, poems, and newspaper articles can also provide interesting texts. Whole language projects fall into this category. Finally, **Class correspondence projects**

> "... involve encounters between L2 learners from different cultures and with native
> speakers of the target language... these encounters are mediated through different texts,
> which are produced for the specific purpose of establishing communicative exchanges
> between groups and individuals under conditions of organized learning" (p.165).

Class correspondence projects include the use and production, on the part of the students, of audio or written texts such as letters, audiotapes, videos, e-mail messages, photographs and chat-sessions; these elements are used and exchanged as part of project work among pupils in different schools, cities or countries.

Several other types of projects have been proposed; the next paragraph presents categories mentioned by other authors.

According to the degree of control exerted by participants, Kolmos (1996) proposes projects that are totally guided by the teacher in terms of planning and timing, projects that are semi-controlled and free projects, those in which students have totally responsibility. Haines (1989) classifies projects as research, survey, production and organization and performance projects, according to the types of activities they involve. Another typology which includes 'Daily life' projects, 'Enterprise' projects and 'Knowledge and competencies' is proposed by Jolibert (1995, en De la Rosa, 2005). Finally, Kagan and Kagan (1998) classify projects in terms of group or individual involvement in 'class', 'team' or 'individual' projects.

3. Topics for Project work

Topics for projects do not necessarily derive from topics or contents in the curriculum (unless the curriculum is project-based). A consideration that should be taken into account is that topics should be closely connected to the students' interests and needs and students should be involved in their selection from the start of the academic year or term. Also, topics should be related to real life. Fried-Booth (1986) mentions some areas of interest which include topics related to local issues, social in nature and concerning people in the immediate environment. A recycling project in which a group of students helps a group of working children in

their community may be an example of this type. Other topics may be related to issues on a global scale such as the manifestations of racial discrimination in different parts of the world or the (relative) importance of water in the life of people on the five continents. Finally, some cultural aspects of the target language, such as the place of pets in the life of the French or the role of family reunions in the American society may be explored in projects.

Explorations of topics proposed by authors such as Holderness (1991), Kagan and Kagan (1998) and Fried Booth (1986), Phillips, Burwood and Dunford (1999), plus my own experience in English language teaching to students and in-service teachers have produced the following list of themes or topics for project work at different levels; these can be developed either as the main curricular approach or as a supplement to a more traditional curriculum:

Holderness (1991, p.20) proposes topics such as school, accidents and safety, toys, books and stories, people, friends, buildings, animals, shops, pets, jobs, transport, clothes, music, families, materials, hobbies, plants, weather, and communications. Kagan and Kagan's list (1998) includes conducting an experiment,   building a model, writing a research paper, writing and performing a play, creating a book/ journal, interviewing, creating a collaborative work of art and training an animal. Their projects seek to foster students' expression through multiple intelligences. Some of the possibilities offered by Fried Booth (1986) are making an apple tart, managing personal budgets, producing tourist brochures, planning and going on expeditions, interviewing people on a specific topic in the streets, and getting involved in community life (hospitals or nursing homes, for example). Phillips, Burwood and Dunford (1999) make proposals of topics to be used with young learners. Some of their topics are picture story, block of flats and fantasy island.

Other topic possibilities for projects to be used at all levels, some of which I have successfully developed with English students at the college level and with language teachers, include the following: parties, sports, countries, food, inventions, neighborhoods, governments, water, fears, reading (or other preferences), teenagers now and then, peoples, love, sex today, the way we are, celebrations, religion and churches, cultures, airports, train bus, looking and overlooking e.g. what we notice and what we decide to ignore, how beauty has enslaved us for ages, life projects or 'I just don't know what to do with myself', and using fame to help others.

Once topics have been selected and distributed (All students may work on one project but several projects may be developed simultaneously by different groups.), procedures must be set up. In **Appendix 1** I share some topics and ideas for project work at different levels.

4. Project work at different levels

The previous section showed the well of possibilities of topic development through project work. Related to this and to the variety of activities and skills projects involved is the possibility of using them at different levels of the learning-teaching process and with different age groups and types of students. Classroom projects have been in use for more than six decades at the elementary and secondary levels because they lend themselves to curriculum integration and to the promotion of experiential learning. Moreover, in the last two decades projects have become a common occurrence at the tertiary level, in EFL, in teacher education and in short courses in 'informal' education. Legutke and Thomas (1991, p.160-165) make reference to a wide variety of projects at the elementary and secondary levels and in EFL programs. Mesa and Frodden (2004) at Universidad de Antioquia and Zuluaga (1993 and 2003) at Universidad del Cauca have carried out project work with undergraduate students in EFL courses.

My experience in EFL teaching and in our Teacher Development program at Universidad del Valle has included projects at different levels, both with fifth and sixth semester students (upper intermediate level) and with elementary and high school teachers, some of which (especially those who work at the elementary level) were beginners in terms of their English proficiency. We have developed text projects with novels, in which apart from the exploitation of the literary work, rich cultural explorations have taken place. We have learnt about history and geography, about culinary traditions and customs, and about migratory movements and religions. In most of these projects, students get in contact with people who belong to other cultures and speak other languages; for example, students got in contact with Chinese people for information about Chinese food and the Chinese language and we even cooked and enjoyed a delicious Chinese dinner after reading a story by Marguerite Yourcenar and developing a project from it. Another group of students interviewed Jews in order to collect information about their traditions and beliefs after reading stories by Sonia Levitin and developing projects from them; we learnt recent American history by reading and developing projects from Song of Solomon by Tony Morrison and The Color Purple by Alice Walker, among other activities. We have also developed projects based on magazine articles such as the Love project (What is Love? Time magazine, February 15 1993), which I presented at the 25th ASOCOPI Conference in 2001 and later developed with a level V group. In this project, one of my students' favorites, we explored many areas in relation to love such as mythology, biochemistry, history, religion, music, etc. Students interviewed their parents to find out about their love story, shared their own stories and

interviewed classmates on this matter. They also produced pieces of art (cards, bookmarkers, dolls, posters, etc.) as love tokens.

We have developed several food projects at different levels, and in their development we have researched and learnt about nutrition, agriculture, the products of our region, the food factories we have, how much the groceries of our 'canasta familiar' (family basket) costs, etc. In a project about clothes, in which we departed from 'Getups', a short story by Maya Angelou, we explored our preferences regarding clothes; we found out how much complete attires of different sorts cost, we learnt about the Civil Rights movement in the USA, the Salvation Army, about patterns and textures in fabrics and about traditional and typical clothes around the world.

5. Steps in project work

Projects have several phases which may vary in number and order. They include the selection of the topic, the definition of a time line, the planning of steps, the distribution of roles and responsibilities, the researching stage, the organization and analysis of findings, the development of products, the sharing of results or products with others and, finally, the evaluation of the project.

Usually, the planning, the assignment of roles, the researching efforts and the handling of results that lead to the final product or report are the entire responsibility of the students. However, low proficiency students may need support from the teacher at the beginning or throughout the development of the project. In all cases, it is important that some of the skills the students need to carry out the activities be reinforced in class (information gathering techniques, for example). It is also necessary -although not widely accepted- for both the teacher and learners to monitor the process, especially in what concerns language use. Fried-Booth (1986, p. 40) offers a format to do this, a kind of self-evaluation form to guide students in the monitoring of their individual language work within the project. Classroom feedback sessions are also advisable to go over the data that are being obtained and to make sure that language use by the students while gathering data is appropriate. This way, we will make sure that we are not downplaying the role of language work in the project.

Another important issue to consider in planning a project is to ask our colleagues for guidance or help in the areas that are naturally related to the topics our students and we are developing. If possible, it is advisable to plan together and see how topics can interrelate and activities can be developed in several subjects, or how activities in classes in other areas may be a backup for the project. Students should also feel free to consult other teachers at school about their projects.

In the development of the series of activities that make up a project, there is a dynamic, communicative process in which, in the words of Legutke and Thomas (1991, p.204),"... goals are determined by the interaction between learners and their expressed interests and needs," and there is "... the constant expansion of experience and knowledge, themes and language through tasks connected on a causal basis. It is also a joint preoccupation of teacher and learners with the management and organization of learning which takes place as a result of the interaction potential of the project classroom". The result of this process is a product which may take the form of something material such as a class directory, a newspaper, a sample of arts and crafts from an ethnic group, a sketch, a brochure, a theater festival, etc. Undoubtedly, there is a close relation between the process and the final product and the effort, interest, organization and quality of interactions in the process would be reflected in the quality of the product.

The presentation of the product or report may be done in class - in a larger context -such as an exhibit- or, as in the case of larger projects, they can be shared with an entire community through publications or shows.

6. Assessment and Evaluation

The evaluation of project-based work is complex because of the multiplicity of tasks and factors that intervene in it; process and products have to be taken into account as well as relationships and degree of involvement. As a result, participation should be given to students as individuals and as teams, without excluding the assessment on the part of the teacher. Legutke and Thomas (1991, p.180) extensively explored the possibilities as regards assessing projects and suggest the inclusion of elements such as topic understanding, group and teacher interaction, procedural organization, input materials, language gains and deficits, examples of learner work, and possible by-products e.g. changes in learners' intercultural awareness. The exclusion of some elements depends on the type of project being evaluated. Assessment of projects can and may be done by all those involved in it: learners as individuals making use of self - evaluation; learners as a group in peer evaluation, and teachers as coordinators and monitors of the processes.

Moss and Van Duzer (2001, p.2) suggest the use of small group discussion with guided questions such as "What did your classmates do very well in the project? Was there anything that needed improvement? What? Why?" They also mention the use of questionnaires, checklists, essays, dialogued journals and portfolios as possible alternatives for project evaluation. Performance tests, self-reports and conferences are to be considered among the possibilities for project evaluation. Because of the richness

and complexity of the work involved in projects, it would be wise not to evaluate them using only one of the alternatives proposed by the authors cited above, but using a combination of elements that cover achievements in learning, doing and socializing.

7. Concluding remarks
Project work is probably one of the richest, more holistic, more communicative and more democratic ways of teaching and learning nowadays. Its pedagogic value is rooted in the fact that it combines the wholeness of the integration of skills, the integration of students, the integration of teachers and the integration of areas. It also provides students with the opportunity to develop autonomous behaviors through decision-making, role assignment, organization of activities, time managing, negotiation and through the acceptance of responsibilities for the quality of the process and the resulting product of the project. Projects enhance motivation because of the possibility of almost "free" involvement and development of the activities, a sense of security and a sense of achievement produced by the students' own management of their process and products. At all levels, with all types of curricula and with all types of time availability, there is a possibility of getting our students involved in project work; this way, we are contributing to their learning through action and to their development as autonomous individuals.

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Appendix 1

The following topics, with alternatives for development, can be considered for use at different levels of language teaching:

1. The house (Children/beginners)

Parts/ size & shape/ colors/ number of rooms in my house (or my classmates') survey / material for making houses/ country and city houses / house vs. apartment/ objects in the house: furniture, electric appliances, plants/ counting chairs, beds, plants, etc. survey. / drawing my house and my dream house.

2. Food and drinks (children, intermediate level/ adolescents and adults, beginners)

Names of fruit, vegetables and other food and drinks/ hot and cold food or drinks/ food we put in the fridge/ shapes and sizes/ colors/ what I prefer to eat & drink/ what my family prefer to eat & drink/ what my classmates prefer to eat & drink / what we eat for breakfast, lunch, dinner/ food for special occasions: Christmas, birthdays, Easter, picnics, Halloween/ what people eat in other countries/ where food grows or is made/ drawing my favorite food/ healthy and 'junk' food.

3. Animals (children/intermediate level)

Shapes/ sizes: largest and smallest/ speed: fastest animal/ colors/ skin: bare, with fur, scales, feathers/ eating habits: flesh eating (carnivorous), herbivorous, omnivorous / habitats: where they live: houses, farms, deserts, forests, grasslands, mountains, polar regions, oceans, other bodies of water / pets: survey including types and number of pets/ how long do they live? / classifying animals: vertebrates and invertebrates/ how they help people/ endangered species: why they become endangered.

4. Famous people (children, adolescents and adults, early intermediate level)

Names/ countries of origin/ description: physical appearance--hair, eyes, skin color, height, weight, etc.) age, occupation /what makes or made them famous/ biography/ imaginary interview/ find picture (or draw it) and glue it to biography page. Illustrate book.

5. Neighborhoods (adolescents and adults, intermediate level)

Types(old, new, suburbs, inner city); quality of life(condominiums, squatters, fancy, busy, quiet); changes (progress, safety, interactions, constructions, business); interactions (the quiet neighbor, the noisy one, the indifferent neighbor, the nosy one; getting together: festivals and community meetings.

6. Cities (adults, upper intermediate and advanced levels)

What is a city/origin and evolution of cities/ mega cities/ largest cities/ what gives cities their character/colorful cities/main places in a city/structure and organization of cities/what makes a city function (infrastructure, transport, communications, supplies)/the ugly side of cities: slums and ghettos/urban hierarchy: race, ethnicity, gender and class/types of cities: industrial, commercial, tourist, dormitory, administrative, college/ What kind of city I live in/ my city.