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THE PROJECT METHOD IN TEACHING ENGLISH

Annotation. This article deals with implementing the project work in teaching English as a foreign language in secondary schools. The article points out that the project method creates the conditions under which students learn group interaction and acquire communication skills, which is important for the socialization of students. The role of the teacher and the student in the context of this type of lessons is identified and described in the article.

Keywords: competence approach, motivation, the implementation of activities, presentation, Project-based learning, English as foreign language.

Experiential learning refers to the organization of the learning process on the basis of the pedagogical principle of "learning by doing", which means that learners acquire knowledge after having experienced or done something new. Experiential learning is defined as the exploitation and processing of experience, aiming not only at acquiring knowledge, but also at transforming the way of thinking and changing attitudes. In experiential learning learners participate "in concrete activities that enable them to 'experience' what they are learning about" and the "opportunity to reflect on those activities", since "learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience". Experiential learning is related to the project method. The

project method is “a natural extension of what is already taking place in class”, an open learning process, the limits and processes of which are not strictly defined, which progresses in relation to the specific teaching context and learners’ needs and interests. The implementation of the project method was based on the following pedagogical principles, expressed by many progressive educators a) promotion of manual activity instead of memorization and verbalism, b) learners’ active participation in the learning process, and c) exploitation of facts relating to the immediate reality as a source for learning.

The project method was linked to the internal reform of the educational process, basic components of which are the following: a) opening of school to the local community, b) provision of equal opportunities to all students regardless of socioeconomic background, c) exploitation of immediate space as departure for learning, d) systematic study of problems of everyday life at school, e) cross-curricular approach to knowledge. Many benefits of incorporating project work in second and foreign language settings have been suggested. First, the process leading to the end-product of project-work provides opportunities for students to develop their confidence and independence. In addition, students demonstrate increased self-esteem, and positive attitudes toward learning. Students’ autonomy is enhanced, especially when they are actively engaged in project planning. A further frequently mentioned benefit relates to students’ increased social, cooperative skills, and group cohesiveness. Another reported benefit is improved language skills. Because students engage in purposeful communication to complete authentic activities, they have the opportunity to use language in a relatively natural context and participate in meaningful activities which require authentic language use. Authentic activities refer to activities designed to develop students’ thinking and problem solving skills which are important in out-of-schools contexts, and to foster learning to learn. While activities are ‘Anything students are expected to do, beyond getting input through reading or listening, in order to learn, practice, apply, evaluate, or in any other way respond to curricular content’, authentic activities are tasks with real world relevance and utility, “that integrate across the curriculum, that provide appropriate levels of complexity, and that allow students to select appropriate levels of difficulty or involvement”, as quoted in Herrington. Among other characteristics, authentic activities have real-world relevance, provide the opportunity for students to examine the task from different perspectives, enhance collaboration and reflection, and allow competing solutions and diversity of outcome. In addition, project-based learning provides opportunities for “the natural integration of language skills”.

A further benefit is that because project work progresses according to the specific context and students’ interests, students have enhanced motivation, engagement and enjoyment. From a motivational perspective, projects being authentic tasks, are more meaningful to students, increase interest, motivation to participate, and can promote

learning. Enjoyment and motivation also stem from the fact that classroom language is not predetermined, but depends on the nature of the project. Another set of reported benefits pertains to the development of problem-solving and higher order critical thinking skills. These skills are very important, since they are life-long, transferable skills to settings outside the classroom.

Effective project-based learning requires the teacher to assume a different role. The teacher's role is not dominant, but he/she acts as a guide, advisor, coordinator, and facilitator. In implementing the project method, the focal point of the learning process moves from the teacher to the learners, from working alone to working in groups.

The following general stages can be used for successful project implementation. They constitute a practical guide for the sequencing of project activities for teachers who want to implement projects in their classrooms.

Stage 1: Speculation

This stage includes choice of project topic, aiming at arousing interest and developing a climate conducive to speculation and investigation that will lead smoothly to the research process. Topic is chosen after a dialogue among all members of the group, and the teacher. The initial stimulus may emerge from the curriculum, or after a discussion about a contemporary local or wider topic of interest, or from reading a newspaper or magazine article

Stage 2: Designing the project activities

This stage includes formation of groups and assigning of roles, decisions concerning methodology, sources of information, activities that will take place, and places outside the classroom that students will visit. The better organized and more analytical the structuring of the activities, the easier and faster the research will be conducted.

Stage 3: Conducting the project activities

At this stage the groups implement the activities designed in the previous stage. Students gather information, process and categorize it. If deemed necessary, there may be intervals of information and feedback, in which students discuss issues related with cooperation among group members, problems of personal relations, and possible changes in group composition.

The next phase is synthesis and processing of information gathered. The final products are displayed in the school or the wider community, and become a stimulus for thought and action for other students, teachers and local community.

Stage 4: Evaluation

Evaluation refers to the assessment of the activities from participants and discussion about whether the initial aims and goals have been achieved, implementation of the process, and final products. Evaluation also entails assessment of the experience at individual and group level, identification of errors and problems, but also appraisal of the

rich cognitive and experiential material gathered. Evaluation includes evaluation from others, as well as self-evaluation.

Although there are many studies focusing on the theoretical underpinnings for project-based learning in foreign language teaching, there are relatively few empirical studies linking theory with practice, evaluating the impact of project work in the context of foreign language instruction. In this context, our study examines the practical aspects of implementing project work in secondary school settings, reporting difficulties encountered, benefits from project work, and pedagogical implications.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the above activities implemented in the context of project work do not constitute “ideal” or “correct” classroom practices. English teachers should be aware that what is successful in one teaching situation might be inappropriate in another. We simply wish the project presented here to become a starting point for teachers to reflect in relation to their students’ needs and interests, and motivate them to incorporate new interactive teaching methods in order to make teaching more attractive and keep up with the social reality. As far as motivation is concerned, findings seem to support the view expressed in some students with low performance, however, increased self-esteem seemed to last only for the duration of the project. It seems, therefore, that project work alone cannot adequately address issues of self-esteem. Most importantly, however, most students seemed to have developed intrinsic motivation, participating in learning activities for “the spontaneous feelings of interest and enjoyment”.

The most serious problem related to the fact that students were not familiar with group work. At the beginning, although clear roles for group members were assigned, some students dominated the work, while others did little work. Another difficulty concerned the fact that some students felt that the duration of the project was too long. Some students seemed to have lost interest and motivation by the end of the project. It seems that short-term projects may have more validity for primary school learners than long-term ones.

The idea of implementing project method is justified by the fact that its using leads to communicative competence’s development and is aimed to creating a sustainable motivation for learning English. Interesting and unusual tasks create conditions for successful language learning, as students are involved in educational process. However, do not assume that the project method can exist separately from all other teaching methods. Only in combination with all pedagogical methods and techniques we can achieve positive results.

In addition, knowledge of modern teaching methods, and willingness to experiment with non-traditional teaching practices are powerful tools for the achievement of teaching aims, such as increased motivation, interest, and performance in the hands of teachers in the context of English as a foreign language instruction.



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