Developing language skills through project work

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Abstract. The objectives of the paper were to highlight the importance of the project work in teaching languages, to discover how it influences the students during the educational process and if this type of work in the classroom helps to learn the language.

Key words: Project, hard work, find information, topic, collect, draw picture, ideas, together, to form, a coherent presentation, creative, terms, content, language.

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. 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 centered.

· 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.

It would be wrong to pretend that project work does not have its problems. Teachers are often afraid that the project classroom will be noisier than the traditional classroom and that this will disturb other classes in the school, but it does not have to be noisy. Students should be spending a lot of the time working quietly on their projects: reading, drawing, writing, and cutting and pasting. In these tasks, students will often need to discuss things and they may be moving around to get a pair of scissors or to consult a reference book, but this is not an excuse to make a lot of noise. If students are doing a survey in their class, for example, there will be a lot of moving around and talking. However, this kind of noise is a natural part of any productive activity. Indeed, it is useful to realize that the traditional classroom has quite a lot of noise in it, too. There is usually at least one person talking and there may be a tape recorder playing, possibly with the whole class doing a drill. There is no reason why cutting out a picture and sticking it in a project book should be any noisier than 30 or 40 students repeating a choral drill. The noise of the well-managed project classroom is the sound of creativity.

Project work is a different way of working and one that requires a different form of control. Students must take on some of the responsibility for managing their learning environment. Part of this responsibility is learning what kind of, and

what level of noise is acceptable. When we introduce project work we also need to encourage and guide the learners towards working quietly and sensibly.

One of the great benefits of project work is its adaptability. We can do projects on almost any topic. They can be factual or fantastic. Projects can, thus, help to develop the full range of the learners' capabilities. Projects are often done in poster format, but students can also use their imagination to experiment with the form. It encourages a focus on fluency.

Each project is the result of a lot of hard work. The authors of the projects have found information about their topic, collected or drawn pictures, written down their ideas, and then put all the parts together to form a coherent presentation.

The projects are very creative in terms of both content and language. Each project is a unique piece of communication, created by the project writers themselves. This element of creativity makes project work a very personal experience. The students are writing about aspects of their own lives, and so they invest a lot of themselves in their project.

Project work is a highly adaptable methodology. It can be used at every level from absolute beginner to advanced. There is a wide range of possible project activities, and the range of possible topics is limitless.

Positive motivation is the key to successful language learning, and project work is particularly useful as a means of generating it.

Project work provides an opportunity to develop creativity, imagination, enquiry, and self-expression, and the assessment of the project should allow for this.

Project work must rank as one of the most exciting teaching methodologies a teacher can use. It truly combines in practical form both the fundamental principles of a communicative approach to language teaching and the values of good

education. It has the added virtue in this era of rapid change of being a long-established and well-tried method of teaching.

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