A POSITIVE AND PRACTICAL APPROACH TO ASSIGN PROJECT TASKS IN ENGLISH AT TERTIARY LEVEL

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Abstract: Teaching English as a second language in addition to using it as a medium of instruction for other academic subjects involves both challenges and rewards. Motivating digital natives is a demanding task for a number of reasons such as time constraints and numerous enticements for plagiarism available online. In this article we share some practical ideas for projects administered to students from our experience. We are convinced that Information Technologies ought to be used in and outside of the classroom to improve pedagogy and not simply to make the teaching content appear more attractive. We hope that our work may serve teachers as a basis for fruitful discussions towards the benefit of all.

Key words: project tasks; ICT; self-study tests; student motivation; learner autonomy

Introduction

The four most important skills of the 21st century learning, also known as the Four Cs, are critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity [10]. Students need these skills in order to become autonomous learners and be successful in life. They must be able to adapt to change, be resilient and able to work effectively in a variety of environments and learners have to develop their abilities at university before they have embarked on a job search.

Learner autonomy in language teaching requires students to become active participants in their education rather than passive recipients of knowledge. The term is defined as the ability to take responsibility for one’s own learning and it positively influences the quality of students' knowledge. Autonomy is not a method of studying but the ability to take control of one’s own learning, i.e. setting specific objectives, determining the content, selecting methods and techniques that will be used to monitor the process of language acquisition and assessment of learning. The ability to learn independently has to be the real result of any training. With the progress of learner autonomy students are expected to develop the ability to make their own decisions what to do instead of being influenced by others [5]. Furthermore, by taking responsibility for their own learning, students can increase their motivation and thus the effectiveness of their education.

The dynamic development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) is associated with the introduction and use of new specific terms in all spheres of life which is vital for the future careers of university students. Moreover, it is of particular importance that learners develop their skills for
independent research and effective use of specialized literature. The methods of active learning are considered as the most suitable for teaching ICT-enhanced skills. These methods should include a variety of learning activities such as role playing games, case studies, group projects, etc. Learning through activities should be emphasized as well as presenting the outcomes by the learners to their peers. ICTs can be used actively to create and apply attractive materials in language teaching in order to illustrate and practice the learning content. A common goal of the strategies and methods of active learning is the facilitation of higher-order thinking skills, not just knowledge and recall of facts, but comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation of knowledge [3].

Other factors that can regulate learners’ actions and behavior are self-consciousness and self-evaluation. Self-evaluation is assessment performed by students of their own learning and it can assist them to analyze their strengths and weaknesses, to establish how well they have mastered the study material and, if necessary, take corrective measures. Learners who often apply self-evaluation, are ready to set themselves new targets and are able to apply their knowledge and skills to new areas of learning.

Nowadays the importance of teaching English as a second language is growing even further in view of its expansion as a global language and being on the verge of becoming a lingua franca [4]. English language teaching is a very dynamic discipline which makes it extremely challenging. It has undergone various changes including a switch in the focus from the teacher to the learner. This, in turn, has brought about more changes in the role of the teacher traditionally being an instructor, controller, organizer of all activities in the classroom, and assessor. However, the contemporary role of the teacher has changed to a facilitator who empowers students by giving them more initiative and responsibility.

The emergence of new Information and Communication Technologies have also had a huge impact on teaching English as a second language. The unlimited number of language resources available on the Internet poses the question of how teachers can make the most of them and use technologies to enhance foreign language acquisition. ICTs can be used both inside and outside the classroom to accommodate the different learning styles and specific student needs. Moreover, ICTs can also ensure instruments to organize and plan learning effectively as more contemporary and convenient ways of teaching are required in accordance with students’ busy schedules.

Project work is becoming an increasingly popular feature within the E.I.T classroom. Some of its advantages are the following:

*Increased motivation – learners become personally involved in the project.*

*All the 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 as learners have an end product.*

*The tasks are authentic, therefore the language input is also more authentic.*

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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 so it is more learner-centred.

Project work is a break from routine and presents a chance to do something different.

A context is established which balances the need for fluency and accuracy [9].

In the Medical University English is used as a medium for teaching other academic subjects such as Latin both to native and non-native speakers of the language. Integrating English in all classroom activities contributes to creating an effective educational environment by using it to set instructions, present challenges, explain specialized terminology, enhance communication, evaluate students’ efforts, provide feedback, etc.

In the Faculty of Mathematics and Informatics (FMI) at the University of Plovdiv Paisii Hilendarski students study both general English and English for specific purposes. Full time students are allotted double the time for self-study compared to that dedicated to contact hours (50 academic hours for seminars and 100 for self-study, which amounts to 150 academic hours in total in a trimester). Some self-study practices that are employed at FMI are briefly described below.

1. Self-study tests

Self-testing alongside with distributed practice are considered to be the most effective learning strategies compared to techniques such as interleaved practice, elaborative interrogation, self-explanation, rereading, highlighting and underlying, summarization, keyword mnemonic, imagery for text, and others. Testing does not only involve high-stakes summative assessments that are administered to evaluate learning but it also improves learning [6]. Several hundred experiments show that practice testing enhances learning and retention [11], [12].

Since 2013/2014 academic year we have been practicing self-study tests with first-year Bachelor degree students. The objective of incorporating self-study tests in English language learning is to enhance the educational achievements of students and help them develop their knowledge and skills. These tests are administered every week; they are based on the material covered in class and provide students with an opportunity to consolidate their knowledge and review their own progress. It is important that self-study tests include a comparatively small amount of the learning material and that they are conducted shortly after students have been exposed to the content. At FMI the self-study tests in English are non-standardized achievement tests – they are devised by the teacher on the basis of every textbook unit studied in class and learners do them in their own place and time on their computers or mobile devices [7], [8].

Some advantages of self-study tests are the following:
Self-study tests provide teachers with essential information which can be used to make decisions about instruction and student grades.

Tests require students to invest comparatively little time into them. Each practice test bears the same structure and method of scoring and is done on a regular weekly basis so students get used to the types of activity performed for class preparation.

Self-study tests are done from the comfort of students’ homes at a convenient time within the one-week period of test validity.

The same self-study tests can be used for formative assessment in class with other groups who study the same learning content.

What makes tests particularly effective is that their content is relevant to the most recently covered study material and activities performed in class.

Students obtain their test results immediately except for the open question(s) score which is added after the teacher has evaluated the texts.

2. Facebook groups

Although Facebook (FB) is a place for private social interactions with friends, both learners and teachers are familiar with the platform and exploit it extensively, facilitated by the universal use of portable digital devices such as mobile phones and tablet PCs. Thus, by integrating the social media in the learning process, educators can use FB to derive academic advantages instead of ignoring the students’ engagement with it and disregarding its potential.

Facebook groups can be used in a variety of ways in the classroom for fast communication with students, making announcements or sending out reminders about upcoming tests, due dates or any classroom news, posting homework, sharing multimedia with the entire group of students, brainstorming ideas, sharing interesting websites, etc.

Here are some ideas of real project tasks that have been assigned to students in Facebook groups:

**Participation in a challenge**: a variety of sentence-writing tasks have been set such as: Make sentences of at least three words which all begin with the same letter of the alphabet.

Here are some students’ examples:

*Cathy copies crazy cartoons cautiously.*

*Eighteen elephants entered eleven enormous elevators.*

*Funny Fred found five freaky friends.*

*Nerdy Nacho never notices Nick’s naughtiness.*

**Description of a favourite person/object/picture for the benefit of a blind person**

Students are asked to choose a picture, person or object that they like, for instance
a beautiful building, landscape, landmark, celebrity, video, etc. – anything that they admire or which inspires them, and write down a description in about 150–200 words. These descriptions are addressed to blind children and young adults to help them see the world through the learners’ eyes. Students are encouraged to include information about why they have chosen that particular object or picture, which colours are used in it, how it makes them feel, etc. Finally, students record themselves reading out loud their texts in order to ensure the practical application of their descriptions.

**Description of graffiti**

Students are asked to choose two examples of graffiti drawings or wall paintings that have impressed them. They have to take photos and write descriptions of the graffiti in about 100–150 words each, including information about their location, what they represent and why they have impressed them.

**Finding idiomatic equivalents to English idioms in Bulgarian**

As defined in the Cambridge English dictionary, an idiom is “a group of words in a fixed order that have a particular meaning that is different from the meanings of each word on its own”. Idiomatic expressions in English are often used in many areas of life including business which makes it important that students recognize them and learn how to use them correctly. The project task requires each student to select videos with English idioms and find idiomatic equivalents in Bulgarian to a certain number of expressions. The task encourages students to work quickly and collaborate with their peers because learners are supposed to make sure nobody else from the Facebook group has posted the same idioms before them.

**Writing texts to illustrate the meaning of idiomatic expressions**

Students are asked to watch short videos from the BBC Learning English site uploaded in the FB group, each of which is dedicated to different idiomatic expressions [2]. Those videos include tapescripts for lower-level students. The videos provide definitions of the idiomatic expressions and give practical examples of their use in everyday situations. Then students are required to write short texts of about 100–150 words to illustrate the meaning of the idioms with a story from their own experience. Examples of such idioms are “got your number”, “a slap in the face”, “close but no cigar”, “get somebody’s goat”, and many others.

3. **Collecting critical incidents across cultures**

Critical incidents in intercultural communication training are brief descriptions of situations in which a misunderstanding, problem, or conflict arises as a result of the cultural differences of the interacting parties, or a problem of cross-cultural adaptation and communication. Each incident gives only enough information to set the stage and then describes what happened and possibly manifests the feelings and reactions of the people involved [1].

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Language learners are not exposed to only a specific society and culture. Nowadays lots of students travel extensively and they communicate with people from different cultures both face to face and by means of social media. Consequently, they need to become aware of the nature of intercultural interaction and to practice skills and competences that can enable them to understand and appreciate diverse beliefs, values, cultural differences and practices with which they might have previously been unfamiliar. In the process of communication learners sometimes experience critical incidents or hear about other people’s confusion due to cultural differences. Learners usually enjoy doing this type of project because the incidents are often funny. The procedure is to describe the situation, relate how the participants feel about it and explain the reason(s) for the misunderstanding. They can also suggest ways of avoiding or dealing with such situations.

**Example**

*When a British friend visited me in Plovdiv we went to a café and he asked the girl who attended our table if they offered capuccino. The girl said “Da”, the Bulgarian for “Yes”, and shook her head to confirm it. The British guy assumed shaking her head meant no, as it does in the UK, so he continued asking about other drinks. Again and again, he got the same shaking of her head as a reply. Finally, the girl ended up wondering why the man was only asking about drinks and not ordering anything, and the man was at a loss what to order as he thought the café didn’t have anything, not even tea.*

4. **Interviewing English speaking visitors to Bulgaria**

With reference to intercultural communication and raising the awareness of cultural diversity a specific project task is introduced to language learners. To promote effective relationships and interactions among people from various cultures students are asked to interview English-speaking foreigners in our country. The objective is to help students develop an open mind for cultural differences, identify and understand them and through critical evaluation learn to appreciate and cope with these cultural differences in their contacts. To do this, guided by their teacher, students first brainstorm ideas about questions related to a number of areas of life such as family relations, time management, physical violence, showing emotions in public, competition at school/work, noise in the neighbourhood, etc. The number of interview questions is negotiated and the answer options are agreed on. For some of the questions different possible answers are provided, while for others a Likert scale is used to show degrees of opinion. A Likert scale measures attitudes and behaviors using answer choices that range from one extreme to another (for example, *not at all likely* to *extremely likely*) so it can be particularly helpful for sensitive or challenging topics. As soon as the questionnaires are devised, students are assigned in groups of two or three and are instructed about the procedure of taking an interview (approaching the people, explaining about the project they are working on, asking for their consent and a permission to record their answers and/or take pictures/make a video, etc.)
Students report from their experience that the most effective way of conducting the interviews is for one student to ask the questions, another one to record the answers, and a third one to observe and take notes of the interviewees’ body language. Finally, students hand in their questionnaires and deliver PowerPoint presentations about the experience of interviewing English-speaking foreigners in Bulgaria and the conclusions they have drawn.

5. Making job descriptions for relevant jobs related to the students' major(s)

To be more competitive and better prepared for their future careers, university students need to be familiar with the employers’ requirements and the types of tasks they will be expected to do in their job positions. For this purpose learners are asked to make job descriptions for occupations which are relevant to their majors. Again, guided by their teacher, students brainstorm ideas in small groups and after that everyone agrees on a list of jobs they may be interested in. In groups of two or three students choose a profession and interview representatives from international companies in Bulgaria. Special attention is paid to the tasks that require employees to use English at work such as email correspondence, weekly reports, video conferencing, etc. In conclusion students submit their job descriptions to the teacher and present their findings to their peers.

Conclusions

The list of project tasks is by no means extensive or complete. We have selected just a few samples of creative ideas that students consider useful and enjoy working on. We would appreciate comments and ideas from other teachers because sharing good practices would benefit both students and the quality of English language education in general.

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