

# PROJECTS – NEW METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES IN THE NEW MILLENIUM

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*Abstract: Considering English as the global language of science, technology, and international relations, many countries around the world consider the teaching of English a major educational priority (Crystal 1997; McKay 2000). However, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is often taught under unfavorable conditions, and, as a result, high school graduates are not always competent users of English. One important alternative is to take advantage of the continuing advances in multimedia technology and to make an effort to integrate this technology with in-class instruction. In this paper I will try to focus on new methods of teaching English that can be used to complement and reinforce traditional in-class instruction – including multimedia projects.*

*Key words: English, computers, technology*

The 20th century has seen an immense amount of activity in language teaching methodology that is why some have called it the Age of Methods (Richards and Rodgers 1986). During this period a number of new methods drew attention and struggled for adherents. It is a fact that multimedia technology can help with some difficulties associated with the EFL situation, such as large class sizes and mixed-ability students. This explains the growing number of schools/universities with facilities for students to access computers and audiovisual equipment.

Due to several reasons, teaching English does not always accomplish its objective and leaves students without an adequate level of proficiency in English. Of course, a major issue is the environment itself, the lack of English speakers for students to interact with. On the other hand, there are many researches that support the use of multimedia technology for foreign language instruction (Jonassen 2000; Kitao 1995; Kang 1999; Pino-Silva 2002, 2004; Stepp-Greany 2002). Some of the reasons for using multimedia technology in the classroom as resulted from the above mentioned researches are:

- allows students to work individually at a computer, at their own pace, and according to their own needs;
- helps teachers to deal more effectively with a large group of students;
- makes the introduction and presentation of content more dynamic and attractive for students;
- increases student motivation due to the interactive nature of the activities;
- promotes a task-based approach to learning;
- allows students to experience real-life and communicatively meaningful language situations and contexts; and
- introduces a variety of print, audio, and visual materials that match different student learning styles and preferences.

Consequently, in order to meet the growing demand and the increasing need for proficiency in teaching foreign languages, The Foreign Language Laboratory has been founded and it is mainly used for the teaching-learning process of foreign languages within the Faculty of Economics in Oradea being an integral multimedia environment consisting of 16 computer stations. It receives about 360 students per week. Activities performed in this laboratory both complement and reinforce what is being taught in the classroom. Every student in the Faculty of Economics attends at least a two hour session of foreign languages per week in the first two years of study. This laboratory enables teachers to alternate the traditional language instruction using the communicative approach, with the more modern approach of using computer presentations at a computer station.

Students work on computers which we hope in very short time, to be loaded with multimedia software programs such as *Focus on Grammar*, which leads them through a series of activities selected by the teachers according to each student's particular level and need. While using the computer program, students typically focus on formal aspects of grammar, although they work on listening and reading activities as well. What we actually do week by week is to encourage students to interact in the foreign language, to speak it fluently at least as long as their

project presentation may last; sometimes they are also encouraged to look up for the meaning of new words using the on-line dictionaries, not only for the meaning, but also with their pronunciations.

Students are divided in pairs or groups and are offered some project topics; they have to choose one topic for their pair/ group which is going to be their practical part of the final mark. The exercises associated with the video materials are conducted before, during, and after the video presentation, which are known as the stages of *previewing*, *viewing*, and *post-viewing* (Gower, Phillips, and Walters 1995). These stages are designed to maximize student understanding of the subject matter, which will in turn increase motivation and involvement.

- *Previewing* activities activate students' prior knowledge and raise their expectations relating to the content of the video. At this stage the teacher can prepare vocabulary lists, reading texts, and comprehension questions about the video so students will start reflecting about what they know of the topic.
- *Viewing* activities give students practice in both content-based and form-focused tasks that require them to use top-down and bottom-up processing. Activities include answering multiple-choice questions, filling in the blanks, drawing inferences, and listening for the gist (Antonini 2004).
- *Post-viewing* activities give students the opportunity to evaluate and comment on the video and the associated activities. Students answer various open-ended questions about the video in terms of their personal enjoyment and the relevance of the content. At this stage they are required to reflect and write about the content of the video, which encourages them to think critically about the subject. At first they can write their comments in their native language, but they are progressively required to express themselves in the target language (Pino-Silva and Mayora 2004).

This methodological approach tries to implement a program that seeks to raise in the student an autonomous attitude toward learning a language and the integration of multimedia technology as a reinforcement of in-classroom activities. All our students of a certain proficiency level (intermediate and above) in our programme must complete a self-directed project each semester, and they are allotted a number of marks for its completion. We have found it helpful to be fairly specific about project options, as described below. We refer our current students to successfully completed projects from previous years, which are kept on file in our self-access centre to serve as examples. The guidelines we provide to the students have proved effective in helping them clarify what they want to do and what they can realistically complete within the time limits imposed.

Students are encouraged to choose a project that is interesting to them and that they feel will best meet their needs as learners of English. They are invited to devise their own projects, which the instructor must approve. However, many students opt for one of our suggested projects. Since we encourage students to choose a project that best meets their needs as English language learners, we present the ideas for projects mostly under skills labels, such as reading or writing, but in fact, all of the projects described below involve several skills. The reading/vocabulary project, for example, requires either oral discussions or written summaries. Projects do not have to be done by individual students, although that seems to be the most frequent choice. Some pairs or small groups of students have successfully completed projects. Many projects reflect the students' interest in their future studies, though just as many aim at general English improvement. We use projects to introduce the new study topic, or to escape from the traditional reading/translating of texts. Sometimes there are students who come to ask for a project topic linked to the subjects discussed during the class as they may find them appealing for their skills, ability, and creativity.

The implementation of project work differs greatly from one instructional setting to another. In some settings, fairly non-elaborated tasks, confined to a single class session, are labeled as projects. In other settings, elaborate sets of tasks establish the process for completing the project and span an entire instructional unit; in settings like these, the benefits of project work are maximized because students are actively engaged in information gathering, processing, and reporting over a period of time, and the outcome is increased content knowledge and language mastery. In addition, students experience increased motivation, autonomy, engagement, and a more positive attitude toward English. Although project-based learning presents challenges for teachers and students (Beckett 2002; Eyring 1997), most project-work proponents assert that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.

The sources for their project usually come from the Internet as it provides the resources necessary to carry out authentic projects and analysis, and thus develop the communicative competence of foreign language students. Among the benefits of Internet use in the second and foreign language classroom, the most important are:

- Increased motivation and participation by students (Warschauer 1996).

- More opportunities to interact with the target language and content area because students spend more time on task (Kasper 2000b).
- Greater integration of reading and writing skills and opportunities to practice them in meaningful contexts.
- The possibility to implement pedagogy based on problem solving and critical thinking (Warschauer 1999).
- More self-paced autonomous learning that is learner-controlled rather than teacher-controlled (Mak 1995).

It is important to recognize that in many situations not all schools have the resources and space to install and maintain a multimedia center. Nevertheless, it is a challenge for language teachers to seek ways to improve our classes, and there are plenty of ways for teachers to begin to install at least the beginnings of a multimedia lab. Sometimes all that is needed to take the biggest step in the direction of using other methods of teaching foreign languages is a change of teachers' attitudes toward technology. Teachers can begin little by little, such as transitioning from audiocassettes to CDs. Technology is prevalent, and it is the teacher's role to think about how to acquire it and integrate it into the curriculum.

Another shortcoming we had to face when using projects for English learning was that not all the students successfully accomplished their task, meaning that sometimes it was just a copy-paste activity, other times they were not able to present and discuss their presentations without reading from the computer screen all the time. In some cases, project work is merely a source of entertainment and a break from routine classroom activities. Though projects often focus on challenging, real-world subject matter, students are often solely concerned with the visual attractiveness of their projects, paying little attention to content and language learning. In these settings, teachers often reinforce this misdirected attention by assessing student projects according to their visual appeal, ignoring students' gains in language and content learning.

Nevertheless, whatever teachers use in the classroom, it is not going to do the job for them. Teachers have a great responsibility to choose materials, to advise and develop the multimedia activities and to train students in their proper use. Still, there are situations with too much teacher control, we find teachers who dictate each step of the process without giving students any voice in defining the project. Generally, such excessive control inhibits students from taking responsibility for their own learning and developing a sense of ownership toward the project. Project work can be more effective when teachers relax their control, when students regard the teacher as a guide (Sheppard and Stoller 1995), and when students provide feedback on the experience so that projects can be improved each year. Finding the proper balance between teacher guidance and student autonomy enhances the advantages of project work in the language classroom.

## Conclusions

Anyway, with all the strong and weak points this kind of approach may hold, we think that one of the most important things learned from the teaching English through project work experience was the understanding that technology use in language instruction must be based on sound pedagogical and theoretical principles, and that both teachers and technology are part of an interrelated system.

We believe that projects can be easily integrated into any teaching situation because topics and specifications can change to fit the students' ages, interests, backgrounds, and proficiency levels.

No matter how rich the classroom input or how stimulating the activities therein, most students are unlikely to learn everything they need to succeed in a class that meets for only a limited number of hours weekly. We have to provide more opportunities for using and interacting in English, and we must respect our students' rights and interests as individuals to exercise choice in their foreign language study. Involving students in doing projects is just one way we may help them gain confidence in their ability to manage their own learning.

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