



Facing Up to the Final Exam: a Facebook-based Optional Course to Improve Students' Communication Competences

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Abstract

This paper shows how an optional course that combines f2f sessions with Facebook-based tasks can increase students' motivation and their communication competences before the Bacalaureate. The optional course was designed in September 2014 and started being implemented throughout the school year 2014-2015. The target group was a class with rather poor results in English, mostly A2, according to the European Framework of Reference for Languages. Through this course I have tried to find out if the use of ICT, more precisely Facebook, can improve the communication in English and can assure an efficient preparation for the final exam. Using activities inspired from real life situations, like writing a CV using the Europass site, or writing formal and informal letters or emails, I have tried to develop their writing competencies needed for the final exam, but also for what comes after it – the labor market.

After four months a test has shown remarkable progress in the students' participation. Both their speaking and writing competences improved. At the end of the school year, the results were positives: 26 out of 35 students improved their speaking and writing competencies, managing to reach a B1 level. Two of these students managed to reach a B2 level and decided to pursue further education in foreign languages. Moreover, this project brought a change in the way the students perceive school. It managed to improve their attendance and to motivate them to learn English.

In conclusion, this optional course brought a change in the students' attitude. It helped them to be more confident when speaking and writing, and turned their preparation for the exam from a stressful process into a fun-filled learning experience.

1. Introduction

Starting with the school year 2011-2012 the Romanian Education Law changed and tougher exam regulations were implemented. The consequence was a dramatic drop in the number of students who pass the final exam: from about 90% before 2011 to about 60% after the above mentioned landmark. Thus the final exam has become a huge stress. Moreover, the students grow into genuine *homo zappiens*, yet the school is not updated to their needs or to the way in which their cognitive patterns have changed [4]. As a result, the educational process is difficult for both students and teachers [3]. Communication among students is to a large extent ICT-based. My assumption was that if I integrate ICT in the language class I could support my students with more effective and less stressful assignments.

In Romania, the most popular social platform is Facebook, and that is why I have chosen it as a vehicle for the online component of an optional course that aims at improving my students' language skills in view of the final exam. Facebook represents the context for genuine communication and is the most suitable place for students to exercise their writing skills [1]. The optional course combines online and face to face sessions, and starts from the problem identified above: the students' preparation for the final exam is very stressful and inefficient. The Romanian curriculum specifies that in the 12th grade, the students must reach B2 level in English according to the European Framework of Reference for Languages and the class I have chosen for this optional course was one with rather poor results – mostly A2 level.

2. Methodology

2.1. General data about the research

The optional course was designed in September 2014 and started being implemented throughout the school year 2014. The target group was a class from the National College I.L. Caragiale Moreni, Romania, 19 girls and 16 boys, aged 17 to 19 years old, with poor results in English who needed good preparation for the Bacalaureate exam. A Facebook page was initiated in order to make this preparation funnier and more interactive.

The optional course was designed in two parts – 32 hours of face to face preparation combined with online sessions. In the f2f sessions I have tried to improve the speaking competencies while in the



online sessions we have dealt with writing competencies. All the online activities were inspired from real life situations and were conceived in terms of a gradual approach, in order to give confidence to all students. Each student had 2 weeks for each task, excepting the holidays when they had no task, but if someone didn't managed to solve the task, he can do it whenever he has time.

If the first task was solved only by 12 students, their number gradually increased and after 3 months 25 students were constantly posting their answers.

The implementation of this project supposed some steps to be taken:

- Finding a suitable name for this optional course - English 2.0 (2.0 in ICT terms means an important update – in our case the English language), writing the project and the curriculum for it, and getting all the necessary approvals from the Local School Inspectorate of the county (Dambovita).
- Creating a Facebook account with a suggestive name – English Club. This was a private account, so no one, except me and the students can view their posts. The fact that only their class mates have access to this page gives confidence to the students and avoid the embarrassment that may occur if posts become public. This step was taken in September 2014, right after the beginning of the school year
- Sending friend requests to all the students. This step was followed right after the creation of the Facebook page and in a week time all the students were connected to this page.
- Beginning posting and evaluating the tasks

As it was something new for them, the students were quickly caught up, but after two months their interest began to fade away. Having the experience of some other projects,[1], [2] I knew that it was the time when I have to stop for a while and so I have made, but without saying something to them. After three weeks, they began to ask me what happened. Why I do not post any task on Facebook? So, I knew that it was the best moment to begin posting tasks again. The same situation appeared after six months, and this trick functioned again.

At one moment in time, the students had to write a Curriculum Vitae using the Europass site. And so they had to face a little problem: how to post in on our page, because the file's format was not supported by Facebook. So, one student with good skills in ICT came with a brilliant idea: he uploaded his CV on Dropbox and then shared its link with us. Because his classmates didn't know how to use Dropbox, he gathered all the CVs from his classmates and posted them, signing at the end of his post with the name of each classmate. It was a thing that shown me how this project can also develop the students' team work skills.

Another noticeable case is the case of one student who managed to reach a B2 level and chose to pursue further education in Foreign Languages. She is now accepted at the University of Bucharest where she studies English. In an interview she told me that she never knew how funny English can be, and that is why she decided to continue her studies in English. She wants to become a teacher of English and to show her pupils that English is not only about grammar and reading, but it can also be funny.

2.2. Examples of posted tasks



Picture 1 – *What does Easter mean to you?*



Picture 2: *A student posting the homework for his classmates*



Picture 3: A student posting the homework for his classmates

In the first picture, one can see a writing activity given around Easter time, in which the students should write what this holiday means to them.

In the second and third pictures there is an activity where the students had to write their CV and post it on our Facebook page. This task came after a speaking exercise during our face to face session – an interview for a job, where the teacher was the employer and the students were the employees.

3. Results

At the end of the school year I have applied a questionnaire and some observation grids and the results were positive. The students are more involved now, they are more motivated and they like this type of activity.

- Improvement of the students' communication competencies. After four months 26 out of 35 students improved their communication competencies, managing to reach a B1 level. Moreover, two students managed to reach a B2 level. At the final exam, the results were even better. The table below sums up the students' results at the final exam for each competence that is tested in this exam.

	Listening	Reading	Writing	Speaking	Interaction
A1	1	2	1	1	1
A2	6	7	5	6	5
B1	22	21	24	23	23
B2	6	5	5	5	6

Table 1: The results in the final exam

- Motivation. The students' motivation increased. The optional course motivated a student to continue studying English and to become an English teacher
- Involvement. The students are more involved. They are more confident in their level of English and now they are not embarrassed to speak in front of their classmates.
- A funny preparation for the final exam. The stress was removed from their preparation for the final exam. This was highly necessary because it was a very stressful year for them .
- Attendance improved. This project managed to improve the students' attendance in this optional course. The tendency is to consider that optional courses are less important than the others courses, and taking into consideration that we deal with some 12th graders with low results the risk was big. Moreover, at the beginning of the school year, 25-30% of the students were skipping my course, but this situation began to improve, and after one month only 2 students were constantly skipping the class.
- A positive attitude towards English. The students have now a positive attitude concerning school, in general, and the English language class in particular. They have seen another way of having English at school, a funnier one.



4. Conclusions

In conclusion, this optional course was a successful one, managing to combine face-to-face sessions with online session, in order to improve the students' communication competences and to remove the stress from their preparation for the final exam. The results of this project overcame all expectations: most of the students have managed to reach a B1 level of English.

Moreover, some other notable results are visible. It changed the students' attitude towards English, motivated them and improved the attendance. Performance is also possible, as one student was motivated to continue her studies in English.

This optional course tries to adapt the school to now a days students' needs, by officially integrating ICT in the curriculum and offering a new perspective upon the school of the 21st century.

References

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