



"School" Box Office aka "SBO": Pretext and Context for English Learning in Grade 5

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Abstract

Our paper explores solutions to improve English learning among students who transition from elementary to middle school. It is part of a research project initiated at the Institute for Educational Sciences in Bucharest, Romania in the summer of 2017 that aims at promoting innovative practices. The research comprises: an analysis of the new curriculum, the design of learning activities and resources that enhance meaningful learning, the discussion of these innovative tasks within a community of practice, the implementation in two target groups (from rural and urban schools), the interpretation of the results. The research benefits from the participation of a group of young committed practitioners who teach in a variety of schools. Two of these teachers are involved in the actual school implementation while the rest of the group participate in the online discussion and sharing of the experiences. The research design offers a framework of film-based project work that give students opportunities to practice English within engaging contexts. The films are entertaining, rich in positive values and with plenty of pretexts to use and improve English. Students get involved in a search of meaning, discuss characters and events, work in group projects related to the film topic and present their 'product'. Throughout the school year, the two target groups worked on Zootopia (how to adjust to a new place); The Good Dinosaur (how to succeed in harsh circumstances: "You can do it!"), Cinderella (magic, colours and words of wisdom!), Waterhorse (how to deal with unexpected events and friendship), Pete's Dragon (how to reinvent a story! Or a dragon!), Wonder (everybody deserves a standing ovation!). Right before the summer holidays, the students had a meaningful revision and final assessment with the story of Winter (Dolphin Tale). The results are very promising: a lovely atmosphere, students' engagement, good quality projects and, last but not least, improved English!

Keywords: *Meaningful learning, creativity, collaboration, English through films, project work, super simple stories;*

1. Curricular revision and the need for revised practices

Romanian public schools started implementing a new curriculum for middle school in September 2017, beginning with grade 5. One of the main features of this new curricular version is to offer learning opportunities for the development of the key competences [12]. In foreign languages for instance, there is a clear CEFRL-based progression from A1 to A2 between grades 5 and 7; the A2 acquisition is deepened in grade 8 where a few B1 elements are also included. The curriculum stipulates correlations with the other key competences: the most obvious connections are with the social and civic, entrepreneurship, cultural awareness, learning to learn and digital competences [9].

In terms of official provision, the students have a higher chance for solid acquisition, transferable in new situations. Nevertheless a progressive curricular change is not always a guarantee for success. Romania has had about 25 years of more or less structured revisions, renovations, reforms and new laws of education and little has effectively changed at practice level [7]. The school remains clustered in lots of routines and rhetorics and shows little adaptation to the needs of the contemporary students: While Romanian teachers are more satisfied than other TALIS teachers about their ability to support their students' critical thinking and learning, the Romanian students have among the lowest scores in PISA in the EU! [11], [10]. Demotivated youth cannot find a meaning in learning and tend to distance themselves from school: sometimes they no longer do their homework, sometimes they stop reading and even drop out. A recent study on the state of the arts in the education system highlights discrepancies between urban and rural schools, the latter being disadvantaged from the perspective of school results, teachers' qualification, drop out rate [1]. Also, PISA shows that socio-economic factors are a predictor of school achievement, while macroeconomic indicators and emigration rates show

that Romania does not make a lot of progress in the direction of a welfare state. Is there any chance of improvement then?

The team, who initiated the project presented below, consists of young practitioners who are very committed to make a difference in their students' lives and to reverse the demotivation curve that tends to enlarge the more children advance in school. They teach in a variety of schools: rural disadvantaged community with students at risk, rural in the proximity of the capital, urban in an average area, urban in a well off neighbourhood, urban in a multicultural community (Romanian, Hungarian and Roma). While trying to address the issue, the team started from the following assumption: If the curricular change is to become real then practices need to adjust and teachers have to shift from teaching a textbook towards teaching groups of students, with individual profiles, levels and expectations.

In the following we shall restrict the presentation to the English component of the research that directly involves two teachers and two groups of students (from a rural disadvantaged community with high drop out risk and an average urban school); the rest of the team came with feedback and planning suggestions.

2. A context for A1 grade 5 students' communication in English

After analysing the curricular provision for grade 5 a few elements have been identified as focal for a sound implementation: listening in order to grasp the overall meaning in familiar/ stimulating contexts, reading for orientation in texts containing several paragraphs, participating in familiar discussions around interesting topics, writing short messages to one another that could make sense in a pragmatic way. In a nutshell, the focus is meaningful communication that is often hard to achieve in the class when routines prevail. After all, it is easier to write on the board about when Present Simple is used, to give standard examples and to ask students to make up sentences with the third person singular according to the model in the book. Sometimes textbooks become a hindrance because they create a distance between that frozen culture among the covers and a pretext for genuine "ad hoc" communication. From this perspective, without disrespecting the text – which needs to be read and understood – the research team looked for a pre-text (sic!), i.e. a communication frame to shape the real need to develop and understand messages.

We found inspiration in famous - old and more recent - literature: A century ago, Dewey and Ferrière insisted on discovery learning and direct activity of students in order to build up understanding and connect school to life [3]. Closer to our times, Bruner and Gardner highlighted the importance of interactive learning and the benefits of project work for meaningful learning [2], [4]. Also, small-scale Romanian recent studies highlighted that project-work brings about increased engagement and achievement [5], [6], [8].

Our choice was a film-based project, School Box Office (SBO), that allow students to watch films and cartoons as a pre-text and context for genuine communication as well as a generator for imagination. During the first term the teachers selected the appropriate films, whereas during the second one students were invited to pick up something of their choice from a group of trailers. This class selection stimulated their initiative, learning to learn as well as listening skills! It is very interesting to note that despite their socio-economic and geographical differences the two groups of students selected the same films, quite recent ones: Pete's Dragon and Wonder. We can infer that irrespective of their school background the children chose according to the current fashion. Students from rural areas have no opportunities to go to the movies and yet their tastes are up-to-date within the youth sub-culture.

The team members have produced resources (posters for the film/ project/ a communication aspect, illustrated reading texts about the film events and characters, hand-outs to support reading and writing, ppt-s with screenshots from the film to highlight a variety of language regularities - and to observe grammar in context!); they also provided feedback, shared plans, activity reports and photos from the class activities. Table 1 summarizes the projects that have been carried out.



Table 1 – summary of films, main ideas, curricular focus and students' artefacts

Film	Curricular focus	Final project team product
Zootopia (adjusting to a new place)	Giving directions, instructions; daily schedule; general, current activities; simple descriptions	City plan and / or poster for an event to be held in Zootopia or elsewhere
The Good Dinosaur (how to succeed in harsh circumstances)	Expressing ability; instructions; activities, descriptions (characters)	A mural "I can do it" and a trademark sign for excellence
Cinderella (magic, colours, words of wisdom!)	Describing; current activities and questions; instructions	A dress and shoes/ a magic scene/ a castle
Waterhorse (how to deal with unexpected events and friendship)	Expressing likes and dislikes Telling a simple story (present tense)	SBO award: Best monster/ best story/ best film etc.
Pete's Dragon (how to reinvent a story or a dragon!)	Telling a simple story (present tense) Describing characters, places Presenting a friend	An illustrated story
Wonder (Everybody deserves a standing ovation)	Describing Presenting (very simple monologue)	Diplomas for everybody in the class
Dolphin's Tale	Revision	List of possible "save the nature" activities to carry out

3. When students get involved with SBO

The students' response to SBO have been positive. Both groups enjoyed the activities. Motivation for the class activities as well as for the home assignments increased. Students' engagement in developing their products has been fantastic. Some artifacts are highly creative and of good quality (see Fig. 1). Communication also improved, with better results in the urban school (75-90% achievement) than in the rural disadvantaged community (30-60%), an outcome that we have expected. Nevertheless, with the coming year we hope to diminish the achievement gap between the two groups.

Fig. 1 – Students' products: trade mark for excellence, favourite character, "best monster", new perspectives on Cinderella





4. What's next for SBO?

The team is committed to continue the project. So are the students and their parents. There will be two new grade 5 groups and two grade 6 ones. Grade 5 resources will be updated, grade 6 will involve more choices on behalf of the students. We also plan to give more attention to oral assessment and metacognition. Students will fill in self-assessment grids weekly.

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