School Box Office, Season 2: The Past and the Future of a Project within a Project to Teach Middle School Students

Cerassela Anghel[1], Alina Crina Terinte[2]

Nicolae Iorga School, Ploiesti, Romania[1]
Sanduleni School, Bacau, Romania[2]

Abstract

Our paper is a "sequel" to a previously presented research in the 11th edition of the Innovation in Language Learning International Conference. The teaching approach that started in 2017 with two grade 5 classes focuses on contextualized meaningful learning that evolve around films for youngsters. The latter engage students in authentic communication while scaffolding their A2.1 level. During the school year 2018-2019, the project has been revisited for two new grade 5 classes and progressed with grade 6 for the previous two groups. The methodology has been preserved to a large extent: a group of teachers share a project design around a film that is a context and pretext for communication; the project is discussed and amended according to the various groups characteristics (rural disadvantaged school and average urban school); learning resources are developed and applied in order to support students design their own exploratory projects; students work on their projects and present them. In the second year of implementation more autonomy has been given to the students who select their project topic under the umbrella of the respective film theme as well as the product / artifact they are to develop and present after a month's work. At the same time, the progression of the language acquisition within the A2 level expanded on the time axis: according to the Romanian curriculum for grade 6, past and future references determine students to make plans and also to do some storytelling. In order to contextualize these abstract grammar matters we used films like Alpha or The Martian that dilate the time frame from the beginning of the human civilization to some future space adventure. Our conclusion is that, beyond the glamour of "Season 1 applause", "the producers" should periodically review and adapt their project to the "market" dynamics and decide if/ how the show could go on.

Keywords: *project work, film-based methodology, student-centered approach.*

1. Season 1 recap

In 2017 we started a research in order to teach the new competence-based curriculum for middle school English as a foreign language [4] in which we applied a project-based and film-based methodology. We called it *School Box Office* [3]. We developed our approach by relying on the social dimension of learning, building on the fact that more student – student interaction can bring a positive outcome and foster the learning process. The project tasks are part of a common plan and framework agreed upon by our team who represent various school backgrounds (rural disadvantaged school and average urban school students). Nevertheless participant students can choose how to respond to a stimulus according to their group perspective and personal preferences as opposed to textbook practice that is more uniform [2]. We thus highlight the idea of a meaningful project for communication (and preparation for life!) where more often than once we need to relate to co-workers within the common ground of projects of various sorts and solve lots of problems. [1]

According to our previously presented research, the students' response to SBO was positive during the last school year. Both grade 5 classes enjoyed the activities; motivation for the English class as well as for the home assignment increased. Students' engagement in developing their projects was fantastic and their communication improved.

We know that when films are successful, they get a sequel. This is why we thought it legitimate to continue SBO in the 2018- 2019 school year with the two groups (grade 6 then!) and revisited the planning for two new grade 5 classes.

2. A revision and a new script

For the new 5 grade groups (one in the disadvantaged rural community, one in the average urban area) we kept the framework that had been used a year before. We decided on giving up one of the films (and projects) based on the Cinderella Disney live action movie which was not liked by the participants. Nevertheless, the methodology was identical, i.e.: same films that were successful in terms of audience interest a year before, a common framework for the project tasks that meet the
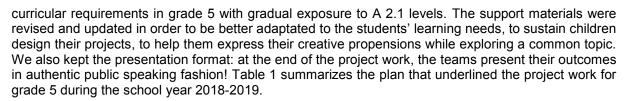
curricular requirements in grade 5 with gradual exposure to A 2.1 levels. The support materials were revised and updated in order to be better adapted to the students' learning needs, to sustain children design their projects, to help them express their creative propensions while exploring a common topic. We also kept the presentation format: at the end of the project work, the teams present their outcomes in authentic public speaking fashion! Table 1 summarizes the plan that underlined the project work for grade 5 during the school year 2018-2019.

Table 1 – Grade 5 plan: films, highlighted ideas, curricular focus and students' artifacts

Film (idea to highlight)	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 on the topic: "I can do it" and a trademark sign for excellence
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/ a different ending
Wonder (Everybody deserves a standing ovation)	Describing Identifying qualities and values Presenting (very simple monologue)	You are the BEST- awards for everyone
Dolphin's Tale (Against all odds!)	Revision	List of possible "save the nature" activities to carry out in the future

For the grade 6 groups, we had to comply with the curriculum requirements that stipulate the expressing of past and future events. Consequently we selected recent films that support the extension of the time axis – from the beginnings of the human tribes (Alpha) to the exploration of Mars (The Martian)! The methodology follows the design presented above with the exception of very open choices for the development of the group projects. Committed to the idea of progressive autonomy in the learning of our students, we allowed the project teams to decide on the particular product format of their work. Table 2 below summarizes the plan that underlined the 6th grade projects, with the last column highlighting the suggestions and open choice for the team product.

Table 2 - Grade 6 plan: films, highlighted ideas, curricular focus and students' artifacts

Film (idea to highlight)	Curricular focus	Final project team product
Dolphin Tale 2	Revision Expressing ability and permission, telling a story in the present.	Initial test, discussion
The Martian (Leave your mark!)	Expressing plans (Future/going to), describing the favourite character, describing food, diet, schedules (numbers by the thousands!)	What are you going to do? (problem solving within a space travel challenge – on poster, ppt, etc.)
Max (The best hero is…)	Describing, telling a simple story in the past, writing short messages	Simply the best project: best dog/ hero/ friend/ story/ film script etc.
Alpha (It started long ago…)	Comparing, telling a story in the past. Describing relationships Revision – 1st term	Amazing dogs - A presentation/ collage/ picture book/ etc. to highlight how special dogs can be
A Street Cat Named Bob (Everybody deserves a second chance)	Past activities, used to, daily schedule, past tense negative/ interrogative	Make a difference in a positive way! Pick a situation where you can change things for the better: a poster/ a story/ a clip/ a ppt/ etc.

Miracles from Heaven	Telling a story. Describing unusual events/ characters Time axis – discussing in the past, present and future Functional reading: schedules	A story/ a short film/ a ppt/ a small picture book/ a drawing/ a poster/ a small play/ etc. for the topic: *Rejecting/ accepting miracles.*
Bears (Disney Nature Documentary)	Reading for information. Working with a presentation leaflet/ webpage. Search for further information. Present findings	A ppt/ collage/ poster/ flier with images and short text to tell about bears or Libearty Sanctuary.

3. SBO Reception in Season 2

Some students' response to SBO has been positive. They continued to like the project, but overall the reception was under the expected results.

Rural school students responded enthusiastically in the first year of project. In the 6th grade, they continued their high fives for the Martian project. They were interested by the novelty of the theme – space travel. Nevertheless the amount of information was too much for them. They generally enjoyed the class, but they considered the amount of work a standard too high. They started to minimize the necessity of learning, not just being present during the classes. It became even harder when they were introduced to past events. There were difficulties in understanding the forms of irregular past forms of the English verbs, as well. The students actually avoided using them. We realized that past reference teaching requires a blending of 'old school' with 'the new SBO approach'. The rural students needed more practice at home, so their commitment to the English class diminished. Their expectations are not very high, regarding the future, their wish being to pass the grade. In this context, all new material following the curriculum requirements proved to be difficult. Another drawback in the knowledge acquisition was students' feelings that the English class became a routine and they asked more use of technology for their projects. Also, the feedback from the 6th graders influenced the younger students. It set the mood, and consequently the level of interest of the new 5th graders diminished in Season 2.

Fig. 1 – Grade 5 students'products

In the urban school, some of the 5th graders' parents suggested that their children should have more grammar lessons, more difficult exercises for homework, grammar rules explained in their notebooks, because they will have the National Evaluation and also, because the traditional way of learning English is better, from their point of view. There were also a few students who asked for more grammar exercises and more homework.

There are differences of perspective in the 6th graders, too. The urban students have asked to have at least one class of grammar per month and more role plays, to prepare the final projects alone, to have more homework, the traditional style.

Fig. 2 – Grade 6 students'products

The team is committed to end the SBO project. Our plan is to find a solution to embody the project based learning within the traditional way of teaching, in order to develop students'communication skills. We can use the SBO methodology in order to guide students to design new projects. The themes of the projects will be assigned at the beginning of the school term and they will be connected to the units of their textbook. Students will work in groups; they will have autonomy, they will interact to solve problems, search for information and practice public speaking. For example, the 5th graders will make a poster-sized travel brochure. Each group will try to convince their classmates to visit a place that they choose. The 6th graders will present a poster about an environmental problem in the area where they live, and will suggest two solutions to the problem.

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