



Applying the “Project Method” in Second Language (L2) Teaching a Multidimensional Interaction with Authentic Input in Autonomous Modes

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Abstract

Learning through the Project Method is somehow like an individual traveler walking in an unknown city following her/his own map. It is not even a method neither a philosophy. It offers merely a structure on which to build your knowledge and experience, a way to work, not a ready-made recipe for learning. It is only an “approach” in the essential meaning of this word: coming closer to the learning objective, with a strong will to learn, to conquer the unknown city you always dreamt of traveling to. In this sense, it represents a student-centered pedagogy, and, at the same time, it embraces multidimensional interaction with authentic input of any kind, as vital component of second language acquisition processes.

This paper presents the Project Method, as an authenticity and autonomy - centered approach and as an experiential learning tool within L2 acquisition context. It describes the implementation stages of this method, and analyzes the way each project is prepared, designed, realized, presented and evaluated. The role of the teacher as facilitator, as well as the skills developed throughout the project, are epigrammatically presented. In order to illustrate, as clearly as possible, the terms and conditions for integrating Project Method in second language settings, this paper is enriched with specific examples from the Hellenic Culture Centre (HCC), a leading educational organization, where the Project Method is deployed as a beneficial approach in teaching Greek as L2. HCC has applied hands-on projects to insert creativity into the L2 curriculum.

Keywords: *project method, second language acquisition, authenticity, autonomy, experiential learning, student-centred*

Introduction

What at the eve of the 20th century made the appeal of authenticity so strong as to have become “the predominant paradigm” for the language teaching classroom is, in part, a consequence of a broad movement in language pedagogy: the gradual shift towards learner autonomy and thence self-direction in learning, which passed the responsibility of the learning, and the access to information and knowledge, from the teacher to the learner (Mishan 2005: Introduction). In light of this pedagogical shift, today’s learner has higher expectations of authenticity – of target language and culture input and of interactions applied to obtain and process it. In fact, in language learning context, autonomy and authenticity are interconnected and interdependent within a symbiotic relationship where, as Mishan points out, the one is “feeding” the other: “The “ideal” effective autonomous learner will utilize a wide variety of authentic sources in his/her learning and it is an autonomous learning environment that such texts can best be explored” (2005: 9).

At the same time, findings in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research advocate the integration of authenticity into the language learning process and emphasize its motivating effect on learners (Bacon & Finneman 1990, Little et al. 1994). Authentic input as “a stretch of real language by a real speaker or writer for a real audience and designed to convey real message of some sort” (Morrow 1977:13), provides a much richer source of input and have the potential to engage learners into language and (inter)cultural raising-awareness processes (Gilmore 2011: 791). Therefore, vital to language acquisition is considered the exposure to and interaction with this sort of “enriched input”, which has been flooded with exemplars of the target structure in the context of meaning focused activities. (Ellis 1999: 68, Widdowson 2000, Tomlinson 2003: 6). Particularly, in response to the current quest of autonomy in learning, there are case studies on learner-experiences in self-instruction, which confirm that learners benefit from interacting with authentic texts in autonomous modes (Fernandez-Toro and Jones 1996: 200) and, conversely, that activities based around authentic texts enable students to work independently of the teacher and thence enhance autonomy (McGarry 1995: 3, Egan 2014).



Historical and Theoretical Background

The Project Method was engendered within the philosophical movement of Pragmatism, which appeared in the middle of the 19th century in the U.S.A. and represents an important legacy of John Dewey's work (ibid.). Dewey situated projects (already known and applied in educational contexts in Italy in the 16th century) within a constructivist-based theoretical framework and advocated them as a means of "learning by doing". In this sense, students are actively engaged in authentic tasks, "solving real problems, and generating knowledge and skills in dynamic interaction with their physical and social environment, thus creating meaning of themselves and the surrounding world" (Knoll 2014: 668).

In 1918, Dewey's student, William Kilpatrick, in his world-famous article *The Project Method*, conceptualized project as a "wholehearted purposeful activity", thus making the student's intrinsic motivation the decisive criterion of project method. Kilpatrick's idea of the project was not identical to Dewey's. In his concept of project learning there was no proper place for traditional educational features such as teacher, curriculum, and instruction.

The Implementation of the Project Method in L2 Classroom: Stages, benefits and Teacher Role

On the practical parameters of Project Method implementation, a project is undertaken by students after teaching hours and outside the classroom walls and includes search through different channels and disciplines and interaction with native speakers. The duration as well as the number of students who participate in a project varies. Students choose a subject they have a personal and strong interest in, often facilitated by a teacher, through brainstorming. To complement their research students are provided with different resources: books, websites, photos, CDs, DVDs, films, songs, etc. Some students are not familiar with interview methodologies and the language teacher offers her/himself to support this process by organizing a meeting with a native speaker who could answer questions, by giving the vocabulary and the ethical instructions for an interview and by providing different equipment (a recorder, a video camera, a photo camera).

This procedure is developed in five implementation stages which constitute a practical guide for the sequencing of project activities for teachers who want to implement projects in their classrooms (Kriwas 1999):

- Stimulus: This stage includes selection of project topic and "sensitization" about it, aiming at raising interest and developing a climate conducive to speculation and investigation that will lead smoothly to the research process (Fragoulis 2009: 114). The initial stimulus may emerge from the curriculum or after an exchange (among all members of the group, and the teacher) of ideas and comments on local or wider topic of interest, on a newspaper or magazine article (Brinia 2006: 79).
- Designing the project: At this stage all methodological issues are clarified: formation of groups, assigning of roles, sources of information, material and tools, places outside the classroom that students will visit. Moreover, practice of specific language skills, as a preparation for doing the project, may take place.
- Implementation: At this stage the groups implement the tasks designed in the previous stage. Students gather information (research in libraries, interviews, questionnaires), process, structure and categorize it. They also dedicate time to organize materials in order to reach the synthesis of the final outcome. Implementation stage is for developing the skills of listening, reading, writing and speaking, organizing writing data search, filling in application forms, teaching the interview planning and carrying out, arranging the survey making and teaching the report writing (Lytvyna 2015). If needed, there may be feedback discussions, in which students examine issues related with cooperation among group members, problems of personal relations, and possible changes in group composition (Fragoulis ibid.).
- Presentation: At this stage the final products are displayed in the school or the wider community (oral, written, audiovisual presentation, drama show, exhibition, etc.) and become a stimulus for thought and action for other students, teachers and local community.
- Evaluation: It is the assessment of the activities from participants and discussion about whether the initial aims and goals have been achieved, about implementation of the process, and final products (Brinia 2006:82). At this stage, Stoller (2002) points out that learners can reflect on the language they want to master to complete the project because the teacher provides several opportunities to recognize weaknesses and thus strengthen skills. Evaluation also entails assessment of the experience gained at individual and group level, self-



evaluation, identification of errors and problems, but also appraisal of the rich cognitive, experiential and cultural material acquired.

Inevitably, this process has a direct and significant impact on the role of teacher who is now required to abandon the dominant teaching model as constant source of knowledge and solutions provider and assume a new role as trainer, coordinator and facilitator (Levy 1997). In implementing the project method, the focal point of the learning process shifts towards learners, therefore teacher should try to become “invisible”, acting only as guide and advisor and remaining an indispensable source of inspiration and encouragement. Through this new pedagogical relationship, teachers may allow themselves to be surprised by their students. For instance, when they realize that their students decide to explore themes and topics different than their chosen ones. Another behavior a teacher should exercise, especially in long-terms project cases, is to stay calm under the given time pressure. This means to ignore the voices which call for productivity and immediate results, in order to avoid the trap of rough and hasty decisions. On the contrary, teacher should give learners concrete guidelines and clear orientation regarding the steps towards completing their work, always in a more free context, where decisions have to be ratified by the learners themselves: how many articles they have to read, which CDs and videos to study, how many interviews or photos they should take, and also how many of these materials they should present to their classmates. For this purpose, organization and proper time management skills should be exercised and deployed by the teacher.

Many benefits of incorporating project work in second language settings have been suggested. First of all, Project Method proposes a learning process out of the “artificiality” of the classroom (Hughes 1981: 7) and thence out of the conventional classroom language learning situations, which can be stress-inducing and put the students under the pressure of performing on the spot (Mishan 2005: 6). The gradual implementation of the project allows the students a silent processing of input and a psychological interaction with it, both vital to language acquisition (Little et al. 1989).

Equally favourable terms for language learning are created by the engagement of students in language, cultural and pragmatic awareness activities throughout the project (Bolitho & Tomlinson 1995, Tomlinson 1994b, 2001). The contact with authentic language input of any type (written, oral, audio) is a source of new language, cultural and intercultural elements. At the same time, the self-directed and interactive way in processing this input, involves students in awareness raising processes where learners eventually work things out for themselves, a fact which can considerably increase their self-esteem and independence, create positive attitudes toward learning (Stoller 2006:27) and thence facilitate language acquisition and development (Tomlinson 2003: 171).

Examples of Project Work at the Hellenic Culture Centre

Derived by the Hellenic Culture Centre’s experience, certain project topics are proposed.

- A creative presentation of a song in the target language: visualization, miming, acting
- The flora of the target culture: A student who has a special interest walked around and collected plants, she painted them, she made photos of them, she found their latin / scientific names and the names in the target language, instructions about how to cultivate, recipes with them etc.
- The traditional children games of the target culture: we were all more than happy when the students taught us how to play.
- A specific kind of theatre of the target culture, where students researched its history, wrote their own theatrical play, chose music, and played the roles.
- Some special words or idioms in the target language that students have to discover their meanings and use. They find a plethora of ways to discover the meaning without looking up a dictionary or searching online. Especially at lower level students, it is moving to see beginners (the most unprivileged ones as far as their exposure to authentic discourse inside the classroom is concerned) make use and coordinate in a creative way their knowledge, however minimal, or invent smart and often witty ways in order to overcome linguistic obstacles, applying often theatrical play techniques and focusing more on the knowledge and skills acquired.

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