Development of Esp learners' Language Communicative Competence through Project-Based Instruction

Naira Poghosyan[1]
Brusov State University, Yerevan, Republic of Armenia
nairapoghosyan@yahoo.com[1]

Abstract

This article presents the findings of a research study on developing learners' language communicative competence through project work in an English for Specific Purposes class. The study was conducted at National University of Architecture and Construction of Armenia with construction engineering undergraduates. The purpose of the study was to observe the role of project work on the development of ESP learners' language communicative competence through cooperative work. The idea behind the project was to foster learners' subject-specific language knowledge through application of cooperative work, allowing each student to be responsible for specific tasks and, in general to take charge of his/her own learning process. This study revealed that developing language knowledge through project work implies not only willingness to take control of learning (learner autonomy), but also necessity to provide students with opportunities to exercise their leadership qualities and organizational skills. The results showed that ESP learners' professional language communicative competence could be developed by means of mutual support in cooperative work in order to achieve common tasks. Students also displayed self-regulation in regard to facing failures through learning strategies. Furthermore, this study showed how intrinsic motivation implies the desire for accomplishment and knowledge to fulfill a learning goal.

Keywords: ESP course, project-based learning, cooperative work, autonomy

Projects are long-term, problem focused, and meaningful activities that bring together ideas and principles from a number of subject areas or disciplines. Teaching through projects is not a new idea. Project-based approaches to education have been tried before, but they have often been thought of as too difficult to implement in most educational institutions and as ineffective for teaching basic skills. Over the years, however, a number of educators have endorsed project-based learning, and individual teachers and schools have used projects successfully. Our own experience has shown that, when carefully thought out, projects are manageable and educationally effective teaching tools for the following reasons:

Projects motivate students to learn about and use a wide variety of literacy and thinking skills. For example, publishing a newspaper gives students opportunities to plan, write, reflect on, and revise articles, and provides a way in which the students can share their work with others.

Projects encourage students to become self-directed thinkers and learners. Unlike many classroom activities, projects enable students to take the lead in their own learning. In the process, they develop the skills and dispositions they need to initiate, pursue, and complete work without explicit directions from or close supervision by their teachers.

Projects give teachers opportunities to use innovative teaching techniques. Because projects encourage students to be self-directed, teachers are able to act as coaches and can vary their level of support to suit the needs of individual students. Projects also provide students with incentives to work together and share their expertise. In addition, projects yield numerous occasions for students to demonstrate their progress and to get direct feedback from teachers, peers, and outside experts.

Projects can be used both in classrooms and in outside programs. By providing opportunities for students to develop literacy and thinking skills, projects can satisfy many of the traditional demands of the learners by increasing students' interest and motivation. At the same time, because projects are not viewed as "homework", students are willing to become involved in them even in settings that are usually reserved for purely recreational pursuits [6].

In the current paper we had two basic goals: first of all, we wanted to help students who were having difficulty in language learning become self-directed thinkers and learners. Second we wanted to support teachers' attempts to try out innovative teaching strategies and curricula that may have seemed too unproven or unfamiliar for immediate use in the classroom.

Our early experiments with projects varied in terms of how actively were the students involved in them, how easy they were to implement, and the degree to which they promoted our learning goals for the ESP learners. Our observation and discussions, as well as comments from our students, revealed that the more successful projects tended to share certain features.

Successful projects:

– involve topics and activities that are of genuine interest to both the teacher and the students
– provide a natural context for learning
– have clear goals and steps
– are flexible in terms of which tasks are taken on by students and how they are approached
– permit and encourage a high degree of self-direction on the part of the students.

A genuine project is motivating and authentic to the teacher as well as to the students. Without these elements, neither students nor teachers are likely to have the sustained attention needed to accomplish the goals of the project and learn from what they are doing. Motivation, of course comes from choosing topics, tasks and goals that everyone truly cares about. Authenticity comes from involving students in "real" work toward "real" products.

In an attempt to help students critically review their work and the work of others, we had them fill out "reflection sheets" at the end of the project. The reflection sheets asked them to write down what was **good** about the work done during the project, what was **not so good** about it, and how it could be **improved**.

We then organized "feedback sessions" in which students shared their work with the group and received verbal feedback about what was good and not so good about it and, as well as how it could be improved. The students responded enthusiastically and became quite adept at giving, receiving, and using constructive criticism.

The kind of sustained work required by relatively long-term endeavours like projects requires that students understand what they are working toward and what they will need to do to get there. Because project work is unfamiliar to many students, the goals of a project and the steps involved in reaching them need to be made explicit from the very start.

There are at least two ways to make a project's goals clear to the students. One is to have the students decide the goals of the project themselves. Another is to begin by telling students what the goals are and then to discuss the goals to make sure they understand what we mean.

The framework of the project implemented by us involved the following eight steps: 1. get background information, 2. decide on the purpose, 3. brainstorm ideas, 4. carefully select the best idea, 5. make the first draft, 6. get feedback, 7. make revision, and 8. prepare the final draft.

The following smart rules or supporting techniques were used in the project implementation process:

1. Get background information
   – Provide some information
   – Share success/failure stories from private/non-private experience
2. Decide on your purpose
   – List many goals
   – Mark the most important and practical goals
   – Choose the two or three most important and practical goals
3. Brainstorm
   – Think of lots of ideas
   – Think of imaginative ideas
   – No dissing any ideas
4. Carefully select
   – Ask: What are the two or three most promising ideas?
   – Ask: What are the good or bad points of each idea?
   – Pick the best idea or put the best parts of each idea together.
5. Make first version
   – 1st draft of plan, product, or writing
6. Get feedback
   – Ask: What's good?
   – Ask: What could be better?

 - Ask: How can we do that?
7. Make revisions (2nd draft)
    - Think about which improvements are the most important
    - Choose the ones you want to make
    - Make the improvements
8. Give Final Presentation / Exhibition [6].

In order to help ESP learners, become self-directed thinkers and learners, we designed our projects to foster three kinds of skills: writing, reflection, and problem solving. Meeting these learning goals meant engaging student in a variety of authentic tasks, supporting them as they reviewed the quality of their own and each other's work, and teaching them to take a problem-solving approach to a wide variety of tasks. As a result, the example presented in this paper involved activities linked to one or more of these skills. Nonetheless, the sample project could easily be adapted to focus on a wide variety of academic, social, and personal goals.

The House Planning, Building and Selling Project HPBS Project
Overview
In this project, students (in two groups) draw a house plan for any district of Yerevan, prepare its miniature / mini-model, do the calculation of the building construction, advertise it and sell it. Students decide on the type of the house, estimate the average amount that will be needed for its construction, advertise the sale with posters, sell them to students and teachers, and as result of individual and team assessment help to identify the best product / proposal at the **HPBS EXPO** event held at the final stage of the presentation of the project findings and assessment of its results**.**
Goal
 - To observe and engage in various stages of housebuilding business from sketching/ planning to sales/marketing.

Learning goal for students
 - To learn how to estimate sales and profits
 - To learn how to write a persuasive proposal
 - To learn how to work together cooperatively
 - To learn the rudiments of starting a construction business, securing a loan (if needed, particularly with more advanced learners), selling a product, repaying the loan (if needed), and making a profit.
 - To learn how to handle money.

The Steps included: 1. Introducing the project, 2. Brainstorming, 3. Making estimates, 4. Securing a loan, 5. Advertising, 6. Making the product, 7. Selling the product, 8. Writing proposals, 9. Feedback and criteria setting, 10. Revising, 11. Choosing a proposal.
Making it work in the classroom
One key to success of this project was allowing several things to go at once, rather than having each student work on the same task at the same time. Guiding and supporting a class full of students engaged in a variety of tasks meant paying attention to classroom management. As an ESP teacher I started each day with an "open circle meeting" during which students gave updates on what they had accomplished so far, listed the things that still needed to be done, and volunteered to do certain tasks. The necessary materials were readily accessible, so students could get right to work once they knew what they were doing.
To make the project implementation more manageable for the learners and to boost student learning at the same time we used a number of techniques and strategies as:
 - **Coaching -** directing from the sidelines instead of the in front of the class, providing support and allowing students to take as much responsibility for their own learning as they can.
 - **Modelling**, which allowed students to observe how a more experienced person carried out the activities step by step.
 - **Ongoing assessment**, which provided the students with continuous feedback about the quality of their work and how they could improve it.
 - **Teaching students how to think** by focusing on the processes and strategies involved in thinking and becoming more critical, creative and intelligent.

– **Making a big deal of learning goals –** highlighting most important goals and giving the direction the students need to practice and improve their skills [1].

After the project implementation we set down to reflect on how it went referring to five characteristics of a good project outlined earlier in the current paper and introduced in the following chart [6]:

	Needs work	Better	Good
1.The project was of genuine interest	Both the students and I lost interest, and the project lost momentum.	Interest wavered, but we managed to keep moving toward the goal.	Both the students and I remained interested in the project.
2.The project provided a natural context for learning	Learning and fun were separate.	Several activities needed to be integrated better with the goals of the project.	Learning and fun went hand-in-hand.
3.The project had clear goals and processes	Students often lost sight of what they were working toward and how what they were doing related to that goal.	The goals were clear, but students were often unsure of what they should be doing.	Students knew the goal(s) of the project and what they needed to do to get there.
4.The project was flexible	There was one project goal and all students did the same work at approximately the same time.	There were a few different goals and activities, but several opportunities to capitalize on student interests were missed.	The project encompassed a variety of goals and allowed students to approach them according to their talents and interests.
5.The project encouraged self-direction	I stood at the front of the room and talked students through most activities.	I tended to address the entire class less frequently, but could probably do so even less.	Students worked in groups or independently while I moved about the room and acted as a coach much of the time.

The marked cells show the results of our reflection analysis. Thus the project was of genuine interest as both the students and I were interested in the project implementation. As for the second criterion about the natural context, so here we needed better alignment between several activities and goals of the project. The third, fourth and fifth criteria were satisfied, still there might be some aspects which I would go on improving with the ESP learners within the same project in the future.

In conclusion, we would like to highlight the basic attractive features of implementing the **HPBS Project** in the ESP classroom:

– It developed ESP learners' language communicative competence.
– It engaged students deeply with target content, helping to increase long-term retention.
– Students gained knowledge and skills by working for an extended period of time to investigate and respond to authentic, engaging and complex questions.
– It brought authenticity to the classroom in that the problem was also connected to the world outside of the classroom and students were challenged to collaborate, communicate and think critically and creatively as they approached the problem.
– It provided learners with chance to recycle known language and skills in natural context.
– Students were invited to live a meaningful experience that went beyond the syllabus and classroom walls.
– Students were motivated to perceive the language not just as an academic subject, but as an instrument for expression and comprehension in a foreign language context.

– And finally, thanks to **HPBS Project**, students developed learner autonomy by making decisions through cooperative work, as well as self-regulation and intrinsic motivation.

The study showed that developing learner autonomy implies not only willingness to take control of learning, but also necessity to provide students with opportunities to exercise autonomy by making decisions and assuming responsibility in groups for their own learning process. Thus, in HPBS project students had the chance to work on teams to support each other and share preferences for fulfilling a common goal, which allowed them to work on cooperative and individual tasks.

References
[1] A Guide to Using Project Based Learning in the Classroom - https://www.trueeducationpartnerships.com/schools/a-guide-to-using-project-based-learning-in-the-classroom/
[2] Goodman B. Project–Based Learning – Educational Psychology https://www.fsmilitary.org/pdf/Project_Based_Learning.pdf -
[3] Harding K. English for Specific Purposes. Oxford University Press, 2007, 170p.
[4] Parker R. Using Project-Based Learning in the Classroom - https://www.ldatschool.ca/project-based-learning/
[5] Schuetz R. Project–Based Learning: Benefits, Examples and Resources - https://www.schoology.com/blog/project-based-learning-pbl-benefits-examples-and-resources,
[6] Goodrich H., Hatch Th., Wiatrowski G., Unger Ch. Teaching through Projects. Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1995, 124p.
[7] Wiranegara D.A. Designing Project-Based Learning in ESP Class - http://ejournal.uin-malang.ac.id/index.php/jeasp/article/view/8291