Project-based Language Learning: A City Trip Combining TBLLT, Blended Learning and Social Media (or not?)

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Abstract

As part of the Dutch as a Foreign Language course, every year, final-year students from the Faculty of Engineering at the French-speaking University of Mons (UMONS) in Belgium organise an immersion day for themselves in the city of Leuven, situated in the Dutch-speaking region Flanders. This "amusing trip" is actually a well-thought-out educational project, based on task-based language teaching and blended learning, a tool to reach the learning objective of the course: learning Dutch. This context increases their will to communicate by making their language productions useful and crucial. The project unfolds over the course of an entire semester and the responsibility is completely in the students' hands: looking up information about Leuven delivers the target language culture and the need for reservations and appointments puts them in contact with role models in Leuven and makes them achieve successful experiences throughout the entire project. Since 2004, smartphones and Facebook have been part of the project. In May 2023, however, the students shattered the formula by questioning the relevance of Facebook. This paper presents the principles which were taken into account to develop the project, as well as the different phases of the project. It also reflects on the further integration of social media and devices in language programmes or projects in the post-corona era.

1. Introduction

The final-year students from the Faculty of Engineering at UMONS have the option to study Dutch as a foreign language. During this intensive course, the language competences are achieved through TBLLT, task-based language learning and teaching [1].

Taking into account the importance of internationalization [2] and intercultural experiences [3], the students visit Leuven in Flanders. In order to empower the students and raise their willingness to communicate, the teacher becomes a supervisor and the students get the responsibility of the citytrip, known as a motivational strategy for learners [4,5,6].

The students take the 6 types of tasks, formulated by Willis [7], to a higher level, because their trip to Leuven is no simulation and this stimulates their imagination [8]. It is a very concrete, authentic project in which every individual participant plays his or her role. The tasks are as follows: listing and brainstorming, ordering and sorting, matching, comparing, thinking and problem solving, stimulating more interaction and even the more complex task, sharing personal experience and story telling.

In order to be learner-centric, the activity requires blended learning: it combines e-learning individual exercises with face-to-face classroom activities and computer mediated instruction in the language lab. Since 2014, Facebook is used during the city trip to cope with students' communication habits and the desire for online social presence [9].

Taking into account the pre-task, the task itself and the post-task, the project takes place over a whole semester and it is becoming a project, while it meets most of the criteria of a project [10]:
- Challenging a problem or question: the students have to organise a citytrip to Leuven.
- Sustained Inquiry and students voice, choice and agency: as students are responsible for the organisation, they have to look up all the information by themselves, organise brainstorming sessions and take decisions together in order to make the required reservations. The teacher becomes an observatory instead of a teacher.

- Authenticity: the students organise a real citytrip, get in touch with locals and make appointments with staff members of the KUL. Acting like tourists, students explore the local culture and the sightseeing opportunities.
- Reflection, critique and revision: during the post-task, students set up a meeting where they share their experiences with eacht other and evaluate the project, using a SWOT-analysis. The students'remarks form the basis of the next year's citytrip.

During the post-task of 2023, the students stated, for the first time in 10 years [11], that the use of Facebook during the city trip was not "fresh" but "maybe too much". This paper reflects on the added value and necessity of devices during the different stages of the project.

2. Pre-task

The organisation of the city trip starts in the classroom. The students are informed that they are going to Leuven and that they have full responsibility for the success of this activity.

2.1. Receptive skills

This part empowers the students, as each student chooses a few responsibilities and tasks: looking up information about the city, finding out where the KUL is, making suggestions about the transport to Leuven, finding a restaurant for lunch, etc. The only restriction is that Dutch is the language of their websites and books, as well as the language they must use to talk to each other, as this preparation is based on TBLLT.
The pre-task puts the students in contact with the culture of Leuven and Flanders. It is the start of an intensive project, working on both their language skills and their intercultural competences [12].

2.2. Getting to know the academic staff at KUL

In Leuven, the students meet a professor of the Faculty of Engineering Sciences of KUL, who is also an alumnus of the students' own faculty at UMONS. They get to know them by watching his Ted Talk. At first glance, this activity has nothing to do with the course: the professor speaks English and the presentation deals with the risks of big data mining and DNA analysis. After an intensive debate about this professor and their domain in Dutch, they get to know he's a former UMONS student. This information comes as a surprise, known as a motivational element in learning methods. [13]

2.3. Productive skills

After having looked up all the necessary information, the pre-task for the visit to Leuven foresees class-wide group discussions to find agreements on the transport, lunch and practical arrangements. The final step calls the students into action by writing e-mails to the different entities in Leuven: making, changing and cancelling reservations, calling certain people in Leuven, inviting the professor to lunch, etc. As this may take several weeks, the pre-task raises the students' class attendance and it increases their willingness to communicate, knowing the entire group is counting on them.

3. Task

The main task consists of the visit to Leuven. After having met staff and students of the KUL, the city centre of Leuven becomes the classroom. In small groups, the students discover its highlights by answering a individual questionnaire and by performing various tasks, which are yearly adapted.

The different groups stay in contact with each other in a private Facebook group. By posting pictures, comments and self-made clips, they share their experiences with each other. This aspect also facilitates supervision for the teacher. This exercise combines written and oral communication with locals and with each other, in an authentic context and on social media.

In addition to the individual search, a communal photo search creates competition among the participants. Each group has about 15 pictures of people, texts, buildings, etc., they will see in the city.

The task is to post the location of each picture as soon as possible. Dutch is no longer the goal, but it is crucial to winning the game.

4. Post-task

The post-task consists of a reflection on the visit to Leuven, during which the students get to know about each others' whereabouts and challenges, but during which they also reflect on how to enhance the project.In order to stay as close to the students' world as possible, this reflection delivers very important information to the teachers. The post-task of 2023 was an eye-opener, as the students questioned Facebook's relevance for the trip. They testified that the combination of the search in the (unknown) city and written communication on Facebook were quite tough. Whereas students perceived Facebook as "young", "fresh" and "innovative" in 2013, they think of Facebook as "normal", "necessary to function" and "of common use for everyone" in 2023. Students also find Tiktok "innovative" but "too young" and "for high school", Snapchat is "popular" but "outdated", Twitter is "too formal" and "not used enough", to name a few issues.

Nevertheless, the students say that they are all on Facebook but their motivation has changed since 2013: they declare that Facebook is not typical for students anymore, it is now used by "everybody". By not being on Facebook, student miss out on real-life activities. There are many other media that can be used [14], but it should be a medium that is close to the students' daily life. Some students suggest Messenger instead of a private Facebook group: it is also quite private, it has its own button on their phone, and they can communicate faster<;

5. Conclusion

Language and culture are very connected. The day trip to Leuven is a concrete example of how culture and authentic language assignments enrich language teaching. Bringing the world into the classroom through articles and culture increases students' interest and involvement, but taking the students themselves into the world gives them the opportunity to practise the language in an authentic context by communicating with native speakers and gaining intercultural experiences.
Technology is indispensable in the elaboration of the city trip: during the pre-task, it enables students to interact with real persons and institutions outside the classroom, to look up practical information and make necessary arrangements, without having to leave the safe environment which their classroom offers them.
Regarding the use of devices and social media during the task itself, the discussions during the post-task showed a shift in Facebook's reputation. Facebook is no longer "fresh" and "typical of young people", but is "essential" to everyday life and "belongs to everyone". For this reason, Facebook no longer increases students' engagement during the task itself, while culture and authentic communication with natives do retain their value here.
If, during the immersion day, tasks on Facebook make the day trip too demanding, as some students stated in 2023, then which social medium would lend itself better to it? Or do students develop more cultural skills and language skills during the city trip without any tasks on devices and social media at all, keeping in mind that sometimes less is more?

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