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Making a school magazine and a video blog in English- Project based TEFL

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Abstract: Due to the needs of the contemporary world, a modern English language teacher must devise and practise effective, efficient and appealing models to develop students' communicative competence in English so that they are able to use the foreign language adequately in different situations as well as to express their opinion on a given topic. A school activity of making a magazine and a video blog in English, based on the methods of the Communicative approach, Contrastive analysis, Project based learning and Computer Assisted Language Learning seems to provide a very successful, fruitful and, above all, sustainable learning environment. This article describes our 5 years' experience in undertaking these projects, giving an insight into the organization and realization of all the phases of the activities. It also consists of our reflection on these activities, which might serve as useful information to other EFL teachers, who may wish to incorporate these activities into their school projects.

Key words: project based TEFL, magazine, video blog, communication skills, teaching, learning.

Apstrakt: S obzirom na zahteve modernog sveta, savremeni nastavnik engleskog jezika mora razviti i primenjivati delotvorne, efikasne i privlačne nastavne modele u cilju razvijanja komunikativnih sposobnosti učenika, kako bi oni adekvatno koristili strani jezik u različitim situacijama i bili sposobni da izražavaju svoje mišljenje na slobodnu temu. Aktivnost pravljenja časopisa i video bloga na engleskom, zasnovana na komunikativnom pristupu, kontrastivnoj analizi, projektnoj nastavi, i učenju pomoću računara, ima izgleda da obezbedi veoma uspešno, produktivno i, pre, svega, održivo okruženje za učenje. Ovaj članak opisuje petogodišnje iskustvo u izradi ovih projekata i izlaže, način organizacije i realizacije svih faza aktivnosti. Pored toga, on sadrži i naša zapažanja o datim aktivnostima, koja mogu poslužiti kao korisna informacija drugim nastavnicima koji bi uvrstili ove aktivnosti u svoje školske projekte.

Ključne reči: projektna nastava engleskog jezika, časopis, video blog, komunikativne veštine, podučavanje, učenje.

Introduction

Considering the modern way and tempo of life, in the world which has become a global village, where numerous modes of communication are available, the role of an EFL teacher has extended. It does not only entail enabling students to use grammar and vocabulary properly within the textbook context, but also training them to practice and expand that knowledge in any new environments and for different purposes.

An approach that emphasizes the importance of the communicative function of a foreign language, and which has been the essence of the methodology of TEFL for the last 30 years is the Communicative approach. Its theory advocates procuring the activities and conditions similar to the first language acquisition, such as providing the target language input and the real communicative contexts. Children should not be forced to talk, nor be pre-taught grammar explicitly, but be provided with the functional, meaningful language, in context, resembling real life situations [Larsen Freeman, 2000:123], which is usually done through role playing games, discussions or debating activities.

However, our years of teaching practice have shown that although teachers do their best to provide the TL input, when asked to express what they think on a free topic, students follow the patterns of their native language (L1) in the majority of cases. The reason for this might lie in the fact that the more subtle the topics, the more likely they are to think in their native language first and then to stick to its structures inertly. They tend to follow grammatical patterns of their native language and provide literal translation, regardless of their mark in English. Although this might be evident in immediate communication, it is certainly less elusive in written works, indicating what clumsy and awkward 'expressions' should be replaced with adequate and authentic grammatical, lexical or idiomatic equivalents of the target language. Consequently, a teacher realizes what L2 context to supply so that the required target language should be practised and acquired.

The activities of a school magazine and video blog are suitable for both approaches as they are devised to encourage the students' free expression, as well as correct the students' literal mistakes and supply them with authentic language patterns. These activities are preferably designed as instances of Project based learning, for its numerous benefits for the development of the students' personal skills, apart from those exclusively linguistic ones [Đorđević, 2007:83]. These activities are really involving and they gradually lead to the process of acquiring correct language patterns and of developing the feeling of accomplishment and social recognition. Besides this, another great significance of project work is that it provides a learning platform for all pupils in the school regardless of their class or abilities. Furthermore, the overall students'

development is enhanced as people learn more effectively in a group setting assuming different roles, observing others' perspectives, interacting regularly and complementing one another [Gardner, 2003:172].

The project based teaching entails a lot of phases of work, one of which is editing the magazine and the video blog, usually manipulating different Internet resources and applications, therefore, CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) is also incorporated. Besides helping the students to improve their ICT skills, this way of e-learning, procures students' active participation in individual and collaborative activities [Mišić Ilić, Mihajlović, 2012: 26].

The aim of this article is to promote this teaching praxis and motivate more EFL teachers to try out these teaching projects and enjoy their benefits. The article gives an insight into the organization and realization of all the phases of the project activities and provides useful information on our 5 years' experience of editing a magazine and a video blog in English.

The school magazine - The phases of its making

Although both models of learning enhance the students' communicative competence, the written work, characteristic of the magazine, is more convenient for monitoring the flow of the students' language, detecting their patterns and correcting them, if necessary.

The phases of making a magazine would proceed in the way described below.

Informing the students - At first the students could be informed by their English language teachers; however, it is necessary to have a project coordinator e.g. an editor-in-chief to arrange regular meetings. English language teachers participating in the project could present students with the possibilities of writing different types of papers, but they should also listen to and accept the children's ideas, which are mainly unexpectedly fresh, novel and unique. After being informed about the general idea, the students should be involved as active participants in editing the magazine in terms of its content (suggesting rubrics, applying for writing certain reports, or drawings, etc.) The editorial work should be based on an inclusive policy and peer to peer learning, as that it is very important for the students' growth that everybody contribute and be accepted according to their abilities.

Collecting the material - The first problem could be gathering the children's materials. The teachers should choose the material for the magazine not only from the given

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assignments to the specific students, but also from the delivered pieces of homework, poster presentations, etc. It is important to encourage and evaluate students' additional self-study work and self-assigned homework, as it would become their habit, enhance their learning strategies and encourage their independent lifelong learning. It would also provide more material to collect for the magazine.

Correction of the material - After the papers have been collected, they could be corrected by all the participants within the English section classes. These classes are also suitable for making the posters with useful tips and expressions or other presentations of useful phrases as a feedback and a reminder of the errors in the students' papers. Thus, contrastive analysis is supposed to be applied here to explain certain instances of interference of the mother tongue in terms of lexical and grammatical patterns and the concept of collocations. For instance, students should realize that some words may sound similar but have quite a different meaning, such as "sympathetic" and Serbian "simpatičan", or "eventually" and "eventualno", "TV programme" and "TV emisija", "chips" and "pomfrit", etc. In addition to that they should be aware of the nuances in meaning between grammatical categories across the languages. Thus the predicates in the sentences "***I am playing tennis now***", "***I play tennis every day***", and "***I have played tennis for two years***", are translated in Serbian with the same predicate regardless of the time reference "***Igram tenis...sada/ svakog dana/ dve godine***".

Furthermore, besides lexis and grammar, certain phrases must be fixed - students cannot "***jump***" but "***get on somebody's nerves***". They can fall in love "at first sight", not "on the first saw", as one of our students suggested in his paper.

In order to discern and acquire different lexical and grammatical patterns the students should use them intensively. They could make a poster, a news item, story, an essay, a play, a debate or a game using the given words and phrases in class or in homework activities.

Graphic design - The next phase would be editing or designing the magazine which could be done in e.g. MO Publisher. Editing the graphic design of the magazine electronically might appear as one of the problems in the beginning. However, ICT teachers should assist the students so that they could be trained to edit their pages independently in the near future.

In our school the graphic design phase was for the first time entirely carried out by our pupils this year. They were instructed into the basics of the MO Publisher and it did not

take them a significant time to grasp its use and to start to enjoy it so the whole job was finished within 6 double classes of ICT, where they excelled in efficient and selective browsing the Internet, choosing and downloading the information and pictures they needed, scanning the drawings, and listing the references, etc.

Printing Phase - Financing the printing of the magazine, especially in colour, might be considerable in amount, however, there are many ways to gather money. First, the school and the local municipality should be asked for the support. Different local shops, factories or companies could also be asked to donate money to the school and to be advertised in the magazine. It could also be agreed that the parents provide part of the financial assets. For instance, on certain occasions the money was collected from the entry fees given on a free basis. Everybody paid as much as they preferred. This way the students could pay for printing costs of the magazine and buy some of the equipment for their English classes - readers, costumes, didactic materials or more valuable technical devices (e.g. a smart board, a camcorder). This praxis is highly recommendable as it reinforces the students' feeling of achievement of doing something concrete and making a change by their own effort.

Promotion of the Magazine- The last, but not the least are follow-up activities of promoting the magazine in karaoke nights, school performances, plays or literary evenings. The magazines were distributed to the visitors comprised of our students, their parents, teachers and special guests, such as eminent town people; however, their target audience was the students of our school, as this project based teaching was designed and performed to improve their ability to express themselves in English. All these events were organized and prepared within the English section classes and they ensured learning in a gamelike and a memorably pleasant environment.

A video blog

While the school magazine is more time consuming, a video blog requires a more hi-tech "literate" team. The team should make a choice of the materials to be presented. Then the pupils should also be informed about the possible rubrics and delegated a section to prepare and write a scenario for. These activities could be used with the age group over 10, as there are very fluent and talkative pupils in the fourth grade.

The scripts would be proofread and practiced under the teachers' supervision and then only a camcorder and a creative cameraman are required.

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In our case, the movie was shot, directed and edited in Windows Movie Maker by amateur teachers and students. This is not a less comprehensible application than any other Windows component and it is possible to be used in schools in ICT or English section classes.

The shooting can be done in English section classes or in pre-classes between the shifts, with the motto that *Practice makes perfect*.

The contents of the magazine and the video blog

Judging by the content of the articles, reports, various columns and rubrics, students may benefit from the CLIL and multicultural learning in addition to their mastering the communicative competence. They can get a broader vision of universal connectedness and diversity in the world. They can also develop their critical and creative thinking, which encourages them to take action to better things and which nourishes their entrepreneur's spirit.

Some of the standard rubrics in our magazine are:

- How to make our school better;
- Culture corner;
- A book to read;
- What's on TV?
- The interviews about visiting other countries;
- Holidays;
- Animals;

Although the articles are mostly expected from 9 - 11 year olds, there are rubrics for the youngest; *My first English steps, I can write, too*, where they can deliver their drawings, exercises, and thus be encouraged to enter the world of English and ignite the spark of love towards learning it from an early age.

The standard rubrics in our blog are: On the spot, School news, Interviews, A piece of DIY advice, A tutorial on the English culture, etc.

Conclusion

All in all, according to our 5 years of experience, during which we published 6 issues of our magazine **Happy paper- Glückliche Zeitung** and 2 episodes of our video blog **Happy English Corner**, which are available at <http://english.osvuk.com/>, we have noticed many satisfactory and desirable outcomes. The students' greater ability to express themselves in English, better fluency, brushed up grammar and a more careful use of collocations were noticed in children's greater ability to communicate, in their

greater achievements in different competitions, as well as in their eagerness to do more project works in English, such as research works, writing poems, essays, plays. In addition to that the students recognized the power of organized team project work, and expressed greater initiative to organize similar activities for different purposes (not necessarily connected with English). For all the above mentioned reasons we would strongly recommend these activities to other primary and secondary schools. They could use these ideas and spice them up according to their own taste and joy as making our teaching enjoyable - both for ourselves and for our students through plays, entertainment and a lot of games [Kitić, 2007:121] - is one of the key notions of the art of teaching and learning.

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