

Project Work as a Means of Teaching Intercultural Communication Skills

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to show the benefits of project work as an effective teaching approach to language and intercultural communication skills. A project work enhances students' language skills, develops their metacognitive skills, their confidence, independence and interpersonal skills, which are very important for people's lives. When students come from a mix of cultural and educational backgrounds project work improves the learning process and provides them with the necessary intercultural communication skills. A case study approach was taken. It is a qualitative approach where observation and interviews were the instruments used to collect the data. The questions that guide our study are how project work benefits students in developing students' language skills and group work skills. The other question is to what extent the use of projects in multilingual groups leads to developing intercultural communication skills. The study concludes that the use of project work is effective and in a multinational learning setting it is essential that the teacher must play the role of a guide as well as an intercultural facilitator.

Keywords: Intercultural communication, Language skills, Project work

Introduction

The globalised economy requires that people have good intercultural communication skills to be able to operate effectively with people from other cultures in different settings as work environment, education, tourism etc. These skill acquisition starts at school and it becomes an immediate demand especially in cases when both domestic and international students study at the same educational setting, as is the case of Beder University which hosts international students from 15 countries. We think that the first intercultural communication skills are learned in the intergroup communication. Group work encourages respect for each other's differences and willingness to understand each other in the effort of performing the task set. Group work is very effective especially in carrying out different projects which last from a week to a few months.

Project-based learning is a teaching approach that presents the students with problems to solve or requires them to develop products. Eyring defines it as "assignments that incorporate student input, with content deriving from real second language use through extensive contact with native speakers and texts, integrating language skills, and extending over several weeks or more" (Eyring, 1997). Project work has been used in the teaching of many subjects in schools, as it allows for student centered activities. It involves topic or theme-based tasks suitable for various levels and ages, in which goals and content are negotiated by all participants, and learners create their own learning materials that they present and evaluate together (Barret M. 2013). In a language class project work serves as a bridge between what is learned in the class with the real life. While working together on one topic to do the project students have to communicate with each other in English, negotiate meanings, use their critical thinking and communicative skills. It is in these groups that students break the ice, learn to understand and respect each other's culture and become more open-minded.

Researchers have defined the features and benefits of project-based learning which range from development of language skills up to enhancing students' personal growth.

First, a project integrates the four language skills, speaking, listening, reading, and writing and requires the use a variety of activities. While working on a project students have opportunities to "recycle known language and skills in a relatively natural context" (Haines, 1989)

Second, students develop metacognitive skills because a project is an activity that "involves a variety of individual or cooperative tasks such as developing a research plan and questions, and implementing the plan through empirical or document research that includes collecting, analyzing, and reporting data orally and/or in writing" (Beckett, 2002).

Third, as students work together to achieve their end product they develop confidence and independence (Fried-Booth, 2002). Project work incorporates collaborative team work, problem solving, negotiating and other interpersonal skills, which have been identified by learners as important for living successful lives (Stein, 1995). When students come from a mix of cultural and educational backgrounds project work improves the effectiveness of classroom activity and learning through exchange of ideas.

It is important for students studying in a multilingual and multicultural setting to develop intercultural competencies which consist of knowledge, skills and attitudes that involve the ability of students to study, cooperate and work with people coming from cultures different from their own. Barrett and Byram (2013) write that intercultural competence enables one, either singly or together with others, to:

- understand and respect people who are perceived to have different cultural affiliations from oneself;
- respond appropriately, effectively and respectfully when interacting and communicating with such people;
- establish positive and constructive relationships with such people;
- understand oneself and one's own multiple cultural affiliations through encounters with cultural 'difference'.

Projects that aim at enhancing students' language skills and real-life skill learning must be challenging to the students and can be carried out if there is a very good combination of the teacher's work, student engagement, and the well designed tasks set. Generally, such projects are multidimensional. They can be used with English language learners of different ages and varying levels of English proficiency. However there are some problems connected with project work. There are students who are reluctant to take part in it, thinking that it can not enhance their language learning or it does not account for their final assessment.

There are also students who take the lead of the group without giving possibility to others to participate actively. Moreover, there are students who view project work negatively (Beckett, 2005).

Research question

The purpose of the study is to investigate the use of project work with the aim of educating intercultural communication skills. The questions that guide our study are how project work benefits students in developing students' language skills and group work skills. The other question is to what extent the use of projects in multilingual groups leads to developing intercultural communication skills.

Methodology

A case study approach was taken in this study. Case study research has been used in different areas of applied linguistics for the last thirty years (Duff, 2008). It is a qualitative approach where observation and interviews were the instruments used to collect the data.

The students were asked the following questions :

- What is the most important thing you have learnt from this project?
- What is the most important thing you have learnt about managing a project ?
- What have you benefited from this project?

Project work, a case study

A project work, titled "A virtual tour through Albania and Turkey (Istanbul), was designed to be done with the students of Beder University taking English Language 101, because it was noticed that there was little interaction between Albanian and Turkish students in the same class. They tended to communicate in their own language with people coming from their country, they did not mix with the others and both groups had little knowledge of the other culture.

Participants

Participants in this project were 30 first year students enrolled in the Course EL 101, in Beder University. Students' language proficiency ranged from intermediate to upper intermediate.

The students were majoring for Law, Communicative Sciences and Religion. They were Albanian and Turkish students. Out of 30 students, 15 Albanian students had never been to Turkey, five Albanian had visited Istanbul. Beder university welcomes students from fifteen countries, so both domestic and international students need to obtain at least a minimal level of intercultural competence in order to operate effectively at the university.

Design and aim of the project

The aim of the project was twofold: to develop language skills and intercultural communication skills. It aimed at raising students' awareness of some aspects of their own culture and of the different cultures they encountered. Also, it aimed at raising interest for the country by informing them about the background of the region, its culture and religion and establishing good communication between domestic and international students. Other specific aims of this project were to improve students' reading, writing, listening, speaking, vocabulary skills, and communicative competence as well as developing their group working skills.

The project was designed after the model proposed by Allan and Stoller (2005) as follows.

Step 1: Students and instructor agree on a theme for the project.

Step 2: Students and instructor determine the final outcome of the project.

Step 3: Students and instructor structure the project.

Step 4: Instructor prepares students for the demands of information gathering.

Step 5: Students gather information.

Step 6: Instructor prepares students to compile and analyze data.

Step 7: Students compile and analyze information.

Step 8: Instructor prepares students for the language demands of the final activity.

Step 9: Students present the final product.

Step 10: Students evaluate the project.

After deciding on the title of the project the students designed its plan. They set up 14 small groups which would present seven touristic attractions from each of the two countries. These attractions included places to visit, local cuisines, traditions and customs. They also appointed a student as a project leader. The groups worked together to search and present the material, which was accompanied by background local music. The final outcome of this project was the PPT presentation of the touristic attractions chosen by the students. The project took six weeks.

Findings and Discussion

The final presentation of the project and the interviews conducted with the students showed that most of the aims set were achieved. A very good participation of the thirty students was seen in the process of the project. It is to be pointed out that while working for preparing their presentation the students worked closely together, thus establishing good relations with each other. Everyone was willing to contribute and motivated to do well. The teacher, one of the authors of this paper, played the role of the guide and facilitator encouraging students to work together, to communicate in English and present their work step by step in the class. In this way it was made possible that every student could have the possibility to share what he had done with the class, to speak and get the necessary feedback from his classmates.

The final PPT presentation lasted about two hours and was given in the main meeting hall. It was followed by many other students of the university, invited by the participants of the project. The moderator introduced each group and what they were going to present. The pictures and videos used as well as the language to describe them were chosen carefully and were appreciated by both the 'players' and the audience.

In the interviews conducted after the final presentation the participants pointed out that it was an unforgettable experience.

Aleksander said "I got to know my Albanian friends better, it seems to me I have been with them for a long time."

Mehmet added that he felt himself a part of the group. He did not want to seclude himself."

An Albanian student stated that this project made her reflect on the beauties of her own country and on the people's hospitality. It seemed to her as if she had rediscovered her own place."

Another student stated that from what he had heard, seen and learned about Istanbul he could really respect and admire the great values of the Turkish people.

In answer to the question "What is the most important thing you have learnt about managing a project?" it was said that they had learned how to plan and follow the stages of a project work and how to cooperate with other partners while working on the project. This is considered valuable not only for the language class but for other subjects as well. Learning new skills of collecting and analyzing data will help them to save time and do other projects better.

There were different answers to the question "What have you benefited from the project?". Most of them said that they had learned how to search material in English and how to write meaningful paragraphs. While searching material they had done a lot of reading and listening. They had been very motivated because it was not simply reading a text in the foreign language for the sake of learning some new words or grammar, but reading with a goal to find and learn necessary material needed for a final presentation. Regarding motivation our observation is in line with the view expressed in many studies that project work results in enjoyment and sense of self-esteem (Levine, 2004).

Besides developing the language skills the students had created or strengthened their friendship, as they spent a lot of time together either in the university library or in the reading rooms to prepare the material for the final presentation.

This project helped the students not only to develop their intercultural communication and language skills, but also to address issues of self esteem. Thus, one student said that he had never been on stage before and had never spoken to a big audience. He felt proud that he had done it. Some students emphasized the fact that they had been able to speak in English in front of other students about issues of interest for all. Two of the students who had worked well in preparing the presentations withdrew from the final presentation, because they could not speak before an audience, they were too shy to do it.

All the participants in this project agreed that it had been worth taking part in it. They had known each other better and could set very good working relations with each other. The participation in this project enabled them to have social interaction with students coming from other countries and cultures.

At the end of the project the teacher asked herself some questions regarding the project, namely: Were the students cooperative during the process of the project?

Did they communicate in English? Did international and domestic students cooperate during all the time or did they tend to work with their natives? Was the project well designed considering timing and challenging tasks?

In the self evaluation process and from the feedback taken from the interviews it is to be emphasized that at the beginning of the project some students were reluctant to participate and it was necessary the teacher interfered. The same happened with the use of English. Sometimes students switched to Albanian or Turkish instead of English, either for lack of sufficient target language or for the tendency to group together as a nationality. For some students the project was too long and it interfered with their studies, so they lost interest in it.

Conclusions

Literature review and this case study show that project work is a powerful and effective approach in foreign language teaching as it leads to enhancing language skills, intercultural communication skills so important in today's world. It can be very useful in a multilingual and multicultural learning environment as is the case of Beder University.

Participating in a project work students develop their language, cognitive and social skills. It prepares them for life, as they learn how to set a goal, to plan how to reach it, gather information, analyze data and present the final product. Doing so they learn how to interact with others by being open minded and respectful for the other's culture. The present case study demonstrated how domestic and international students understand and appreciate different cultures by taking part in mutual learning activities. It is essential that in a multilingual setting the teachers should act not only as a guide that help students with the stages of the project work and its organization but also as *'intercultural facilitators'* to help their students to become *mediators between cultures* and *social actors*, who are able to engage with other social actors in communication and interaction which is different from those between native speakers (Byram 1997).

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