

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PROJECT – BASED LEARNING IN THE ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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***Abstract.** In the last years the project – based learning has become a popular teaching method in Latvia. Project work is a student-centred teaching approach; it motivates students to use language in real life situations and involves a great number of students' feelings, talents, skills and knowledge in the education process. It is a way to express students' own decisions, experience, almost dreams. This approach can be used for both: small kids (beginners' level) and for adolescents (upper-intermediate level). The goal of this research is to analyse the effectiveness of project –based learning in the acquisition of English as a foreign language This investigation is based upon Legutke, Thomas, Fried-Booth, Haines, researches.*

***Keywords:** English as a foreign language, project-based learning, pupils.*

Introduction

The status of English as an international language has increased considerably in the last decades. The knowledge of English is highly valued; it is associated with wealth and social status. English also helps to understand other cultures and different ways of life better, as well as enables people representing different nations to become aware of the world's diversity.

English is widely used as a communication tool internationally – in the Internet, mass media, sports, business, science and technology, culture and entertainment. English has become one of the most popular languages in the world.

Project-based learning is a student-centered, motivational, creative and meaningful teaching approach. Students at all ages can be involved in projects and show their knowledge, skills, and special abilities on a great variety of topics. Real life situations and needs offer a great range of forms and kinds of projects on different topics.

Project based teaching became a topical theme during the practice because there was no special approach to raise students' interest and motivation for learning English as a foreign language. It was a clear feeling that students in the chosen group had lost the interest of this subject; they had found it difficult and sometimes boring. The poll among students showed their will to make the

learning process more delightful. Therefore, it was offered and they chose project-based learning as the method of English acquisition. A project can last successfully and more effectively if students are able to work together. The experiment classes were chosen as appropriate taking into account such characteristics:

- age,
- level of English
- curriculum demands

It was essential to make sure that the activities, which were done in groups really changed students' attitude towards English and motivated them to learn much with the greater interest and acquire the topics offered. Moreover, the authors of this research and learners wished to show the results of students' work to their peers in the classroom and school.

The goal of this research is to analyse the effectiveness of project – based learning in the acquisition of English as a foreign language.

This investigation is based on the researches of Legutke, Howard, Thomas, Fried-Booth, Haines and Campbell.

The authors of this research have experimented with and analysed the project work approach at one of secondary school in Rezekne.

The authors of research have chosen the observation, opinion polls, interviews and questionnaires as the most appropriate methods of the investigation.

Theoretical Framework

A task-based and learner-centred learning process is not a recent one. The American pragmatists, Dewey and Hilpatric (Legutke & Howard, 1991:157), had noticed the theoretical and practical foundations of learning by and through experience. During the 1960s and 1970s, project learning has been a central issue in educational debates in Europe. There were some radical critics and defenders of the democratization of learning through the introduction of the comprehensive school.

Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture defines the word: *project* – a piece of work that needs skill, effort and careful planning, especially, over a period of time. Longman Exams dictionary gives the explanation of a “school or college project” – a part of a school or college course that involves careful study on a particular subject over a period of time (Lewis, 1993).

Project learning has not been reduced on the teaching methods; it is more educational philosophy, which aims are to show the way and to introduce with some possible activities to establish a more democratic society (Legutke & Howard, 1991). Legutke and Howard (1991) have also defined the project work and they say that it is the theme and task-centred form of teaching and learning. Project results are the sum of process of negotiation among all participants. A

teacher has to use a wide range of self-determined actions for both the individual and the small group of learners. She also has to formulate a plan, which defines goals and procedures. Project learning is a dynamic balance between the process and the product. Finally, it is experiential and educational because it involves body and mind, theory and practise.

Carter and Mc Carthy (1986) stress an exploratory and investigative manner of language projects. Areas for investigation can range from the comparison of particular variations of accents and dialect to topics such as the student language of newspapers or advertising. Projects develop a comprehensive language understanding or knowledge about language. They raise learner autonomy and independence.

Cem Alpetkin (2002) points a great role of native and non-native participants' involvement into communicative projects.

David Hill (1999) says that project work is:

- centred;
- content-based;
- integrates by tying things together and structures from one part of the project to another;
- educational.

Diana Booth (1986) indicates that project work moves through three stages: beginning in the classroom, moving out into the world, and returning to the classroom.

Projects are multi-skill activities focusing on topics or themes rather than on a specific language targets. The students themselves play in the initial choice of subject matter and in the decisions related to appropriate methods, the project timetable and the eventual "project product". Specific language aims are not prescribed. Because students concentrate their efforts and attention on reaching an agreed goal, project work provides students with opportunities to recycle known language and skills in a relatively natural context. Projects can be intensive activities, which take place over a short period of time, or extended studies which may take up one or two hours a week for several weeks (Haines, 1989).

In this approach rather than "learning to use English", students "use English to learn it" (Larsen- Freeman, 1986).

There are some groups of projects. Educators as Legutke & Howard (1991) and Haines (1989) offer the division according to sources of information and data collecting techniques. These educators accent six types of projects.

The first group of projects is called *encounter projects*. It includes the projects with the main aim of learning to make direct contact with native speakers. They may take place in the target language speaking countries or sub-systems of the target language and culture such as military communities, religious groups, language societies, or individuals.

Matt Wicks (2000) agrees with mentioned above educators that the local community can offer two important things to classes engaged in project work: communication with native speakers, and a dimension of reality, which motivates students. He points also the next activity would be the language study in the foreign country – a brief visit on a day excursion, class trip or school exchange.

Hutchinson (1986) declares that the second group of projects arise from a variety of media, such as literature texts, media, video and audio material and even text-books declares, not from real world encounters outside the classroom. This is the way students experience the world and life through text. Such projects are called *text projects*. Learners of this project type organize their own work on the basis of set textbooks, of different texts from stickers, books, magazines, newspapers, dictionaries, poems, songs and literary texts.

The third group incorporates the elements of the two project types mentioned above. *Class correspondence projects* (Tregret & Raymond-Barker (1991: 81) involve students communicating with the foreigners and with native speakers of the target language. These learners are mediated through different texts produced for the specific purpose of establishing communicative exchanges between groups and individuals.

The fourth one is *research and information project*. Information is found in a library or in the Internet or in archives. This kind of project work is very usual and can be easily done in a relatively short time.

The fifth group is *survey projects*. Learners make surveys and then collect and analyze data.

Haines (1989: 1) points the *performance and organisational projects* that finish with a very serious outcome – starting an English club, talent show and *production projects* such as news about the country translated on the radio or television.

Haines (1989: 35) offers projects' division based on learner or teacher centred activities.

Structured projects are teacher- centred. The teacher offers and orders all topics, materials, as well as methodology and presentation. This kind of projects doesn't motivate learners or motivation isn't definite enough.

Unstructured project is learners-centred. All activities are focused on student's interests and needs. The greatest disadvantage is to maintain the main idea and the aims of the project work.

The semi-structured project is an approach when a teacher and students define learning process. They all are involved in the project.

Educators Booth (1986) and Haines (1989) offer subdivision by longing and motivating activities. Projects are divided into *full-scale projects* and *motivating activities*. These are a form of preparation for full-scale projects. The main difference between the two motivating activities is restricted to the classroom, while project work is extended beyond the classroom.

The next subdivision is according the way information is “reported”. Educators Legutke, Howard, Haines, Booth, Hill, Phillips et al. (1999) have mentioned the most important “products” of learners’ project wok. *Table 1* shows projects’ division based on the outcome.

Table 1. Subdivision of projects according to the outcome

PROJECTS		
PRODUCTION	ORGANISATIONAL	PERFORMANCE
Video Radio Website Posters Magazines Newspapers Handbooks Brochures Lists	Partner programme Conversation table Literary afternoon Language Language club	Debates Oral presentations Drama Fashion shows Food fairs

Research methods

Participants. The experiment was set up in a secondary school environment. This school is rather large – 643 pupils attend it. It was a suitable place to carry out the experiment because the students represent a great variety interests and attitudes to studying English as a foreign language. The research experiment was set with the students aged 12-15. Total amount of the participants was 109.

The authors of the research wanted to clarify students’ attitude towards project work and its influence on the learning process. The opinion poll was conducted among 5 - 8th form students.

The aim was to prove that project-based studying raises motivation to learning English and the acquisition of it.

Students were also invited to write their reflection on the projects and suggest the topics they are interested in. The statements for students:

- 1) to realize things provided in project more than a week is necessary;
- 2) I can realize all things provided in project within 5 days;
- 3) offered topic was interesting;
- 4) I liked working on project;
- 5) I’d like to investigate my theme also next year;
- 6) presentation should be in the last day of project week.

The framework of the project

No matter how long or short the project may be, it passes through certain stages of development. *Initial discussion* of the main idea demands teacher’s

comment and suggestion as well as the students' debates on the topic of project. The briefing session was used to raise students' awareness on the area of project and to sensitize the types of items. The students and the teacher made sure about every pupil's responsibilities for planning the structure of project work. During all the project students *practised in the main language skills* – listening, speaking, reading, and writing. They were very responsive in *the design of written materials* because it let students to employ their abilities in composition, drawing and even editing. *Group activities* proved their effectiveness in project work as well as raised students' communicative skills. *Gathering the information* from many types of media helped to develop learners' synthesis and analyses skills. The information was discussed in groups and in the classroom. Students read the notes, explained visual material. *The final presentation* concentrated on the outcome and its quality. This stage of the project involved school society and their peers in the process; this encouraged learners' interest of English. Moreover, it broke the routine and let to use English in real life situations. *Evaluation* is the final stage of project where all the work is discussed and analysed.

The research work was devoted to the theoretical and practical discussion on the importance of project work for teaching and learning English.

Before and after the experiment the questionnaires were distributed among the basic school students. Pupils gave their answers to the question "Do you like studying English?" Their responses show that the project work definitely influenced the learners and they started to enjoy learning English more. 56% of students have declared they like learning English. Only seven students still show their negative attitude towards studying it. Therefore, the conclusion is that the project based learning raises pupils' positive attitude towards studying English (table 2).

Table 2. Students' attitude towards studying English

<i>Do you like studying English?</i>			
	Offered responses	Number of students	Percentage (%)
Before the experiment	yes	32	29
	sometimes	43	40
	no	34	31
After the experiment	yes	61	56
	sometimes	41	38
	no	7	6

The table 3 shows students' attitude towards project work before and after the experiment, so pupils have done the similar kind of activities before they had agreed projects could help them in their learning process. The large number (52%) of learners recognizes projects as acceptable form of learning. 21% of the

students are in doubt of projects efficiency. 27% of experiment group learners think they don't like project work. After the experiment set up it is necessary to investigate students' attitude towards project work again. Surprisingly, the most number of students (82%) declares they like project work.

Table 3. Students' attitude towards studying through projects

<i>Do you enjoy studying through projects?</i>			
	Offered responses	Number of students	Percentage (%)
Before the experiment	yes	57	52
	partly	23	21
	no	29	27
After the experiment	yes	90	82
	partly	16	15
	no	3	3

Before the experiment 53 % of students preferred projects to ordinary English lessons, 27 % of pupils couldn't formulate their attitude but the least number of students (20%) declared that they liked ordinary lessons better. After the experiment pupils have changed their opinion. The most number of students have formulated their positive attitude towards project work. 86% of children declared they enjoyed the project-based learning better.

Table 4. Students' preference concerning projects and ordinary lessons

<i>What do you like better - project work or ordinary lessons?</i>			
	Offered responses	Number of students	Percentage (%)
Before the experiment	Ordinary lessons	22	20
	Don't know	29	27
	Project	58	53
After the experiment	Ordinary lessons	6	6
	Don't know	9	8
	Project	94	86

Students were also asked to evaluate their motivation and interest towards learning English before and after the experiment using the three-grade system (0 – the level of interest did not change; 1 – it quite increased 2 – it increased considerably) Some learners consider that their interest into studying English has been risen for 1 (54 pupils) or even 2 grades (19 students).

The authors of the research are convinced that the students who are not interested in the learning process also can change their attitude to better. Students who are able and interested in learning have also aroused their interest and satisfaction. After the research the authors have made a conclusion: the students need more interesting and creative learning and teaching process on

different topics. They are eager to use English in a more natural environment; they are very quick to enjoy the modern teaching approaches.

Some citations of pupils' choice reflect the main opinion about project-based learning: *"I liked projects because I could test my English for certain purposes"*. *"I prefer working in teams; it really enjoyed me because I could test my organization skills"*. *"I was interested in the chosen topic very much."*

Conclusion

The findings of the present research allow drawing the conclusions that the project-based learning on different topics arouses motivation of studying English. Using project work might help to make the language use in the class real and active, keep the pupils' attention and make the learning process more exciting. This kind of activities could improve the students' communicative, cooperative and creative skills. The learners can feel themselves secure and converse with each other in positive atmosphere.

Summarizing all the data it can be concluded that:

- more students like learning English through project;
- more students think that they learn better during the project;
- project-based learning rises students' motivation to studying English;
- project-based learning arouses pupils' interest of English acquisition.

Summing up all observations, made during the research, advantages and disadvantages of the project work are described in table 5.

Table 5. Advantages and disadvantages of project-based learning

Advantages	Disadvantages
1. Students spoke more English than in "ordinary" English lessons.	1. Not every group speaks English all the time.
2. Students learnt a lot of new vocabulary.	2. One student did hardly any work.
3. Some students showed that they were able to be incomparable organizers.	3. Written work contained many mistakes.
4. Most students showed good communicative and cooperative skills.	4. The project needs a lot of extra preparation by the teacher.
5. Many students showed their special talents in art, music and computers.	5. It is difficult to find <i>appropriate and authentic</i> resources for students' language level.
6. School society were introduced with students' work.	6. Some students were often absent.
7. School staff was involved in the project.	7. There was much noise in the class.
8. Students practised language, social, communication, study, information technology and problem solving skills.	8. Project work costs much time and patience as well as high professionalism from the teacher.
9. Different types of activities and different topics could be used in project work.	
10. Learning becomes more meaningful.	

<p>11. Students learn how to set their own goals and work out the strategies how to achieve them.</p> <p>12. Project- based learning is a good way to involve pupils in interactive and autonomy learning using general and special skills.</p>	
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The present research has limitations. The empirical study conducted by involving only the pupils of one secondary school. This means that the results of the study cannot be representative for the whole area. If the results of other educational institutions had been available for analysis, different results could have been achieved. There is a possibility to continue the study. Further research tends to implement empirical studies in other institutions. A comparative research of different countries could be carried out, too.

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