

SMART PROJECTS TO DEVELOP YOUNG LEARNERS' COMPETENCES IN EFL

Ana MUNTEAN, *lecturer*
Faculty of Letters,
Alecu Russo Balti State University

Rezumat: *Curriculumul la Limba străină, aprobat în 2019, reiterează importanța învățământului formativ-dezvoltativ și optează pentru deplasarea accentului de pe procesul de predare pe cel de învățare. Formarea competențelor pentru secolul 21 necesită promovarea alternativelor metodologice de predare-învățare-evaluare, or învățarea în bază de proiecte constituie o asemenea alternativă. Articolul reliefează beneficiile implicării elevilor în proiecte cu condiția că profesorii vor aplica metoda SMART în specificarea obiectivelor și vor respecta etapele de implementare ale proiectului. Articolul prezintă un model de proiect, elaborat pentru a fi implementat la disciplina limba engleză cu elevii din clasa a 5-a. Proiectul cu deschidere interdisciplinară încurajează interacțiunea pozitivă, motivația și implicarea elevilor în propria învățare.*

Cuvinte-cheie: *învățare în bază de proiect, competențe-cheie, inerdisciplinaritate, creativitate.*

(1) Introduction

Project work has become one of the essentials stipulated in the National Curriculum for the gymnasium level and is recommended as an additional approach to the traditional methods of foreign language teaching [2, p. 113]. In addition, the Curriculum requires implementing, once per semester, educational projects with interdisciplinary openness in which the emphasis will be on flexible approaches that encourage positive interaction, motivation and involvement of students in their own learning, which extends to contexts beyond the classroom (outdoor education). Therefore, as project work makes its way into the Moldovan EFL classroom, teachers need to update their knowledge and skills on how to make projects an efficient teaching/learning/evaluation tool.

Proper implementation of project work requires understanding of 'project' as a separate term first, as well as awareness of the stages of implementation.

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines 'project' as "a piece of work involving careful study of a subject over a period of time, done by school or college students" [11]. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary online defines project as "a task or problem engaged in usually by a group of students to supplement and apply classroom studies" [12]. According to the Project Management Body of Knowledge, 3rd edition, a project is defined as a "temporary endeavor with a beginning and an end and it must be used to create a unique product, service or result" [10, p.5]. As it can be traced, a project is a type of activity which involves a group of students in careful study of a subject, or in accomplishing a task or in resolving a problem. The activity generally lasts over a period of time, however, it is a temporary endeavor, and it has a beginning and an end. As the students work on the project, they are supposed to create a product or suggest a solution to a problem by presenting a service.

A broader definition to 'project work' has been formulated by M. Legutke and H. Thomas (1991) who define project work as "*a theme and task-centred mode of teaching and learning which results from a joint process of negotiation between all participants. It allows for a wide scope of self-determined action for both the individual and the small group of learners within a general framework of a plan which defines goals and procedures. Project learning realizes a dynamic balance between a process and a product orientation. Finally, it is experiential and holistic because it bridges dualism between body and mind, theory and practice.*" [7, p. 160] Therefore, project work is work which focuses on completing a task, the process involving students in negotiation, decision making, planning the stages and sharing responsibilities.

It should be pointed out that the idea of using projects for learning purposes is not new. In 1897, John Dewey in Article II of *My Pedagogic Creed* emphasized that "the school is primarily a social institution" and that "the school must represent present life – life as real and vital to the child as that which he carries on in his home, in the neighbourhood or on the playground," thus pointing out the role of experience and problem solving in the process of learning [3, p. 7].

(2) Benefits of learning with projects

Project work in the foreign language classroom is a way to expand and activate language taught in class. However, one of the fundamental essences of language teaching-learning is the importance of the students' personality and their active involvement in the teaching-learning-evaluation process around which the didactic initiatives will be centered. Therefore, the teacher is encouraged to create an appropriate motivational framework for the student to learn the language. In this sense, the three basic pedagogical elements are needed: arousing students' interest in learning, stimulating or organizing events based on the active use of the foreign language as a means of communication and addressing thematic topics according to students' age, preferences and interests. Implementation of project work responds to all these requirements and equips learners with 21st century skills, such as communicative competence, critical thinking, life-long learning, team-working and problem-solving skills.

Tom Hutchinson (1992) pointed out the benefits of project work and outlined four facets of learning in projects:

- (1) Involving hard work: “Each project is a result of a lot of hard work. The authors of the projects have found information about their topic, (...) and put all the parts together to form a coherent presentation. Project work is not a soft option.”
- (2) Creative: Projects are creative in two aspects: content and language. The teacher shall see each project as a “unique piece of communication.”
- (3) Personal: The aspect of creativity makes the project very personal. The teacher should remember that his students invested a lot of themselves into their work.
- (4) Adaptable: Project work can be used with all ages at every level of language. The choice of activities is not limited and each topic can be adapted for the specific purposes of a particular group of learners [6, p. 10].

Writing about the benefits of project work, Hutchinson reveals its impact on increasing students’ motivation. According to the scholar, project work improves motivation because it is personal [6, p. 11]. The students, as a rule, write about themselves, their relatives, friends, and experience. In addition, project work is an active process as the students are learning by doing. All students can contribute to a production of a valuable product, therefore project work enables the students to experience success.

Implementing project work into the modern educational context is indispensable, as seen by Michael Legutke and Howard Thomas, who highlighted several positive characteristics of project learning. First, it is learner-centered as it involves student participation in all stages of project implementation and it reflects students’ age, needs and interests. Students can discover their strengths and talents while working on specific tasks and get rid of some of their weaknesses. Second, project work provides opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration. As it is investigative in nature, working on a project allows students to make use of their knowledge and skills in various school disciplines while working on a task. Finally, project work implies a balance between process and product, motivating students to create their own product which has its own value [7, p.159-160].

(3) SMART project planning

George T. Dolan pioneered the idea of setting SMART goals in the business world back in 1981 [4, p. 35]. Since then, numerous authors have adapted his concepts to setting objectives for project management and personal development. The term SMART applied to project goals orients teachers towards planning project work with very specific attainable outcomes. SMART stands for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Timely. Specific deals with a very precise achievement of the project activity or rather an end product of it. Measurable is the adjective form of the verb “to measure” and it is about stating clear objectives. Students should know how much work they will do to complete the project. Action verbs such as plan, write, create, produce, select, compare will be used to set a measurable objective within a project. Students may lose their patience or motivation/enthusiasm if they feel the outcome of the project is too sophisticated or they have no appropriate resources available to create the final product. Therefore, the project outcomes/objectives should be achievable as well as relevant, that is interesting, attractive and necessary to the students. Finally, setting a deadline or a timely program for project implementation is also very important.

It is true that during the project work, students often make decisions and distribute tasks and organize some of their learning on their own. However, the teacher should keep control of the whole activity and provide good organization of the project and make sure that the students understand what they have to do. Therefore, when planning a project activity, the teacher should work SMART and think of the objectives he/she intends to achieve when involving students in project work. Foreign language teachers will set clear language aims, think about its relevance to the students, and will formulate well defined final results.

Teachers may design projects to address various learners’ needs (age, language proficiency, professional interests). However, each project should go through certain stages.

(4) Stages of project implementation

Papandreou (1994) in “An Application of the Projects Approach to EFL” introduces a model which illustrates the process of project work in six steps [8, p. 41]:

Step 1 Preparation: in this period, the teacher introduces the topic to the students, and asks them to discuss and ask questions.

Step 2 Planning: in this period, the teacher and the students determine the mode for collecting and analyzing information, and different work are assigned.

Step 3 Research: in this part, the students work individually or in groups gather information from different sources.

Step 4 Conclusions: the students draw conclusions based upon their analysis of the collected data.

Step 5 Presentation: the students are supposed to present their final product to the whole class.

Step 6 Evaluation: in this part, the teacher makes comments on the students’ endeavor and efforts. Based upon the above models, Alan and Stoller (2005) summarize and put forward the revised ten-step process in “Maximizing the Benefits of Project Work in Foreign Language Classrooms” [1, p. 10].

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

Step 2: Students and instructor determine the final outcome.

Step 3: Students and instructor structure the project.

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

Step 5: Students gather information.

Step 6: Instructor prepares students for the language demands of compiling and analyzing data.

Step 7: Students compile and analyze information.

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

Step 9: Students present the final product.

Step 10: Students evaluate the project.

The revised model is easier to handle and manage, which may help the teachers and students in the real application of the project. Thus the students’ language skills, creative thinking and content learning can be facilitated and the final objective of the project work can be achieved.

(5) Project work to develop competences in EFL








As specified by the Curriculum for Foreign Language I (2019), the gymnasium level, the linguistic, sociolinguistic, pragmatic and (inter/pluri) cultural competences will be capitalized through action thematic approaches that will contribute to the formation of the students’ personality with spirit of initiative, capable of self-development and which will demonstrate independence of opinion and action, responsibility, openness to intercultural dialogue in the context of national and international values. Project work has become a requirement of the 2019 National Curriculum, including the area of foreign languages, therefore teachers need to make project work part of their teaching/evaluation process. Teachers will respect all the stages of project design and implementation, connecting the project objectives to the competences to be achieved.

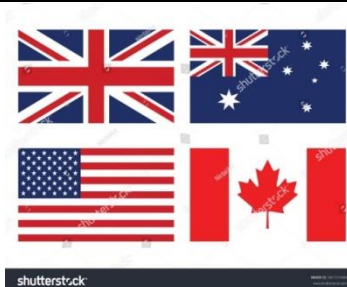
Further on, one project will be described designed for students of the fifth form at the lessons of English. The project is proposed to be done after the students have studied the unit of learning related to the culture of an English speaking country (Great Britain). The objectives of ***Create Your English Speaking Country Picture Book / Poster Project*** focus on cognitive skills / linguistic / pragmatic and pluricultural competence, that is knowledge of facts, ability to use appropriate vocabulary and grammar. Likewise, the activities suggested in the project address key competences: speaking a foreign language, the mathematic competence, the digital competence, the learning to learn competence, social and civic competence.

Stage 1. Plan

In groups, choose an English speaking country. Decide what information you want to include in your Book / Poster.

Brainstorm for the following:

-  The geographical situation
-  The climate
-  Facts from history
-  Traditional holidays
-  Popular sights / Places to visit
-  Traditional sports
-  Famous people



During the stage of planning, the teacher initiates the students in project work by setting the objectives and helping the students split into groups, in accordance with their personal interests and preferences. The visual aid, the picture of the flags of four speaking countries may help the students grasp the idea of the project task.

Stage 2. Research

Collect information on the subjects you decided to include in your Book / Poster. You may visit the school library or use the internet. You may look for information in your geography and history textbooks.

Stage two of the project work implies that students will spend time on collecting information, on doing additional reading and research. They will probably try to capitalize the information they can find in their geography, history or science textbooks and thus realize the interdisciplinary link between school subjects. In addition, the students will strengthen their digital skills in case they will have to look for information online.

Stage 3. Share and Collaborate

Share your findings with members of your group. Select the information and discuss the design of your Book / Poster. Listen to each other and respect every contribution.

At this stage, the students will learn collaboration and cooperation, they will develop communication skills as well as social and attitudinal skills as they will have to be critical, to provide arguments, to prove their point of view, to listen to their peers, to be polite and tolerant. It is a very important stage of the project. As students share with their findings, they also learn from their peers. This type of learning may be more efficient as the students feel they control their own learning, they are willing to share, they negotiate and adopt final decisions.

Stage 4. Create your Book / Poster.

Include the information you selected in your Book / Poster. Add photos and drawings to make it very attractive.

As in stage 3, students need more time for this stage. It is the time when they develop their motor skills as well as they demonstrate their individual talents and skills (such as design, drawing, colouring, writing, taking a good picture, etc.) In addition, the students continue to cooperate as they are united by one common goal, to create an attractive and informative Book /Poster or even video.

Stage 5. Present

In your group, distribute roles and present what you have learned while working on the project.

During this stage, the students will demonstrate their ability to present in English the facts /information about an English speaking country (linguistic competence). They will also display their Book / Poster and speak about the pictures/images they selected. It is at this stage that the

teachers should provide rubrics, so that students may evaluate their peers' work based on objective criteria. In such a way, they will be better prepared for the last stage of the project, that is evaluation.

Stage 6. Evaluate

Discuss the Books / Posters presented by other groups.

What elements are most interesting?

What elements surprised you?

The teachers may create their own rubrics and include more specific descriptors, related to students' use of vocabulary, appropriate use of tenses, or fluency. The questions included in the Evaluation stage of the project encourage the students to notice and speak about the positive aspects of the products they produced.

Self-assessment is essential to using feedback appropriately. It is conceptualized for students to identify their learning strategies in order to self-monitor their own learning. Therefore, it is important to allow time for self-assessment at the completion of the project, making students reflect on the whole period of project work. The students' ability to reflect on their own learning is an essential part of their cognitive development, a sign of conscious appreciation of his/her achievements and reflecting on his/her weaknesses. The teacher may include the following questions in the self-assessment sheet:

1. What was your contribution to the project?
2. What stage of the project did you like best? Why?
3. What was most difficult?
4. Did you ask anyone for help? Why?
5. What did you learn to do as you worked in this project?

The project has been designed to help the students acquire or/and develop a number of skills that, further on, develop into key and specific competences. The table below exemplifies what skills and competences the students may develop or consolidate engaging in the suggested project activities.

Table 1.

Project Stage	Skill	Competence
Stage 1 <u>Plan</u>	Can work and cooperate in groups; Can listen to each other; Can express ideas and opinions.	Linguistic competence Personal and social competence
Stage 2 <u>Research</u>	Can look up information on a certain topic on their own; Can read authentic English texts on a specific topic; Can work with information, make notes; Can work independently, without teacher's control; Can learn and understand specific vocabulary connected to their topic.	Learning to learn competence Linguistic competence Cultural awareness and expression competence
Stage 3 <u>Share and collaborate</u>	Can work and cooperate in groups; Can respect opinions of others; Can take responsibility for a successful completion of the task; Can use language appropriately (explain, agree/disagree, make suggestions); Can select important and less important outcomes of their work;	Communicative competence Social and personal competence Civic competence Linguistic competence
Stage 4 <u>Create your Book / Poster</u>	Can operate a camera or/and a computer; Can design an attractive poster/book showing the results of their work; Can create a product that can be used by other students;	Digital competence Creativity Communicative competence

Stage 5 <u>Present</u>	Can present their work to an audience; Can use appropriate language during the oral presentation	Linguistic competence Personal, social and learning to learn competence
Self-assessment time	Can evaluate their own progress	Social and personal competence

(6) Conclusion

Research based evidence demonstrates that project work is benefic to cooperative learning, student-centeredness, life-long learning, self-directed learning, motivation, autonomy and creativity. The EFL classroom can become an appropriate environment to involve students in project work as an alternative methodology to develop the 21st century key competences. Foreign language teachers may feel resilient to the idea of implementing project work with students with a lower level of English. Despite the limitations, the project presented in the paper is intended to raise a supporting voice in favour of project work as an efficient alternative in teaching English.

Bibliography:

1. ALAN, Bülent, STOLLER, Fredricka L. Maximizing the Benefits of Project Work in Foreign Language Classrooms. In: *English Teaching Forum*, 2005, nr. 43(4), p. 10-21.
2. Curriculum național: Clasele 5-9: Curriculum disciplinar: Ghid de implementare / Ministerul Educației, Culturii și Cercetării al Republicii Moldova; coordonatori: Angela Cutasevici, Valentin Crudu, Natalia Grîu; grupul de lucru: Daniela Munca-Aftenev (coordonator) [et al.]. – Chișinău: Lyceum, 2020, 156 p
3. DEWEY, John. My Pedagogic Creed. New York: E.L.Kellogg & co, 1897. 18 p. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/My_Pedagogic_Creed [accessed September, 2020]
4. DORAN, George T. There's a S.M.A.R.T. Way to Write Management's Goals and Objectives. In: *Management Review*, 1981, nr. 70 (11), pp. 35-36.
5. HAINES, Simon. Projects for the EFL Classroom. Edinburgh: Nelson, 1989. 108 p. ISBN 0175557365
6. HUTCHINSON, Tom. Introduction to Project Work. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991. 23 p. ISBN 0194702030
7. LEGUTKE, Michael, THOMAS, Howard. Process and Experience in the Language Classroom. London: Longman, 1991. 332 p. ISBN 10: 0582016541
8. PAPANDREOU, A. An Application of the Projects Approach to EFL. In: *English Teaching Forum*, 1994, nr.32 (3), p. 41-42
9. PHILLIPS, Diane, et al. Projects with Young Learners. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. 152 p. ISBN-13: 978-0194372213
10. Project Management Body of Knowledge (*Guide*). Third edition. Project Management Institute, 2004, 405p. <http://www.physics.rutgers.edu/~ransome/muse/project/reference/PMBOK3rdEnglish.pdf> [accessed August, 2020]

Dictionaries:

11. "Project" Oxford Learners' Dictionaries. Oxford University Press 2020.// https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/project_1?q=project [accessed August, 2020]
12. "Project" Merriam-Webster.com. 2011. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/project> [accessed August, 2020]