Teaching creatively, teaching for creativity: Project work with Young Learners

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The aim of this article is to present the case of using project work in the young learner EFL context. Taking into consideration relevant literature in second language acquisition and child cognitive development, I attempt to justify the integration of project work as an innovative, creative and whole-person approach into the YL language classroom. I further develop some parameters the teacher needs to take into consideration during all stages of working with a project, from topic selection to overall evaluation and feedback and the pedagogic values that lie behind. I conclude the paper by suggesting some ideas for project exploration with young learners.

Second language acquisition and the YL context

‘the most remarkable features of the young mind-its adventurousness, its generativity, its resourcefulness and its flashes of flexibility and creativity’.
(Gardner, 1993)

It is postulated that if language teachers are to be effective in whatever approach they decide to take, it is necessary to take into consideration theory and research in second language acquisition and children development. (Cook, 1997, 2002, Ellis 1987). Children learn at their own pace and in their own way, exploring the world around them. Exposure and repetition are central to this process, which in the classroom mirrors life learning outside the classroom in the variety of different types of activities and means of practice that expose them to language. Cognitive skills are just beginning to develop in these formative years along with language skills. No two young learners will be alike in any class. Research in multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983) and in neuro-linguistic programming show that children can be auditory learners, visual learners, while still others are kinaesthetic learners, they better learn through doing. Intelligence is a multifaceted concept and consists of combinations of eight different primary intelligence types: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily kinaesthetic, musical, interpersonal-the way we relate to each other, intrapersonal-our ability to self-evaluate, and the naturalist. (Berman, 1995). This should be seen rather as a distinct advantage when thinking of activities to introduce in the young learner context.

Taking to the above theoretical considerations the project approach, an old approach to general education coming from the American progressive educators of the 1920s-1940s that has found its way into the TESL/TEFL field seems promising. A project activity can be any type of group learning activity that brings about a sustained period of self-reliant effort by learners to achieve a clearly perceived goal. However, one has to consider what justifies the integration of the project approach in the EFL primary school context.
Reasons behind

There are psychological, linguistic, cultural and educational reasons that justify the integration of the project approach in the Young Learner classroom.

Relevance and motivation

Integrating project work into the YL classroom enhances children’s intrinsic motivation (Williams and Burden, 1997) as it is of personal relevance and a child-challenging process of learning. “A foreign language can often seem a remote and unreal thing. This inevitably has a negative effect on motivation, because the students don’t see the language as relevant to their own lives” (Fried –Booth 1986, Hutchinson, 1991). By bridging the gap between real life and classroom language work project work brings out children’s creativity and imagination. It by fostering learner independence and responsibility along with a sense of ownership and feeling of success it contributes to the young learners’ emotional development.

Social development.

Following Vygotsky’s Social Development Theory (1978) learning should be matched in with the child's cognitive developmental level and full cognitive development requires social interaction. The project approach mainly adopts cooperative instruction which offers a plateau for children to express their opinions, to appreciate each other’s contribution and develop a sense of belonging to a community, thus fostering school ethos. Phillips, Burwood and Dunford (1999) point out how important is for young learners to develop their social skills by learning to work cooperatively within a community along with developing learner independence skills which contribute to their process of maturation.

Linguistic development

The project approach integrates development of motor skills such as colouring, painting, gluing or cutting along with intellectual skills like planning, using imagination or describing. Moreover, all four language skills (i.e. reading, listening, speaking and writing) are used alternatively. Quoting Fried-Booth (1986) “different projects, require different procedures. And so different skills will come into prominence at different stages”. At a deeper level what makes project work so important is the fact that it offers the plateau for young learners to develop language learning strategies (Oxford, 1990): direct learning strategies as cognitive, memory, compensation strategies and indirect learning strategies as metacognitive, affective and social strategies that contribute to the development of critical thinking skills. And by adopting Discovery Learning (Piaget, Bruner, 1960s) project work encourages the development of life-long learning skills paving the way to learner independence and autonomy.

Cultural enrichment and intercultural awareness:

Project work offers children the opportunity to bring into the foreign language classroom knowledge gained during other school subjects such as history, music, art, science, geography or drama (Wicks,2000). Exploring with students relevant project topics in the contemporary often multilingual and multicultural EFL language classroom complies with the argument of language pedagogy to develop the young learners’ cultural and intercultural competence through Content-based (CLIL) and Cross-curricular approaches of instruction. It gives the teacher a great
opportunity to introduce and put into practice the principles of intercultural understanding and communication thus, contributing to world peace.

**Teacher wavering**

Despite the justification of project work in the Young learner language context as a creative, learner-centred and holistic approach of instruction there are some issues that make EFL teachers rather hesitant to integrate it. I attempt to outline these in the following sections.

**Noise**

There is an argument with regard to the level of noise in project work lessons. Indeed, sometimes it is probably higher than in traditional lessons. However, Wicks (2000) asserts that it can be a good sign which often means that children are enjoying the activity. If the noise is disturbing, the class and the teacher could agree on adopting some “quiet sign” (e.g. teacher rising or clapping hands).

**Time**

Getting a good project prepared and implemented can often be time-consuming for both teacher and learners. If there is not enough time, work can be divided into classroom work and assigned home work. For instance, group work can take place in the classroom whereas individual tasks may be done at home. Project work can become a very cost-effective use of time. However, the positive motivation it generates positively affects the students’ attitude to all the other aspects of language learning.

**L1 use**

Children often indulge in mother tongue use in monolingual classes. However, rather than seeing this as problematic we would rather consider its merits. L1 and L2 are not two completely separated domains; the learner may code switch naturally from one to another. As long as the final product is presented in the target language, L1 use is not an issue. It can be seen as an opportunity for vocabulary building and developing translation skills since children get to know to various language registers and genres according to the topic they explore. Nevertheless, even lower competent learners should be encouraged to communicate in L2 during project work. A suggestion that facilitates L2 use can be a vocabulary wall poster with relevant phrases. Another one is nominating an “English monitor” in each group who encourages and facilitates communication. (Hardy-Goud, 2003).

**Mixed ability classes**

There is a growing body of evidence to indicate that teachers are influenced by their beliefs. Teachers’ beliefs about learners, about what learning is, about teaching will affect everything they do in the classroom, whether these beliefs are explicit or implicit (Williams and Burden, 1997). A resistant belief among EFL teachers in the Greek educational context is that mixed ability classes appear rather problematic as to the introduction of innovative approaches to teaching. The issues mixed ability raise can be identified in four areas (Salli-Copur, 2006). The first one concerns different reactions on textbooks. Texts that are easy and interesting for some students can be boring or difficult for others. Topics that are seen by some students as meaningless other ones may find appealing. The teacher’s role here is to evaluate and adapt materials according to the
learners’ needs. A second issue relates to the different learner profiles. Whereas some of the students are very active in the class and extrovert others are shy and feel insecure to contribute. In addition, students’ attitudes towards the subject matter, the teaching methodology and the teacher varies and affects student motivation. A last preoccupation concerns possible difficulties in classroom management so that misbehavior of the early finishers and confidence shortage of the weaker students can be avoided.

Indeed, no one involved in EFL teaching could deny the above issues but instead of considering a mixed ability class as problematic it can be seen as a challenge to broaden students’ knowledge by creative and innovative ways of instruction.

Stages of project work

Time spent on a project varies and depends on parameters that are unique to each teaching context but it is agreed there are certain stages of development common to every project work. Fried-Booth (1986) distinguishes eight stages. First, there is a “stimulus” with initial discussion of the idea, comments and suggestions. The second one is a “definition of the project objective” when students and a teacher give suggestions and negotiate the project. Then a “practice of language skills” takes place followed by “design of written materials” which can consist of questionnaires, grids, maps etc. The “group activities” follow that are designed to gather information inside or outside the classroom and the “collating information” stage supported by discussion in the classroom. Next, students dedicate some time to the “organization of materials” and “developing the end product” of the project. The “final presentation” follows which depends largely on the form of the end product. However, this scheme can be adapted to conform to the demands of individual projects according to learning context.

An important stage is the “evaluation and feedback” of the project work which can take place at the end of each lesson or at the end of the week and the overall feedback after concluding and presenting the project work. This final stage is valuable for the young learners to develop their metacognitive skills as they can see what they have learnt, compare and discuss their experience.

Parameters to take into consideration

Choosing the topic

A project can be related to any of the units of the coursebook or it might be a topic students are generally interested in exploring. It can also be led by the syllabus needs, cross curricular links or the time amount that can be dedicated. Phillips, et al (1999) suggest that a practical way to start a project with young learners is to think of the end product and then choose the activities that will lead to its successful completion. Final end-products can be wall displays and posters, exhibitions, booklets, magazines or newspapers, models and presentations, reports, videos, various events such as a party or a theatre play and so on. However, there is no need to be overambitious as it is better to have a small amount of high quality work than a mass of badly presented, poor quality stuff.

Appropriate timing

The teacher will judge when it is the most appropriate time to introduce project work according to the learning context and his/her learners. A suggestion is to integrate it to the current he syllabus as a follow-up activity to a course book unit so
that children practice and expand new language or during “low level” student motivation periods such as the end of the term and one or two weeks before students’ Christmas or Easter holidays. (Hardy-Goud 2003; Hutchinson, 1991).

**Introducing the project**

Essential parameters to consider when introducing a project are the age, maturity and the cultural context of the children. It is important that the teacher discusses the end product with the children and explains the procedure, what they will practice and learn, what they can expect and what is expected from them, the choices they will have, the rules they will have to follow. Careful planning and setting specific goals on the outset is advisable especially with younger learners. Drawing a timetable, or a check list of objectives gives children a sense of goal and makes classroom work easier to follow. In addition, visual aids such as pictures, maps or personalized questions help to engage the whole class actively. The more students are motivated and committed to a project, the more likely it is that the project will be a success.

Young learners need to focus on feasible goals otherwise they will probably get demotivated. So, an advisable strategy with beginners is to start with mini projects or to break the bigger project into smaller micro-tasks, later they can progress to more extensive work.

**The learning environment**

Learning never takes place in a vacuum. Whatever perspective one adopts whether it is the Piagetian perspective which conceives of the developing child exploring the environment by their own or the social constructivist one which advocates that right from the birth learning is the outcome of social interactions, it always occurs within particular overlapping contexts: cultural, educational and physical to name a few. (Williams and Burden, 1997) When it comes to the project approach the immediate physical environment of the classroom and the nature of the personal interactions which occur within it will have a profound influence upon whether, how and what the children will learn. Classroom ecology, classroom interactions, quality of instruction, classroom management and the teacher’s role during project work are in a continuous interplay.

**Classroom ecology**

A self-access corner supplied with newspapers, magazines, leaflets, pictures can serve as a resource bank for classroom work. Access to the school library and reference books such as dictionaries, grammar books, atlas, encyclopedias encourage students develop their research skills. A computer in the classroom with internet access offers also numerous possibilities to retrieve information.

Cooperative instruction is important for project work which presupposes a different classroom layout. A rearrangement of desks so that students sit face each other facilitates groupwork. It also is necessary to give room for some student leadership in determining some aspects of the project, making choices at the beginning and at certain stages throughout project work. This makes students feel the ownership and responsibility for their work. Each student can have a copy of the arranged plan of group work than can be placed on the wall of the classroom as work reminder. The teacher can tick off all the completed tasks. This technique can be as springboard to constructive classroom feedback.
**Classroom management and the role of the teacher**

Cooperative instruction with children may not be an easy path to follow. However, a strategic classroom management and a positive attitude help to overcome any possible difficulties. Setting goals and expectations from the beginning is highly important. Children have to know what to expect and what behaviour is permissible. A detailed work plan is needed even for each group. Giving clear instructions is also important, even in L1 and also often checking whether children know what their group is assigned to do.

Nothing works better for young learners than a decent amount of praise. Praising and rewarding every effort give a positive feedback and sustain student motivation. It is important to invent ways of rewarding students. Draw smiling faces, stars or use stamps or stickers to show your appreciation. Put up posters on the walls with the students' names to keep record of their good work.

The role of the teacher changes and develops during project work. From a more traditional teacher-centred instruction when the teacher introduces project work and new language patterns it changes to a mediator and a facilitator within groups. The teacher can be described as **the figure in the background** evaluating and monitoring and encouraging students to express their creativity.

In seeking to establish a harmonious classroom environment the teacher also needs to be sensitive to the relationships within the group. According to Fried-Booth (1986) “there will always be occasions when things go wrong...relationships may sour, certain students drop out of the group commitment, or others become downright uncooperative”. Collaborative instruction often has to go through disputes and discussions to reach to group communication.

A final point the teacher needs to be aware of is that young learners may easily get bored during a long-term project and demotivation may appear. Also the language learning may seem “to have reached the plateau”. Giving positive feedback and group reinforcement in this case could ease the situation. However, if nothing seems to work, the project has to come to an end on a positive note, highlighting the benefits of this learning experience children went through.

**Reaching the final stage**

**Presentation of the final product**

There are pedagogical reasons behind the public display of the students’ project work: most prominent of all is that it contributes to a positive development of self-concept, which gives rise to their sense of personal identity. (Williams and Burden, 1997). Presentation of the end product follows a common agreement among teacher and students on the place and the audience. It can be in a classroom, a school hall, indoors as well as outdoors at public place and the audience could be fellow students or teachers, parents and friends or the wider public. Similarly it is necessary to select how to present the end product. A video can be treated as a film at the cinema; a display can be introduced as an exhibition, a play may be accompanied by printed programmes. It has to be mentioned though that whatever the place and the way of presentation the most important outcome is the sense of pride and
accomplishment that is established among students, thus promoting a strong feeling of belonging to the school community.

**Evaluation and feedback**

**Classroom evaluation**

When planning the project it is important to earmark time for evaluation of the process and the product. Class feedback sessions can be integrated into the project work schedule. They offer useful information to the teacher who can further plan effectively and adapt materials and methods accordingly. In addition, learner training on self-evaluation during project work builds self-confidence and paves the way for learner independence. It is important to help students with measuring their progress and have their progress recognized. Check lists can be created which cover units of work within the project, where children tick the objectives they achieved. A “weekly review” as a teaching feedback aid ensures that the language work does not become too haphazard. In order to be able to monitor each child in class another suggestion could be a record grid which the teacher fills at the end of each lesson using a simple grading system with comments to participation, cooperation, understanding etc. that can help to assess how the individual pupils work in the class. When circulating among the working groups, the teacher can also make notes on an “error analysis sheet” where the student can write on the corrections later. Each student needs a separate sheet divided into two columns. In the left column there is a mistake noted by the teacher and in the right one the student’s correction.

Video monitoring can also be used as a part of the project evaluation. It provides useful material for analysis; the activities can be easily replayed or it can serve as an end product of the whole work.

An alternative method of project work evaluation is to develop student portfolios where children can put their plans, timetables, objectives of the project, grammar exercises, vocabulary lists, homework tasks, reports, tests and their evaluation sheets. More language competent students can keep a class diary or a web log of what the class has achieved during project work. The entries can be made by groups working on different parts of the project or by individuals in turns (Phillips et al. 1999).

Whatever the method is used the principle to keep in mind is that classroom feedback sessions have to be positive and focus on what is important for everyone. Every single contribution has to be valued and appreciated. Some of these sessions may turn into a workshop or constructive discussions that foster group cohesion and classroom ethos. (Fried-Booth, 1986).

**Correcting**

Seen through this student-centered teaching perspective correcting children’s mistakes on the final work goes against the whole “spirit of project work”. Such a practice draws the attention to things that are wrong instead of drawing attention to things that are good. The teacher has to acknowledge that language is only a part of the project work and that credit must be given mainly for the overall impact. (Hutchinson, 1991; Hardy-Goud, 2003).

**Follow-up review**

After presenting the end products, Phillips et al (1999), further suggest some ideas for class review and feedback such as looking and reviewing each other’s work,
awarding prizes for the best contributions or selecting the best examples from the different groups for the class magazine or a wall display. These follow up activities offer the various groups opportunities to develop group evaluation skills. By creating their own evaluation tasks or questionnaires older students can be asked to give an oral or written report about what they liked, did not like, what they have learned etc. Younger students can use bar charts where they write the activity they liked the most, less and the least, or preference lists that can be springboards for classroom discussions about the project. These follow up review and feedback sessions can become very constructive as they help young learners to develop language awareness, to boost their self-confidence and develop their critical thinking skills.

**Ideas for language projects with younger children**

Though the list of topics varies and depends on the teaching context and children’s interests these are only some suggestions from my own teaching experience

- Colour posters
- Letter posters
- My journey to school
- My family tree
- My friends
- My town
- My favorite bed time story
- Things with wings…
- Things I don’t like…

**Ideas for projects with older children**

- Class Magazine; class newspaper; wall newspaper; story books
- Poetry collections
- Class photo albums, thematic cards
- Wall posters; collages; crafts and constructions
- Cross-curricular projects ie: water, forests, clothes today and in 19th century
- Surveys ie: favourite activity/food/music
- Videos; CR ROMs, DVDs
- Plays and performances; feasts

**Putting it all together**

With this article I attempted to draw attention, justify and methodologically present the case of project work in the young learner EFL context. I have the view that as language teachers we need to adopt teaching approaches that focus on the unique contribution each individual brings to the learning situation and also encourage our young learners to develop cognitively, emotionally and socially.

Project work is an authentic appeal to our young learners; it fosters children’s language awareness and their social development; it engages emotions of enjoyment and personal fulfillment establishing at the same time classroom ethos through the principles of tolerance and cooperation.
A project work syllabus opens up new teaching perspectives especially in a mixed ability context. It actually gives the plateau to teacher and students alike to perform at their own level, to express themselves and communicate feelings, ideas and views. It brings real life material into the artificial world of the language classroom and bursts children’s creativity to blossom, therefore it is enormously empowering.

For all the above reasons EFL teachers of young learners should take the advantage and integrate it in their language classrooms.

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