

## **FOSTERING STUDENTS' AUTONOMY: PROJECT- BASED LEARNING AS AN INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY**

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### **Abstract**

Independent of discipline or year of study, learner autonomy has become a topic of great interest in SL and FL pedagogy over the last decades. It is seen as the ability of learners to be responsible for the process of their own learning. In higher educational contexts, where students have long been accustomed to instruction through lecturing, their under-involvement generally leads to boredom, loss of concentration and limited learning. In light of the literature, the present paper explores the impact of project-based learning- as a non-conventional teaching strategy- on the autonomous learning of a group of 30 ESP Moroccan university students. Accordingly, the study employs an experiential practice design, which aims at engaging students in a paired project assignment to be eventually presented and discussed in class. Drawing on a reflective practice approach, the study reveals interesting findings. Specifically, project-based instruction enhances students' autonomy and self-commitment, stimulates their understanding of the topic presented and increases their motivation for language learning and speaking skills. The results also show that students enjoy using technology and multimedia aids while preparing for and delivering their final presentations. Finally, the paper concludes by stressing the limitations of teacher-centered pedagogies and strengthening the need for practitioners to incorporate autonomy-promoting strategies into classrooms.

**Keywords:** project-based learning (PBL), autonomous learning, Kolb's experiential learning, student-centered learning, class presentations

### **INTRODUCTION**

Learning foreign languages implies that people seek to cross one of the boundaries in communication. Nowadays, in the global era, communicating in English has become one of the most crucial elements. The English language has been the world's common language for decades and in today's world, it is essential for getting access to information. In fact, English is the language of science, information technology, internet, business, aviation, media, tourism and others. Learning English allows people to widen their understanding, step outside the boundaries of one's culture and immerse in other cultures. In the nineteenth century, foreign language teaching was dominated by the grammar translation method. Originally used to teach dead languages, this method emphasized the study of grammar rules at the expense of the oral use of the language. As a result, the learner found it difficult to communicate in the target language. This method was therefore criticized for ignoring two important skills in language learning namely speaking and listening. The grammar-translation method, together with other teaching methods that followed, proved deficient as it did not allow students to play an active role in learning. With the communicative method, emphasis is shifted from grammatical competence to communicative competence, and emphasis is put on the four basic language skills. Students are encouraged to engage in discussions, dialogues, role- play, problem-solving tasks, project-preparation and pair or teamwork selected on the basis of students' age, level and needs. As

for the teacher's role, she or he acts as a facilitator and/ or a guide.

At the heart of the communicative language teaching approach is learner autonomy which has recently been a major topic of discussion among academics and applied linguists. In fact, language teaching is not only about which strategy to use but also about the students' individual effort to learn that language. Thus, in this globalized era, there is an urgent need to encourage students to be autonomous learners. In other words, students need to be able to develop strategies that would enable them to take charge of their own learning inside and outside the classroom. However, despite all the interest in fostering learners' autonomy, its implementation in foreign language classrooms has minimally been achieved. With regard to the English language, researchers have focused on different strategies to foster learner autonomy; those include journal writing (Kanberi, 2013), weekly reports, storytelling...etc.). Realizing the impact of communication and presentation skills in languages, the present paper explores the impact of project-based learning, as a dynamic approach to teaching, on the autonomous learning of a group of Moroccan university students.

## PROJECT BASED LEARNING

Project-based learning, or PBL, is referred to as a pedagogical approach built upon tasks and activities to stimulate students' autonomy and encourage them to participate in their learning fully. Thus, the responsibility shifts for learning onto learners (Hafner and Miller, 2011) who become engaged in collecting information about specific topics, arranging ideas and communicating them to their peers. This process of learning creates knowledge through the transformation of experience (Kolb, 1984, p. 38). In fact, with the development of the industrial world and the demand to prepare professional graduates, the world of education is faced with the need to shift from traditional modes of instruction to more interactive student-centered approaches. Accordingly, project-based learning does not focus merely on content, but also on building skills that are likely to be needed outside the classroom context. These might include research skills, communication and presentation skills, organization and time-management skills, self and peer-assessment skills, collaboration and team-building, among others. Research shows that project-based learning raises academic achievement and students' motivation to learn since they are exposed to real-world social and professional problems and challenges and are placed at the center of the learning process.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Project based learning is actually introduced into classrooms in a number of ways. On the basis of reviewing the current theory and practices of fostering learner autonomy in EFL classrooms, the present study aims at exploring the feasibility of integrating oral PowerPoint presentations into the syllabus as a project assignment. This assignment is intended to assess students' autonomy based on their language use, understanding of the topic and management of the final product (the oral presentation). To achieve these objectives, the study adopts a reflective practice research approach that is, indeed, a kind of inquiry into one's own experience as a practitioner so as to engage in a process of continuous learning. Considered as an ability for continual self-renewal (Mitchell and Weber, 1999), reflective practice approach helps teachers identify strengths and weaknesses in their pedagogical practice in order to improve their teaching performance. There exist, in fact, a vast amount of literature presenting the models of reflective practice research. This study, however, uses Kolb's (1974) theory of experiential learning which has been considered one of the best-known theories in higher education that has guided the scholarly work for over two decades (Kolb and Fry, 1975; Kolb, 1984). This model works on the following four-stages learning cycle.



The essence of Kolb's cyclical model is a simple portrayal of the way experience is translated through reflection into concepts, and how these are in turn used as guides for active experimentation and choice of new experiences. In other words, the first stage is one's own concrete experience whereby practitioners can

register and describe what they see and feel. Then, after transforming their experience into tangible and meaningful ideas, they are able to reflect on their actions, i.e. analyzing and evaluating what worked or what failed in their teaching performance. This reflective observation phase, in turn, gives rise to the formation of an abstract conceptualization and a generalization developed from the understandings of the reflection they went through. The last stage is the active experimentation during which the practitioner applies the newly acquired theoretical knowledge to test the hypotheses made in the former phase, resulting in new experiences. To put it differently, experiences within the active experimentation stage become the starting point for the new concrete experiences. It is a cohesive process with mutually supportive stages. Moreover, it is claimed that one can enter the experiential cycle at any stage and follow its logical sequence (Kolb, 1974).

## **PROCEDURE**

As its name indicate, the experiential learning approach displays the necessity of experiential activities. My teaching experience took place at the higher school of technology (École Supérieure de technologie EST) in Casablanca, Morocco. I actually teach ESP, specifically English for sales and Marketing) to two groups of first and second year students in the department of management techniques. Since they are preparing for a career in business, the course with the first year students followed a task-based approach and was designed to introduce them to the professional communication and language skills necessary for business situations. For this, I used Market Leader elementary business English course book as it uses real resources and authentic scenarios from the business environment. As for the second year students, they were taught different aspects of marketing, sales and management with a terminology and a functional language that are more specific than those they have been taught in their first year. Therefore, with an aim to help them improve their productive proficiency in the language, the second year students were asked to apply what they have learnt. Since it is argued that productive tasks like presentations are a key to language acquisition (Nation, 2001), the students were expected to make a 15 minutes PowerPoint presentation-either individually or in pairs- following the rules and guidelines of a good presentation previously seen in class. They were given the freedom to choose any company they like and prepare its identity sheet, marketing mix, mission, vision, SWOT analysis... etc. The students were not, however, allowed to work on the same company their friends have already presented. In addition, because of the importance of multimedia use in professional presentations, students were encouraged to use combinations of images and / or videos to make their point and make their work more interesting and appealing. As for the evaluation of the project, it was worth 40% of the final grade.

By watching and reflecting on the projects done by the second year students, I could notice how engaged and interested they were. They asserted that it was the first time they were given such an assignment in English; and the first time they were supposed to deliver an oral presentation in that language. Therefore, because most of them saw it as a big challenge, they worked hard for it. Their mastery of the chosen topic was satisfactory since they had been prepared ahead of time. Other aspects of their performance while presenting were also very impressive; those mainly relate to audibility, eye contact and use of technology tools.

Therefore, based on my observation and reflection on the experience with the second year students, I was able to develop conceptual understanding of project-based learning as an interesting instructional method and the extent to which it fosters students' autonomy and enhances collaborative learning. As a result, I decided to include class presentations assignment in the first- year S2 course syllabus as well. Accordingly, at the beginning of their second semester, I informed my first year students that they were responsible for participating in a 15 minutes presentation on a particular topic of interest. They were also informed that their performance was going to be graded so that they do not take the task for granted. Immediately after, a pre-task aimed at introducing the rules and structure of class presentations and deciding on the dates and groups. I particularly encouraged them to work in collaboration with fellow students as it is generally thought that creating an intimate and supportive atmosphere can help learners feel more comfortable using the language, lead to more interaction and is likely to increase motivation. In fact, through teamwork, students can maximize their own and each other's learning (Johnson et al. 1990). The students then took one week to think of their topics; and as these were freely chosen, they were very diversified ranging from sport, leisure activities, social media and international brands to current topics in health and education. I also made myself available to be consulted for grammar, spelling, structure and organization of information. After each group gave the PowerPoint presentation, time was left for questions and discussion, and we finished by 'peer evaluation time' during which students tried to evaluate their friends' presentations pointing to its strengths and weaknesses. Peer evaluations were, in fact, meant to increase the level of attention paid to presentations and the learning that is likely to result from listening attentively.

## **FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS**

Related to the objectives set for this study, interesting findings were displayed. The first effect concerned language use. In fact, as students rehearsed delivering their talk, as was recommended, their speaking rate increased and their pauses decreased. Although these effects are not necessarily lasting, it is suggested that frequently doing such oral tasks could improve students' spontaneous communication in the long term (Herman, 1985; Nakamura, 2008). Similarly, a project assignment is indeed a practice task that involves a complete mastery of what is to be presented. Therefore, while preparing for their presentations, students were urged to look up new words and/ or unfamiliar expressions in the dictionary; this largely helped them retain new vocabulary and expand their lexical repertoire (Rundell, 1999). Second, the goal of this project assignment has been to develop learners' capacity, active engagement and interest for learning on their own. By analyzing and reflecting on students' projects, it was found that as students were in the process of gathering and organizing data for their oral presentations, they acquired an understanding of the different aspects of the topic; most of them seemed knowledgeable and well equipped and were able to respond to the questions at the end of their talk. Finally, with regard to the management of the presentations as a final product, findings could be organized into the following three aspects:

Discourse management: presentations do normally focus on more than one detail, hence the use of transitions to help the audience follow. Most students, however, failed to use logical transitions to move from one point to another or move from one slide to the next.

Paralinguistic features: these refer to non-verbal communication. Students were told about the big importance of body language, posture, hand gestures, facial expressions, rate and tone of the voice in making the oral presentation better and clearer. Paralinguistic features are particularly important for business students who will need more sophisticated communication skills in the professional world. Overall, as it was their first experience, these language features were quite respected especially as we progressed because students could learn from their peer's observations.

Use of technology: it is commonly agreed that visuals like graphs, diagrams, photos and videos can support one's ideas, add impact and interest to a presentation and help keep the audience engaged (e.g., Krajcik and Shin, 2014). Most students have shown good technical expertise in manipulating their slides, including videos from online resources. Few have sought assistance from their friends. Moreover, technology helped them in gathering information and interacting with the resources they bring. This implies that technology allows students to access knowledge more easily, to take an active part in their educational process and to be more productive.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS**

The results suggest that there is considerable promise in the use of project-based approach to enhance learners' work autonomy as students engage in some investigations and analysis of a particular issue and present what they have produced in front of their peers. In addition, the results show that academic presentations help in improving students' communication skills and understanding of the material. Our conclusions and findings are, however, subject to some limitations. First, the results in the current study should be applied cautiously to other settings since the demographics of students in the current study may differ from students in other institutions. Further studies can examine whether the same results emerge under different settings, and might provide more conclusive evidence on the implementation of project-based learning in EFL and ESP university classes. Second, foreign language learners feel strong anxiety when speaking in public; this anxiety may be higher for introverted students. In fact, being the center of attention largely influences learners' performance, as they are afraid of failure, laughter and / or mockery. As these were first year students, the teacher had not had enough time to know every student in the class mainly because of the large sample size. It would have been beneficial to try to understand each student in person. This knowledge will certainly be valuable for future studies. Indeed, knowing one's students help in choosing appropriate teaching methods that suit different learning styles and getting the introverts out of their comfort zone. Third, heavily grading the work may lead to more anxiety. Students focus on getting the grade rather than on the learning process. Some students therefore memorized their entire presentation, which affected their speaking rate, conversational voice inflection and mental blocks. Besides, although the grading system was set to be as rigorous as possible taking into consideration students' effort as well, it can sometimes be implicitly biased. For example, a student's performance in other class activities might intervene with the teacher's grading of the class presentation. Future studies need to investigate the extent to which extrinsic motivation (i.e. grades) affect learners motivation and performance, and suggest ways to motivate students intrinsically to do a particular task. Finally, though it is widely accepted that technology gives access to

massive amounts of information, it does not guarantee that it will be useful to students. A central issue is the copy and paste plagiarism, commonly referred to as 'Googling'. This occurs most often in students' academic assignments that require independent work outside the classroom. In other words, when students do not have the language or skill to research a topic, they are unable to collate, organize the information and paraphrase it before presenting it. Although, as a course instructor, I worked closely with each group and insisted on the ethical aspects of research projects assignments and on the importance of accurate referencing, plagiarism was easily recognized in some students' presentations. Those, however, were not sanctioned but were instead given a second chance to repeat their presentations and avoid the errors they had made before.

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