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# Project Based Learning: An Empowering Tool*

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## Introduction

The world has seen English language grow and acquire a new and a unique position that no other language in the world has achieved. Its importance lies not in the growth in the number of native speakers but in the increased number of people who use the language. Today it is used for everything - from international academic conferences, diplomatic and economic channels to news reports and popular culture.

Today the world is a global village and LPG (Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization) has thrown up numerous challenges in the teaching - learning scenario in terms of syllabi, materials, methodology, skills development and assessment. There are many theories and approaches to teaching a second language, some exotic and some mundane but, all have one thread in common - the desire to make SL (Second Language) acquisition as efficient and effective as possible. The form based "synthetic approach" (Wilkins 1976) to language teaching was replaced by the "analytical approach" (Wilkins 1976) in which learning was organized in terms of the purpose for which people learnt the language. Task based approach to language teaching grew out of this alternate approach to language pedagogy. Today, the focus of language teaching has shifted from the prescriptive models and methods of language proficiency to the language learner, the classroom and the teacher and 'task' has become an important element in syllabus design, classroom teaching and learner assessment.

## Task Based Teaching

Task according to Nunan (1989) is "a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form". Current interest in tasks stems largely from what has been termed as the 'communicative approach' to language teaching. The 'form based' approaches assumed that there was a direct relationship between the input

and the output. But research work in interlanguage by Pit Corder (1967) and Selinker (1972) revealed that it could not be predicted how the input would affect learners' interlanguage development.

Swain (1985) in her seminal study argued that comprehensible input was not sufficient for successful SL acquisition. More opportunities were needed for producing comprehensible output. According to her, only understanding of new forms was not enough. Language development was promoted when learners were given the opportunity to negotiate meaning and modify their output. And to provide this to students, undertaking tasks in the classroom was a vital importance. Learners carry out the task in the Target Language or in any other language to achieve the desired outcome. As language forms are not prescribed in advance, the learner's mind makes note of the new language output, attempts to produce it, and importantly, uses to adjust and adapt the input to enable them to exchange create and negotiate meanings. The language generated during this interaction provides them with opportunities to expand their interlanguage capacity, thus enabling them to "internalize it" (swain 95). In this constant process of creating a new meaning system, they adopt strategies which sometimes lead them to ignore grammatical niceties and create for themselves forms which are not sanctioned by the TL norms. Different learners adopt different strategies and different language forms to achieve their goal depending on the stage of language development, their degree of involvement with the task and the cognitive challenge the task presents. R Ellis (2000) termed this type of teaching and learning as the "psycholinguistic perspective". The works of Long (1983a, 1998), Doughty and Pica (1986) Swain (1995) Skehan (1992), Foster (1996) and Bygate (1996) show that the interaction generated in language use does lead learners to modify and develop their language system. When faced with the need to interpret language and encode meanings, learners adopt new forms and refashion their language system to meet the new demands placed on them.

Research conducted on various tasks types/projects undertaken in class revealed that small group work prompted students to use a greater range of language functions than whole class activities (Long etal 1976); more negotiation of meaning in activities took place in which the exchange of information was essential for the successful completion of the activity (Doughty and Pica 1986); problem-solving tasks prompted more interaction than debating tasks (Duff

1986). Dr. N S Prabhu, (1917) the principal architect of the Bangalore Project, justified the use of tasks in his Project on the grounds that they stimulated internal psycholinguistic processes of acquisition and Varonis and Gass (1983) found that there was more modified interaction in small groups in which the learners were from different language backgrounds and proficiency levels.

Project Work and Project Based Learning as instructional approaches offer the opportunity to create innovative learning environments. They help students to engage in meaningful activities like, problem-solving, analyzing, evaluating, collaborating, reporting, presenting etc. over a significant period of time, in order to create a product, realistic and relevant to the learners. The tasks /projects function as a bridge between using English in class and using English in real life situations outside of class (Fried-booth (1997). It does this by placing learners in situations that require authentic use of language in order to communicate, thus providing relevance to their actual needs. Project work being an active medium, learners "learn through doing". When learners work in pairs or in teams they find that they need the skills to plan, organize negotiate, make their points and arrive at a consensus on issues as to which tasks to perform, who should shoulder the responsibility for performing those tasks and how should the information be researched and presented. Thus it captures better than any other activity the two principle elements of communicative approach: motivation and relevance.

Keeping the learning outcomes of such an approach, in the immediate frame of reference, it was felt very necessary to introduce projects in the class in order to diminish the mismatch between what is taught and student needs and expectations. Though teachers took all efforts to develop their language, yet the exposure students got to use the TL (Target Language) was minimal. Hence, two projects were taught and tested to the First Year students of the Faculty of Home Science, M. S. University, Baroda. They were Collecting and lnterpreting data through a Questionnaire and making Oral Presentations.

**The Questionnaire Project**

Numerous task based projects are available to teachers who wish to teach L2 by involving their students in real world interesting activities that expose them to large amount of authentic

language. One example of this is the questionnaire project which is an excellent way to integrate the four macro skills within content and task-based activity. Questionnaire as a teaching tool is a commonly used activity to facilitate project based work in the classroom (Stoller 2OO2 Harmer 1998). It facilitates different forms of communication in the classroom and outside of it; its advantage also lies in the interaction of the four macro skills. While an equal amount of time may not be placed on each skill, yet at the end of the activity all four skills will have been utilized as the teacher together with the students transforms the classroom assignment into real world communication activity. Secondly, working on questionnaires having real life contexts brings a motivating dimension to the project. Rather than relying on generic text book activities which learners may find contrived, these activities encourage students to put their heads together and work actively to accomplish a meaningful goal. Thirdly, the questionnaire project presents an opportunity to combine focused language use with development of critical thinking (Facione 1998). According to him critical thinkers have both affective dispositions such as honesty, open-mindedness, flexibility and set of cognitive skills comprising interpretation, analyses, evaluation, inference, explanation and self regulation and the questionnaire project has the potential to increase all these cognitive strengths.

## Making Oral Presentations

Generally most students lack proficiency in oral speech. Numerous factors contribute to this insufficiency like, medium of instruction, lack of confidence to use structures, inhibition to speak fearing that if they speak something ungrammatical they would be laughed at or even lack of motivation on the part of the teachers to help them use the language etc. Proficiency in oral communication is extremely important in today's competitive world. And lack of these skills is likely to deprive the students of their space in the job market.

Making oral presentations is an effective communicative activity that has been widely adopted by EFL conversation teachers to promote oral proficiency. However, when oral presentations are assigned to the class the students find it very intimidating because the very thought of giving an oral presentation in a language other than one's own mother tongue can be a source of extreme anxiety. This feeling of anxiety causes deterioration in performance and affects novice speakers' self esteem and confidence. For teachers also, it takes a large

amount of class time. An obvious gap between the current level of performance and the intended learning experience often results in a breakdown of language production and frustration for students. However, if a comfortable low- threatening environment is created in the class, if students are properly guided, organized and are provided with a learning experience then learning of this skill will not only be beneficial but will remain a life long experience for the learners. Most importantly, it will bridge the gap between language study and language use, and make way for the use of the four macro skills in an integrated way. Helping students to collect, sift, organize, construct and write information and prepare visuals to match the content will help them become autonomous learners.

Keeping in mind the advantages got from undertaking such activities in the class, the questionnaire project and making presentations was included in the First Year English Curricula for the Faculty of Home Science. The methodology undertaken for both projects is given below.

**The Study**

The English curriculum in the Faculty of Home Science is language based and English as a subject is spread over two semesters in a year (July - December and January - June). The students enrolled in First Year have passed their Std. Xll with English as a subject from any Board/University across the country and abroad. They hail from all streams of discipline - Arts, Commerce Science. Majority of the students are from Baroda and from nearby places in Gujarat, but as this Faculty is ranked third best in Asia, many students from outside of Gujarat like, Karnataka, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Manipur etc. are also enrolled forming a microcosm of India. Students from Mauritius, Jordan etc also take admission in this faculty. Every year nearly 350 students are enrolled and are divided into four divisions, A, B, C and D each division having nearly 90-95 students. Each division has three English classes per week. Two English teachers are assigned teach English at the faculty. Each teacher teaches two divisions. The faculty follows the semester pattern in which the students have to take three internal tests of 30 marks each and a semester exam of 100 marks. In the second semester also the same pattern of internal evaluation along with the final exam is followed. Marks are converted into grades and in the final mark sheet grades are allotted to them on the basis of which students are entitled to take and pursue Major Subjects. English

grades are considered very important because when students fall short of the required grades in English they are not eligible for Major Subjects. Such students then have to opt for General Home Science who form a different division.

**Classroom Methodology**

In the first semester which spans from July to December, the Questionnaire project was undertaken. Before the Questionnaire project was assigned or even discussed, two to three hours were spent in teaching the concept of framing questions. Students were taught how to frame 'Wh' questions and questions using 'Is', 'Are', 'Did', 'Does' etc. The reasons for framing questions with such words were told to them. Next, two /three unseen passages were given to them and they were asked to frame questions using 'Wh' 'ls', 'Are', 'Did', 'Does'. This activity was given to them so that they could practice framing questions on the basis of the information present in the paragraph. When the teacher was fairly certain that the students would be able to frame questions for the questionnaire a broad topic entitled 'Fast Food in Modern Times, for the Questionnaire was presented to the class. The students were asked to bring in their perspectives on the topic for discussion. The next day, a lot of discussion took place on the various perspectives of the topic and finally one perspective was unanimously decided to work upon. The narrowed down project topic was "Popularity of Fast Food as against Conventional Food".

The next step was to prepare 25-30 questions on the topic on a four point rating scale. Students prepared the questions in groups and were asked to select 20 questions which would best elicit responses. They were also asked to refer to two models of questionnaire given in the book "Interface" by Dr. Ranu Vanikar published by Vikas Publications. Incidentally the book was also a prescribed text book for the students. A rough draft was prepared by the students and they showed it to the teacher concerned. The teacher provided feedback on a one to one basis and suggested how they could improve framing questions. Students selected 20 questions, typed out the final questionnaire and were ready to collect responses from 20 people. The breakup of the people from whom they collected responses was:

10 friends:  who were not a part of the Faculty of Home Science but were college students in the campus or studying in various other colleges

2 teachers:       teaching at the Faculty of Home Science

3 couples:       other than their parents, relatives, uncles or aunts

2 teachers:       teaching at any other faculty or college

2 Professionals: one doctor and an advocate

The rationale behind this breakup was that students should approach unknown and different types of people use language to convince them to respond to their questionnaire.

Having collected the responses they were asked to interpret the data collected and write a report on what their finding was. Before they undertook field work to gather responses, one hour/lecture was devoted to the teaching of data interpretation, inferring from the findings, presenting data and findings in the form of tables, graphs, and charts etc. and writing a report. The projects were collected on an allotted day and evaluated. The marks they received constituted one of the three internal tests of 30 marks.

The second semester saw another activity undertaken in class - oral presentations. At first, three to four lectures were spent on teaching them how to narrow down a topic from a broader perspective, how to gather information from all available sources, that is, primary and secondary sources, to read all materials and to retain information which they felt was important for explicating the subject. Further, they were asked to write out their speech and to use appropriate examples wherever they thought it was necessary. Next, they were asked to read and time their speech so that they did not exceed the time limit allotted to them. While rehearsing and practicing if they exceeded the time limit they were even advised to cut short their speech. They were asked to keep in mind two important aspects of presentations: one, not to overshoot their time limit and two, not to read the speech they had prepared. They were told that their grades would be adversely affected if the two aspects were not taken care of. In one of the classroom discussions they were also taught the various techniques of making presentations and how to make and use visuals while making presentations. Depending on the subject matter they were asked to prepare visual aids but grades were not affected if students did not make or use them. All students were given five minutes (5 minutes) each to present on the topic of their choice. The choice of the topic of presentation was left entirely on them because it was felt that if topic was imposed on them, it would create a lot of anxiety

defeating the entire purpose of the exercise. A schedule was drawn up by the teachers for presentation and each student had to present at an allotted time and date. Since two teachers shared four divisions between them, both teachers went to each others divisions to evaluate so that objectivity in judgment was maintained. Average was taken of the marks given by both teachers and those constituted the marks of the student for one of the internal test.

## Findings

In order to find out the effectiveness of both the activities, a questionnaire was administered to the students. (Appendix A). 325 questionnaires were distributed in class out of which 310 questionnaires were valid because they were answered completely. The questionnaire was divided into six parts. The first part constituted the personal details of the student. The second part dealt with questions on task based teaching; the third dealt with questions on the questionnaire project; the fourth on the effectiveness of oral presentations; the fifth on the testing pattern and the last section elicited suggestions from the students regarding the changes they required in the English course.

## The Questionnaire Project

Six questions in the questionnaire dealt with the questionnaire project that the students had undertaken. They were:

1.  What difficulties did you encounter while preparing the questionnaire?
2.  Did the task of preparing questions from a given paragraph undertaken as a class activity help you in the preparation of the questionnaire? If so how?
3.  How difficult was it to collect responses? State the difficulties encountered.
4.  Which language did you use to convince the people to respond? How did the English course taught in the class help you in this respect?
5.  State the interesting aspects of interpreting the collected responses. How did the English course help?
6.  Did you find the exercise useful? How?

Most students (75%) found it extremely difficult to frame questions on the given topic; 20% students did not encounter much difficulty in preparing the questions; 5% students did not encounter any difficulty at all. However, it was heartening to note that nearly all students said

that the activity of framing questions undertaken in the class did help them to prepare questions. 18% students felt that the exercise undertaken in the class specially helped them frame 'Wh' questions which are important to elicit information. A minority percentage of students (0.5%) said that the activity did not help them at all because the paragraph given to frame questions was different from the topic on which questions were to be framed. This response revealed that students are so much used to spoon feeding that they are unable to use their thinking skills. Teaching applicatory skills therefore assumes importance so that they can apply the knowledge of strategies to any problems or situations encountered.

A majority of students (79%) found it difficult to collect responses from the people because the respondents were not cooperative. They seemed to be disinterested in the whole exercise and therefore ignored them. The professionals who were approached were embroiled in ego problems and most students had to wait for long hours in order to seek audience with them and after that also they usually did not spare time to respond to the questionnaire. Very few students (No. 05) said that they did not have any problems while gathering data.

As regards the language students used to interact with people, it was primarily English but it had to be interspersed with Hindi or Gujarati because some respondents did not understand English. Some concepts were clarified in the local language, that is, Gujarati. Another interesting aspect written by the students was that for the respondents who belonged to the elite social class only English was used, while Hindi/Gujarati and occasionally English was used who were not comfortable with the English language.

Students found interacting with different types of people and knowing different views on the same topic as the most fascinating aspect when they were asked what they found interesting about the whole exercise. Along with this new experience there was an increased use of the English language for communication. This built their self confidence in using language in the public space. They learnt how to convince people to respond to their questionnaire, thus learning to negotiate meaning at every stage of the project.

Another interesting aspect which a majority of the students (90%) opined was interpreting the data and finding the implications of the study. Most students felt that this exercise would definitely help them when they undertake future research work. They also developed time

management skills because the entire exercise of preparing the questionnaire, gathering data, interpreting it, writing the report and its submission along with the responded original questionnaires had to be done in an allotted time frame of one month. However a minority percentage of students felt that the entire exercise was quite tiresome.

**Making Oral Presentations**

Two questions in the questionnaire were related to the making of presentations. They were:

1.  In what way did presenting on a particular topic help you?
2.  In what way did the use of visuals help you in presenting?

The most important achievement of this exercise was that majority of the students (80%) said that presenting in front of the class removed the stage fright they had and developed the confidence to stand and speak. In fact one student said that now she loves presenting in front of people. 50% students said that they came to know the different presentation skills, like how to address the audience, how to maintain an eye contact with the audience, how to modulate one's voice, and what should the posture of the presenter be, etc. 25%-30% of the students liked this exercise because they could explore different topics from various angles and said that a lot of thought went into the selection of the topic that is, which topic would be liked by their peers. This in turn also helped them to understand the points they needed to present and the explanations they needed to keep in mind if questions were asked to them. 20% students revealed that their writing skills improved. Since they wrote the speech themselves, they had to write 2/3 drafts of it. Writing of draft made them understand which structures to use to convey their meaning. It also developed their vocabulary as they tried to choose the most appropriate words to convey their intent. Finally nearly all students opined that cohesiveness and team spirit developed in them because as their problems and anxieties were similar they helped each other to succeed.

The second question was related to the use of visuals during presentations. 15% students did not use any visual aids because they thought that it would not help them; the rest 85% used visuals while presenting. According to them using visuals made the audience understand better what they were trying to convey; using them created a "huge impact", they said. 30% students opined that use of visuals helped them to place their points in a logical and

sequential manner which made it easier for them to speak. 2 girls opined that preparing visuals enhanced their creative skills.

Thus the findings revealed that language learning occurs most effectively when students have opportunities to use language for real purposes. Purposeful activities help bridge the gap between artificial classroom setting and the real world. No doubt questionnaire writing is a labour intensive activity but the most satisfying part for the teacher is to see his/her students gain skills necessary to solve problems and evaluate their own learning. Being able to integrate critical thinking with the four macro skills is an important step in students' development. The dynamic nature of this type of learning sometimes results in the project moving forward in a different direction than originally planned. This angle makes the work organic and unique to each class. It also makes it exciting, challenging and meaningful.

The process of preparing and giving oral presentations is a purposeful activity which finally ends in sharing a created product with others which serves as a springboard for meaningful interaction. Both teachers and students need a break from text books. It is a rewarding experience for low achieving students who are intimidated by past learning experiences. It provides a stimulating experience both for the teachers in developing facilitating skills and for students in training themselves to make confident presentations in public.

**Conclusion**

Project Work creates a logical link to content-based instruction The projects undertaken relate to the students' real life situations, encourages initiative, independence, imagination, self discipline, and cooperation together with the development of cross-curricular skills where knowledge gained in other subjects may be used in the English class. It is also likely that students will use L1 while working on their projects. However, rather than viewing it as subtractive we need to consider it as an additive factor. In fact students work in both domains L1 and L2/L3, constantly switching from one linguistic system to another as situation demands. So it is perfectly natural for learners to use L1 while working on a L2 project as long as the product is in English (TL). Infact it could provide realistic opportunities for realistic translation works. As students develop language by doing tasks/projects, learning takes place not under any compulsion but at their own pace. Students internalize such

learning which contributes to their cognitive development which in turn would always help to sustain themselves academically and socially. Finally, it combines in practical form both - the fundamental principles of a communicative approach and values of good education.

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