PROJECT WORK AS
THE CENTRAL PART OF THE CURRICULUM

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T*he rhythm of social change in the present world is so quick that it is difficult to assess what is needed in the near future. These accelerated changes have crucial implications in education and lead to focusing our teaching on helping learners develop skills that are essential to obtaining, organizing and using information. Skills that help learners control their lives and learning.*

The traditional approach to learning, particularly in secondary schools, has been to assume that the right ideas are in the teacher's head and that learners need to be exposed to these ideas in order to understand the world. However, in a productive mode of learning, the learner is actively engaged in a learning situation in which he becomes involved in processing information, in investigating, in making connections and solving problems in such a way that he combines reflection with practice and experience. Based on these assumptions, the authors who took part in the GTFL project (Curricular Guidelines for the Teaching of Foreign Languages in the Middle School System of Bogotá), a project that emerged out of a bigger project located in FIUN (A consultancy organization run by National University academics) proposed the inclusion of a project work approach as the central part of the curriculum. The foundations of this proposal are that the areas of learners' experience may be related to the subjects of the school curriculum and to the various forms of human intelligence.

Introduction

The present article explores some of the complexities involved in the curriculum of the GTFL project, an evolving project in which the authors took part as co-ordinators during the period 1999-2000. The GTFL project laid out a programme's educational philosophy, specified purposes and contents in the form of expected performances and articulated assessment and evaluation criteria. It emerged out of a bigger project located in FIUN, a project that sought to design curricular guidelines for four major subject areas in the middle school system of Bogotá: natural sciences, language, mathematics, and modern languages. The FIUN project was responsible for the curricular content as well as the staffing and managing of the project. The personnel –typically university academics– were subject specialists, and teacher trainers.

Central to this project was an interest in the development of competencies : 'a capacity to use knowledge in a meaningful way' (Vinet: 1999). The philosophy of education that underpinned this project was based on the idea of enabling learners to obtain knowledge through active involvement, and to apply it in meaningful situations. Discovery and experiential modes of education were, thus, central.

In the field of foreign language teaching, this notion of competency is based on the

communicative use of the language, i.e. using the language for social interaction, to perform different tasks, to survive in the context of the foreign language. The communicative approach emphasises the communicative use of the language in real-life like situations.

Some trends of the communicative approach have emphasised the use of the language in cognitively complex situations: 1. Problem–Solving Approach: *The language is used to identify problems, and come up with solutions based on evidence* (Murray: 1980); 2. Task-based approach: *The learners engage in demanding and solving complex tasks* (Prabhu: 1984,); 3. Project work: *The learners learn through active participation and co-operative work* (Fried-Booth: 1986). According to Legutke and Thomas (1991), the theoretical and practical foundations of project work came from the American pragmatists Dewey (1916) and Kilpatrick (1918), who referred to the concept of learning by and through experience.

Scope

Although the implementation of a project work approach in the public school system would pose great challenges to the teachers, the students, the schools, and the educational system at large, the following circumstances, however, led the GTFL project team to push forward a proposal based on this type of approach:

• Working on projects, with its participatory and co-operative methodology, springs from a philosophy of education that promotes a democratic view of society. This emphasis is fundamental for a country that strives for peace, disarmament and development.

• Working on projects would exert pressure on teachers, students and the government to compromise and look for ways by means of

which innovations can be brought into the educational system. Project work emphasises learner autonomy, and the importance of such qualities as self-direction, self-monitoring, and a capacity for responsible social action.

• In the view of the GTFL project team, project work represents an important move to innovation from practical experience, theory and research. There was interesting evidence as case studies and documented accounts both in the curriculum and the teaching of foreign languages. The following experiences were examined: 1. Project Zero, an educational research group at the Harvard Graduate School of Education that promotes project work in American Public schools, particularly those that serve disadvantaged populations; 2. Bell Education Trust at Bath, UK. Various projects to teach English to foreign students (Carter, 1985, 1986; Lambert, 1989). 3. Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Departmento de Lenguas Extranjeras. Different experiences to teach English to children (Vargas et al: 1999).

• Project work would represent an effort away from weak forms of the communicative approach (sometimes represented by banal dialogues, memorisation of sentences, promotion of cultural and social stereotypes based on consumption) towards more cognitive challenging work.

• Whereas the quantity of textbooks and literature promoting the communicative approach has mounted in Colombia, classroom observations and interviews continue to suggest that the structure of classroom interaction has changed very little. A stronger version of the communicative approach would advance the claim that foreign language can be an instrument of thought, a means to develop the capacities of the mind to resolve problems and come up with solutions.

• The National Curriculum, the National Curriculum for Foreign Languages, and the

theoretical framework that gave rise to the UN project, all emphasise the development of competencies and problem-solving performances as means to foster students' personal growth in a complex and changing world. These documents constituted the legal framework from which the GTFL had to be structured.

The main purposes of the GTFL were established as follows (FIUN: 2000, 35):

- to promote school-based knowledge that can be of benefit to the learners (groups in grades 10/11, and the age range between 16 and 18 years), the school community and society at large.
- to develop autonomous, responsible, critical and creative learners.
- to equip students with academic and linguistic competence to cope with academic study throughout their university courses.
- to develop an awareness with regards to the culture, and the technological and scientific products associated with the foreign language.

The concept of project work that constitutes the GTFL was adapted from Legutke and Tomas (1991). Project Work is a thematic and task-centred mode of teaching and learning which results from a joint process of negotiation among teachers, students and the schools. These themes and tasks are not derived exclusively from a list of predetermined curricular items, but from life, the school, and the tasks and experiences students will encounter outside school and, particularly, in the world of work. So, students' projects transcend the boundaries of traditional academic subject areas, and, therefore, require interdisciplinary forms of learning. Assessment as a reflective and evaluative tool for learning involves students as well as teachers and creates

dynamism in which students take on the ultimate responsibility for the quality of their work and learning (FIUN: 2000).

One source of resistance to project work may originate from the type of learning strategies promoted by these practices. Teachers still focus on grammar and mnemonic forms of teaching –as opposed to holistic, open and experiential. Teachers and students' previous experiences, values, views and expectations are to a larger degree reliant on the tradition of teacher-centred approaches. The tendency of project work to assume great identity between what native speakers might need in an experiential classroom and what foreign language learners would need, poses new challenges. Students and teachers in the foreign language classroom have limited linguistic tools for engaging in the type of spontaneous communication required by project work. Thus, any initial specification reflecting native speakers' needs should be reinterpreted and reconstructed in terms of the real possibilities of students and teachers in the context of Bogotá. This would necessarily require many more hours of real contact between the learner and the foreign language.

Conclusion

At an operative level, the implementation of any proposal –pilot project or major change– that integrates project work into the current practice would require some minimal provisions: 1. A policy of teacher development and a commitment on the part of the teachers to improve their present levels of communicative competence in the foreign language. 2. The gradual allocation of materials and teachers resources that allow classroom practices to integrate project work. 3. The allocation of more hours of foreign language

education with the view that students and teachers have more interaction with the foreign language. The social and economic cost of an innovation based on project work needs to be borne in mind but it deserves a try.

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