

Main theoretical features of a “project approach” in the classroom

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Abstract

A Project Approach is a specific kind of project-based learning that searches what students need in order to find success and fulfillment in the current and future world. There are different ways of carrying out a project work in a classroom, all of them different rather we follow the ideas of diverse authors, We have selected Legutke and Thomas, Fried-Booth and Ribé and Vidal to analyze the specific features of a project according to them.

Keywords: Project approach, learning English

Título: Principales características teóricas del aprendizaje por proyectos en el aula.

Resumen

El aprendizaje basado en proyectos trata de hallar qué necesitan los estudiantes para encontrar el éxito y la satisfacción profesional en el mundo actual y también en el futuro. Hay diversas maneras de llevar a cabo un trabajo por proyectos en el aula, todas ellas diferentes, según sigamos las ideas de unos u otros autores. Hemos realizado una selección de algunos de ellos para analizar las características específicas del aprendizaje basado en proyectos según Legutke y Thomas, Fried-Booth y Ribé y Vidal.

Palabras clave: Aprendizaje por proyectos, Inglés.

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The Project Approach is a specific kind of project-based learning that brings a great number of advantages to any classroom and searches what students need in order to find success and fulfillment in the current and future world.

There are different ways of carrying out a project work in a classroom, all of them different rather we follow the ideas of diverse authors, although there are plenty of overlapping features between all of them.

We are going to select some of them and analyze the specific features of a project according to them. The authors selected are Legutke and Thomas, Fried-Booth and Ribé and Vidal.

1.- LEGUTKE AND THOMAS

Following Legutke and Thomas explanations, a project has a full *educational role*, giving to the students the chance to work in groups together, fighting for a common goal and trying to provide direction and some possible routes to a more *democratic* and *participatory* class with students having to make in group several important decisions.

A project work is a *theme-centered* and *task-centered* mode of teaching and learning, with several tasks all addressed to the achievement of the final task. This results from a joint *process of negotiation* between all participants.

For Legutke and Thomas, a project might be divided into several steps:

Opening: Talking about the task, the final goal and the steps students have to follow to accomplish it.

Topic orientation: The whole project is devoted to a concrete topic and consequently to its related vocabulary.

Research and data collection: in this step the project is dedicated to seek for good information about the topic, sometimes with specific goals to be achieved.

Preparing data presentation: in an attractive not boring and interesting layout.

Presentation: to show the information gathered.

Evaluation: there is a continuous feedback on what students are discovering throughout the project.

For a *successful implementation* of a project, Legutke and Thomas stand for the idea of using the term *backward planning*. This means that a “main target task” is identified and other “preparatory tasks” arise naturally out of the need to fulfill this main task.

Then teacher and learners need to sequence the crucial preparatory tasks with a certain degree of flexibility and so being ready to implement some on-going adjustments in the management of task execution if needed.

The *teacher's role* becomes that of *coordinator and facilitator* of the learning process, not meaning that he/she abdicates his/her responsibility towards the learners but rather the opposite, as the teacher carries the responsibility for the learning process as a whole and retains the right to intervene with help, advice or to set new and fresh targets whenever is necessary.

Regarding the *learner's role* in a communicative project-based classroom, greater *independence, autonomy and responsibility* are placed on the learner with a certain amount of *power and control* and with a role that can be seen as more *demanding*.

A project work is a way of *experiential learning*: learning through doing and experiencing.

This view of the learners' role can be divided into three parts:

- *Learning in the here and now.* Instead of learning about something for some indeterminate future reason, learners are concerned in learning about something which is related to their present reality. All the learner's abilities are involved in the learning process, for instance affective, intellectual and physical abilities.
- *Experimentation and reflection.* In this role, learners are discoverers. They find out about things through a process of hypothesis making, verification experimentation.
- *The project learner is also reflective.* The learner is encouraged to reflect back on the project, to draw conclusions and to make new hypotheses which will affect future project work. This is also possible thanks to a continuous feedback that they receive throughout the entire project.

We have to mention the *increased responsibility*, although not absolute, that the learner in the project classroom enjoys, and also the increased sense of *independence and autonomy* in his/her learning, due to the following reasons:

- Projects increasingly include the learner in the decision-making process about topics, content and process materials, the learning and the management of it.
- They encourage independent decision-making and give responsibility for these decisions to the learner and the cooperative group. The group has to make several choices and some of the good or bad results clearly depend on these decisions.
- They take into account the relationship between learners. This is something new, as in a traditional educational model only the learner/teacher relationship was taken into account, and a much more individualistic and competitive learning was prevailing. The existence of learning groups with collaborative and cooperative members that seek for a common goal is needed and essential for a successful project work implementation in the classroom. However, some problems may arise: shy students may not take part, students may participate only in their strength areas and may not develop other skills or abilities, and also some problems may appear in learners that have other behavioral and cultural expectations opposite to those of collaborative learning.

The use of *experiential cycles* always increases the *learners' consciousness* for understanding, managing and improving their own learning. There are four steps:

- 1.- *Preparation of the experience.* In this step the essential is planning, using the knowledge, skills and confidence and anticipate the language to be used in the next experience. Some new vocabulary is also taught.
- 2.- *Experience,* based on hypothesis, doing and trying out. Learners try to design several covers for the record and finally choose the one they prefer. They also create a song that they feel is going to be successful.
- 3.- *Review,* processing the experience and being aware of what they felt, do and find out. In this step there is also a language development. Where their expectations met?

4.- *Making_connections*. Transferring learning to new situations and seeing things differently; Being able to change circumstances and to apply what was learnt to their future experiences.

2.-RIBÉ AND VIDAL

Regarding Ribé and Vidal's ideas we can recognize the existence of several types of tasks in a project, belonging to the three categories in which they divide them.

First generation tasks refer to typical *communicative tasks* used in the classroom, as can be using role play activities. The aim of a first generation task is to develop *communicative ability* in a specific area of the language.

Second generation tasks are more challenging than first generation tasks, involving learners not only to manipulate language, but also to use *general cognitive abilities* as *handling or organizing* information. Language becomes a vehicle for doing a 'real' piece of work.

Third generation tasks are similar to second generation tasks but they have the wider purpose of trying to develop the *personality* of the student, seeking to fulfill wider educational objectives as an attitudinal change, learner awareness or motivation. They have a high degree of authenticity, globality and integration of language and contents. These tasks also involve all the aspects of the individual's personality, previous experience and knowledge, including artistic, musical, literary interests and hobbies. Creativity is usually the factor that links all these elements.

For Ribé and Vidal, a project should be divided into the following ten basic stages:

1. Creating a good classroom atmosphere
2. Getting the class interested
3. Selecting the topic
4. Creating a general outline of the project
5. Doing basic research around a topic
6. Reporting to the class
7. Processing feedback
8. Putting it all together
9. Presenting the project
10. Assessing and evaluating the project

It is interesting to highlight the importance they give to *affective factors* such as creating atmosphere, or stimulating students' interest and also the fact that learners have to be fully involved in the choice of the project's topic.

3.- FRIED-BOOTH

For *Fried-Booth* one of the main defining characteristics of a project work is that it takes place both *in*, but more importantly, *outside* the classroom context. She differentiates between *full-scale projects*, that are mostly developed out of the class and *bridging* or *motivating* activities, which take place within the classroom. She highlights that both are closely linked, as bridging activities normally are a way of preparation for the full-scale project.

Fried-Booth places "project work" at the end of a continuum from *controlled language use* to *free language use* and maintains the distinction between accuracy and fluency.

According to her, a full-scale project involves three main stages:

1. *Classroom planning*. In which students in collaboration with the teacher, discuss the content, scope and specific language needed for their project, and also some ideas about interviews, visits, or ways of getting the material they might need.

2. *Carrying out the project.* The students go out of the classroom to carry out the tasks they have planned. It is important to realize that at this point they will be using all four skills - reading, writing, speaking and listening - in a naturally integrated way.

3. *Reviewing and monitoring the work,* including discussions and feedback sessions during and after the project. The teacher would give advice and comments; they would also use the group analysis of the work, and self-monitoring by the participants.

4.- CONCLUSIONS

As we have seen, there are different characteristics of a project approach depending on what author we are considering. But all of them share some global characteristics. Communication between students is clearly essential, and the implication of students is also an important factor for the success of the project. There is always a global task that has to be fulfilled, and the role of both teachers and students is essentially different if we compare it with previous kind of approaches to learn languages.

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