

The E-Project Work: A Means of Authentic Language Practice

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Abstract:

In Algeria, a new instructional content was introduced where it has been stressed the need for a new clinical type of assessment that targets authentic language learning situations. The aim of the study then, is to explore the familiarity of EFL teachers to employ the E project in their classrooms for learning measurement sakes. According to the research findings that adapted a semi structured questionnaire, it has been concluded that, although some teachers have received a pedagogical training in addition to the university one, no nuance between outset and inset trainings exists. That seems to be dreadful; as no kind of official partnership exists between the institutions of National education, that is in charge of recruiting EFL teachers and the university, where would be teachers merely receive a modest scaffolding for teaching and evaluation, resulting in the issue of massive clinging testing that is the necessary evil.

Keywords: Change- language learning-assessment challenges -assessment E- Eproject EFL teachers.

1. Introduction

In the worldwide educational setting, there has been a deep implementation of modern strategies to the whole process of instruction. In that wave of change and innovation, the secondary school EFL curriculum witnessed the lion's of evolution in terms of general and specific aims alike, including topics, skills, and functions; a curriculum that focuses on independent learning through the project and the e-project mainly as an effective tool for e-learning which became a sine-qua-non in the today's learning enterprise.

Hereby, the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom was highly concerned with a heavy reference to language assessment which is project geared. The latter however, has proved to be a challenge for Algerian EFL instructors due to the fact that the implementation of the e-project as an assessment device, was not well studied in the Algerian context among policymakers, and rather done at random. The challenges related to the use of the e-project work for English language assessment are introduced as the main focus of this study.

2. Theoretical Considerations

Here, the most significant theoretical considerations to the e-project work are presented.

2.1. Change and Innovation:

Algeria has become familiar with the concept of educational reforms since its independence in 1962. In the past 20 years, as many developing nations did, Algeria, managed to identify a revised education system as a strong pillar of

economic progress; this obviously the rationale for educational change and innovation in our country (Mami, 2013).

In 2004, the mission statement ‘Thinking Schools, Learning Nations’, which was widely adopted has turned into ‘Teach less, Learn more’ with more focus on quality rather than on quantity (Maroun et al., 2013). That meant less dependence on rote learning, receptive tests that all only drop in the one size fits all instruction.

Moreover, innovations in educational approaches demanded new techniques of assessment owing to the fact that “a successful education reform policy depends on frequent and consistent measurement” (Maroun et al.2003,p.23). Its practicality however, is still precarious and could not comply with the Algerian ELT classroom reality.

2.2. Project-Based Learning within the Reform:

No one would refute the fact that any well designed school curriculum considers assessment an essential component and a main professional obligation for successful classroom management that are said to be, in the light of current trends in instructional settings, synergistic partners for catching up with effective education (Hinton, 2006), involving assessment tools that have implications for learners’ motivation and the learning process alike, in this respect Gronlund (2003) posits that poor assessment practices can lead to a total learning failure in a nutshell.

This is closely matched to the view that assessment, if appropriately practised, can realize a positive washback on educational practices, in his clear words Stiggins (2004) believes that, “If teachers assess accurately and use the results effectively, then students prosper. If they do it poorly, student learning suffers”, leading to serious classroom management issues, such as frustration, lower motivation levels, off-task behaviours, and even disengagement from the

learning task (Levin, et al., 2005). In the same vein, Stiggins' (2004) words addressing the 'students' prosperity', 'students' sufferance' is a clear interpretation to the concept of negative and positive washback.

In the outset, it is necessary to review that the newly shaped curriculum in Algeria is built on the principle that all students can learn equally well if the needed kind of instruction is received. This also echoes the fact that learners should be accompanied with well-versed instructors in communication and who must be kept abreast with new educational methodologies through relentless action research, the fact which is rather to put more weight on the responsibility of the EFL teachers to meet the kind of teaching that serves the students to ascertain their adaptability and usefulness to the changing world.

Admittedly, the assessment type in the national EFL curriculum respects the principles of the Competency Based philosophy to instruction that mainly takes into account knowledge construction, in addition to authenticity of the learning process, i. e. contextualization, the requirement of problem-solving, active and learner-centeredness also, as significant pedagogical aims to meet (Fox, 2001). In the Algerian educational ground, Ait Abdesselam posits that "the Competency Based Approach lays on the principle that the learners' knowledge is constructed by action and individual practice" (2005,p.46).




Hereby, what is being said stresses the requirement of performance assessment that is an integral section of teaching and learning as it is applied for motivational diagnosis, evaluation and intrinsic as well as extrinsic feedback purposes.

Due to the nature of such a curriculum that mainly seeks to meet both civic and character development, and rather draws on the evolution of the communication skills that are necessary for a myriad of real-life targets (Louznadji, 2009), criterion-referencing standards then, are demanded to interpret the scores of tests for the sake of an obvious determination whether or

not the student is able to proceed to the following unit, section, sequence, or course of instruction.

It is worth saying here that the type of assessment which is criterion-referenced is in tune with the going up understanding that the potential value of measurement extends traditional testing in terms of strengthening the students' productivity and performance (Mc Alpine et al., 2002).

Criterion referencing this way, is rather reinforcing instruction rather than used for mere learners' ranking. The main considerations for assessment dealing with the EFL curriculum in Algeria favours the principle of providing explicit information about what a learner is able to do (Roegiers, 2006). Obviously, they involve the following,

-  Assessment has to reflect the approximate proportion of emphasis of the course,
-  Principles to assessment should be respected,
-  Criterion-referenced assessment requires the explicit definition of terminal behavior.

Beside tests, performance assessment that refers to the process in which students demonstrate their ability or knowledge through activities that are often direct and active such as interviews, role plays, school forums, debates, group work and so on (Hadji, 2005); should require the implementation of other assessment forms such as portfolios as a self-assessment means that informs the teachers about different aspects of their work (Kilpatrick, 1918, as cited in Finch, 2007) to mean that the task of collaborative project is the one in which the whole learner is involved, leading him/her to the achievement of a tangible goal, usually in the form of a concrete product.

2.1.1. Origins of Project Work

The project approach has found advocates in the world and reached the field of language education in the light of the ‘Progressive Era’ in America. Indeed, many linguists consent that the Progressivist John Dewey was the mainstream outstanding figure to promote the project work in the last 1800’s, followed by William Heard Kilpatrick (1918) who was another outstanding figure of the 20th century, promoting project work through his pamphlet *The Project Method* that had a great impact on the pedagogy of teaching at schools (Novack, 1960).

In considering Dewey’s thought to the project approach, in his article ‘John Dewey’s theories of education’, Novack (1960) shows that this progressivist aimed at integrating the school with society and the process of learning with the actual problems of life; clarifying that Dewey sees that group activity, under self - direction would make the classroom a miniature republic.

From this perspective, education then, must adapt to the chronologically changing world by creating new instructional strategies, amongst which project-based learning. Before moving deeply into this strategy to the teaching/learning process, an attempt to briefly define ‘project work’ will be presented as follows.

2.1.1. Definition of Project Work

More specifically, in the English classroom, for Beckett and Slater, “a project work was introduced into English as a second language (ESL) education as one way to reflect the principles of student-centered teaching” (2005, p.108).

As previously discussed, for the sake of meeting a comprehensive definition to the task of project work, it is important to borrow Dewey and Kilpatrick’s words in their writings in the first half of the 19th century, saying that an educational project is a “Whole-Hearted purposeful activity”

(Kilpatrick, 1918, as cited in Finch, 2007, p .3) to mean that the project task is the one in which the whole learner is involved.

Nevertheless, Legutke and Thomas also conceive the project work as a task- centered mode of teaching and learning which results from a joint process of negotiation between all participants. In a nutshell, they claim that “a project work realizes a dynamic balance between a process and a product orientation” (1991 as cited in Finch, 2007, p.3)

Similarly, Hawes (1988, p.88) interprets the concept as “any series of activities which are integrated so as to lead students to the achievement of a tangible goal, usually in the form of a concrete product”. As project work gained increasing attention, it became center of focus for numerous educators.

To conclude, in comprising that mosaic range of definitions, it can be implied that a project work involves the learner’s research and investigations which culminate in end - product.

2.1.2. The Defining Characteristics of Project Work

In dealing with its features and characteristics, Eyring (1997, p.4) proposes three main ones to the project work:

- Student negotiated syllabus: It indicates that the syllabus for the language program is developed through negotiation with students. In doing so, students act actively in every step of the project work, deciding on its own topic, how to process the project and define the target product.
- Extended research: A project work grants the learners an opportunity to move beyond fix- form classroom activities, using a variety of research sources.
- Collaborative assessment: It is a striking feature of project work, making it not only a teaching approach, but also an assessment tool

through students' cooperation and rather collaborative skills can be assessed.

Regarding the fact that project has, for some time, been receiving attention in general and vocational education in particular, other characteristics were suggested by different linguists:

- It engages students in an array of cognitive skills such as conceptualizing and inquiring (Fried - Booth, 1986).
- It is both process and product - oriented (ibid).
- It allows the learners to decide partially about the criteria of assessment (Stoller, 1997).

All in all, the above characteristics of project work, imply that the latter requires learners to perform various activities that are built around authentic assessment, collaborative work, self - monitoring and most importantly critical thinking.

2.1.3. Rational for Project Work in the Language Classroom

One of the most interesting definitions of project work is that of Katz and Chard (1992, p. 1) in their article '*The Project Approach*' contending that, "the project approach builds self-confidence, encourages creativity and other dispositions, and offers opportunities for children and parents to work closely together in support of the school program".

The theoretical rational of the project approach as they added is "based both on a specific view of the main goals of education and a developmental approach to implementing those goals" (Ibid, p.8). By cause and effect, alternative assessment seeks to capture the learners' total litany of skills and competences to set expectations that are appropriate within the cognitive, social and academic development of the learner (Sanchez, 2002).

In down to earth terms, the implementation of project methodology in the English language education, as a kind of performance assessment, has been associated with pushing students' responsibility in their learning process (Fried-Booth, 1982). As such approach gained greater foothold in the language classroom setting, project work was proved to be valuable in a number of manners. In what follows, the most striking of the benefits of this teaching method will be summarized. These include the following.

a) Fostering Learner Autonomy:

Project work provides excellent opportunities for independent learning. Students are allowed to exercise choice, make decisions, plan their work, discuss with their group members about what information to look for, write and up reports.

Project work thus, is the key to assign students greater responsibility; to this, Leung (2005, p.15) posits, "it [project work] is considered an effective means to help students form their autonomous learning attitude".

b) Allowing for Learner centeredness;

Needless to recall, a learner is no more spoon - fed with information in the history of learner - centeredness, but rather an active agent in his / her classroom. In this context, Dietel et al (1991, 2) admit that "from today's cognitive perspective, meaningful learning is reflective, constructive and self - regulated. People are seen not as mere recorders of factual information, but as creators of their own unique knowledge structures". For this sake, project work on its own right, allows students of mixed abilities to work and hold equal responsibilities and chances.

d) Enhancing Motivation:

It is widely believed that project work introduces novelty in the language classroom by shrinking the train-train of routine as one of the crucial problems which besets the teacher is how to motivate the learners. Hawes claims,

Projects motivate students because they provide a reason for learning the language (i.e, the language becomes a vehicle for accomplishing the project) and they are reliable within a relatively short period of time. If properly planned and orchestrated a project not only increases motivation but also gives a sense of direction to the language learning.

(1988, p .98)

So, instead of being viewed passive recipients in the classroom, learners play an active role during the different steps of the project. Furthermore, Fried-Booth (1982) highlights that project work enhances students' motivation.

e) Practicing English Skills in an Integrated way:

Project work provides the utopia for the use of language skills in an integrated way. It enables the students to understand the necessity to build a relationship between the four language skills. Fried-Booth (1986) recommends the use of communicative activities and project work through this process, speaking, listening, reading and writing are all practiced in an integrated manner.

f) Using Language for Authentic Communicative Purposes:

Project work provides the context for authentic language use. It requires the use of language for genuine and purposeful communication. Also, for the sake of improving what is taught, Fried-Booth (1982, p.98) posits that “a project work would enable work to be carried out in an entirely authentic context beyond the ‘artificial authenticity’ that, by definition, is the only kind

that can be achieved in a classroom”. Thus, students learn better by doing, and project work is an excellent opportunity for experiential learning.

2.1.4.General Overview of Assessment Challenges

Algerian EFL teachers are unfamiliar with competency-based assessment that is “the measurement of student’s competency against a standard of performance and the process of collecting evidences to analyze student’s progress and achievement” (Idrissi et al, 2017, p. 57).

Issues that are emanating from the factor we mentioned arise at all levels of school program development and research, comprising the project of informing education policy; planning and execution of performance assessment tasks (Graham, 2005).

The practice of implementing new types of assessment is seen as effort-demanding “because of the profound shifts required in teacher-learner power relations, and due to the nature of teacher professional learning” (Schweisfurth, 2011, p. 421).

Additionally, a change that is said to be based on packaged pedagogy imported from outside often fails to respond to the demands of the new, local context. Accordingly, “when an innovation fails, there is a tendency to blame the way it was implemented rather than criticize the idea itself” (Fullan quoted in Wall, 1996, p. 339).

Arguably, ELTs are perceived to have an inadequate background in assessment to meet the demands of implementing a new curriculum (Malone, 2011; Popham, 2009). ELTs are said to lack “assessment literacy”, or what Inbar-Lourie (2008) calls, “the assessment skills and understandings currently perceived as vital for conducting language assessment in educational setting” (p. 386).

Other related obstacles that impede teachers' assessment practices include their lack of deep understanding of the subject matter and lack of instructional strategies that promote problem-solving. Teachers are often tied to their traditional instructional approaches and find it difficult to embrace and implement innovative and unfamiliar approaches.

Assessment literacy provides pedagogical authority and intellectual force to review the purposes for which a test is set, including the appropriateness of its items and tools, conditions and what the post-test situation would be.

Being literate in assessment is as highly valuable as other professional skills, and it rather necessitates reliance on discussion, analysis, criticism and questioning issues that are relevant to the context (Benmostefa, 2014). Ultimately, Popham believes that, “it seems that assessment literacy is a commodity needed by teachers for their own long-term wellbeing, and for the educational well-being of their students” (2009, p. 11).

3. Research Findings

The investigator conducted a research using a questionnaire for more than 50 EFL teachers in Algeria in different secondary schools. The researcher could meet the teachers face to face in an educational seminar that was held with inspector of education to discuss special ELT issues for both experienced and novice teachers. The research questionnaire aimed at testing the hypothesis we put and most importantly unveil the reality of project work practice for an authentic language practice in the Algerian EFL classroom. The questionnaire results confirmed the following.

- **Item One:** Do you have an idea about the types of project-based learning and assessment?

Through these findings, the target is measuring the teachers’ knowledge about the various types of tasks that all together work under the concept of project work.

Pie-chart. 2.1.Teacher’s knowledge about the types of the project work



- **Item Two:** Where do you learners get the topics for the English language projects from?

Table.2.1. Authenticity and teacher-learner collaboration in project-based learning and evaluation.

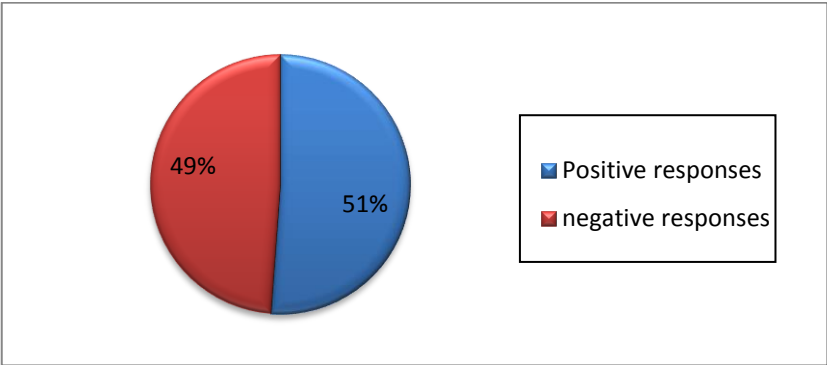
The table above seeks to find out the teacher-learner collaboration in the process of project work and checks its correlation to learner-centeredness.

Suggestions	Number	Rate
- The one that proposed in the text book New	21	51,21%
- I propose one that suits them better	13	31,7%
- I provide them with a list of topics and they	05	12,19%
- They can come out with a topic	02	4,87%
- - Others (please mention them or some of	00	00%

Item Three: Do your learners receive feedback after presenting the project?

The pie-chart below indicates the teachers’ investment in project work to evaluate teaching and learning alike, plan effective feedback and overhaul what is needed for a more effective and fruitful English language learning.

Pie-chart 2.2. Evaluation through project work.



4. Discussing the Findings

The compendium of the gathered information from the teachers and learners’ questionnaires enabled the researcher to be open-eyed on many details and facts related to the target issue.

As previously stated, the teachers’ declaration to not being trained in the English language education was a direct admittance to their ignorance to most of the current competency-based approach procedures and techniques amongst which, the project work represents the backbone.

Hence most of their responses to the questionnaire items ascertained their clinging to traditional assessment or rather swinging between former and current assessment procedures and even the aversion of some of the teachers to project-based assessment. The results lead the investigator to assume that those facts would be enormously contributive to adjust many things about the process of project-based learning and assessment in the Algerian EFL classroom.

5.Conclusion

All in all, it could be shown that project-based learning is rather a complex task requiring from a bottom down perspective hard work and utmost efforts that engage both teacher and learners in a relentless process, allowing by that the teacher to be a reflective practitioner and innovative in his / her own teaching pedagogy, and learners to be monitoring their personal learning and rather be acquainted with strategies to life-long self-learning.

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