Exploring a context sensitive project work for the Algerian EFL classes: The case of first-year secondary school

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Abstract

Project work has been introduced within the frame of the Algerian competency teaching as a tool for applying the newly acquired knowledge and skills in a concrete manner. However, it seems that this activity is underexploited in both the Algerian middle and secondary school English language classes. This study intends to promote a context sensitive methodology for teaching and learning through project work in the Algerian English language classes. After analyzing the existing projects in the middle and secondary school textbooks through a content analysis grid, a sample innovative project plan for the first-year secondary school textbook is devised and applied. This novel project plan involves, for instance, using explicit guidance in the textbooks, placing the project plan at the onset of the unit, and presenting the project end product. The evaluation of this project through classroom observation and students' diaries shows that this innovative instructional device allows learners to apply affectively the learned language items, interact in the target language, and get familiar with the objectives of the unit. Consequently, this study suggests for the Algerian syllabus designers, textbook authors, and teachers to orchestrate project work carefully in the Algerian English language teaching/learning context.

Keywords: Project work, competency, EFL textbook, middle/secondary school education

مُلَخَّصُ البَحْثِ

دراسة تجريبية حول العمل بالمشاريع في اقسام اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في الجزائر : المستوى:سنة أولى ثانوي

تم إدراج العمل بالمشاريع في إطار المنهج الجزائري القائم على التعليم بالكفاءات كأداة لتطبيق المعارف و المهارات المكتسبة بشكل ملموس. غير انه، يبدو أن هذا النشاط غير مستغل في أقسام اللغة الانجليزية في كل من المستويين المتوسط و الثانوي بالجزائر.تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تعزيز منهجية التعليم و التعلم من خلال إدراج العمل بالمشاريع في أقسام تعليم اللغة الانجليزية في الجزائر.بعد تحليل المشاريع الحالية في الكتب المدرسية للطور المتوسط والثانوي من خلال شبكة تحليل المحتوى ، تم تصميم وتطبيق نموذج جديد قائم على العمل بالمشاريع لكتب السنة الأولى للتعليم الثانوي.تتضمن هذه الخطة الجديدة، على سبيل المثال، استخدام إرشادات واضحة في الكتب المدرسية، ووضع خطة المشروع في بداية الوحدة وتقديم المشروع النهائي مع نهايتها.تبيّن من خلال تقييم هذا المشروع عن طريق الملاحظة الصفية ومذكرات الطلاب أن هذا المشروع التعليمي المبتكر يسمح للمتعلمين بتطبيق عناصر اللغة المستفادة بشكل فعال والتفاعل في اللغة المستهدفة والتعرف على أهداف الوحدة. وعليه، تقترح هذه الدراسة لمصممي المنهج الجزائري، ومؤلفي الكتب المدرسية، والمدرسين أن ينظموا أعمال المشروع بعناية في سياق تعليم / تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية في الجزائر.

الكلمات المفتاحية :العمل بالمشاريع ، الكفاءة ، كتاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ، التعليم في الطور المتوسط / الثانوي

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1. Introduction

Project work is work is not a new approach to teaching; it is rather an old approach that dates back to the work of John Dewey and Kilpatrick at the beginning of the 20th century [1]. Unlike encyclopedic

learning, project work aims at making the voice of the learner heard and making him experience with the language itself rather than learning about it. However, due to many concerns about this approach such as its difficulty, its viability, childish nature, and its assessment, its use has waned until the beginning of the 1980s (the advent of learner-centeredness) in foreign language classrooms.

The development of interactional theory, the rediscovery of Vygotsky's socio-constructivism, and the promotion of competency-based teaching in English as second language (ESL) curricula has renewed interest in project work. According to Beckett [2] project work has been promoted in second language research (SLA) because it provides opportunities for comprehensible input and comprehensible output. Comprehensible input refers to Krashen's [3] suggestion of extensive exposure to input that is tuned to the learner level and comprehensible output refers to the learner use of language in communication.

Consequently, as project work is considered the most learner centered activity [4], it has been promoted in SLA for its capacity to expose the learner to the target language and for its capacity to open avenues for meaningful interaction in the target language. Indeed, project students experience with language at various levels; they listen, read, write and interact in the target language while implementing their project topics.

Competency-based language teaching (CBLT) equally promotes project work to bridge the gap between theory and practice. The components of a competency (i.e., knowledge, skills, and attitudes) that are dealt with in separation are combined and integrated in project work. Therefore, CBLT uses project work as a tool to achieve its major principles, that is, the mobilization of knowledge, skills, and attitudes in real life tasks. Project work then functions as a type of a global integration task to be carried out at the end of a sequence of instruction or at the end of a unit of study.

The Algerian school reform of 2002 introduced project work into the Algerian middle and secondary school English foreign language (EFL) syllabuses as part and parcel of competency-based teaching. It is stated in the first year secondary school textbook that project work "seeks to make the attainment of objectives visible, i.e., concrete…" [5]. In other words, the theoretical knowledge acquired or covered in the lessons of English is applied in project tasks to show visibly whether the learners have indeed mastered what they have been taught.

Similarly, Aimeur [6] points out that project work in the Algerian EFL textbooks is considered not as a learning situation, but as target situation. In simpler words, project work is not applied to introduce and acquire new learning, but to mobilize the newly acquired knowledge in complex tasks. The learner acquires new concepts and skills through regular textbook activities; and, then he/she reuses them in parallel and different project sub-tasks.

However, previous studies on project work show that the way projects are formulated in the Algerian textbooks is defective and this makes them dysfunctional [7]. Among the concern raised by many scholars about this instructional activity are its reduced function, its layout, its lack of provision, and its lack of guidance. On the whole, most of these studies argue that teachers and are not guided enough to implement this complex activity effectively.

Specialists in project-based learning such as Sheppard and Stoller [8] argue that project work in EFL classes should be implemented carefully. For example, they argue that "Incorporating project work into more traditional classrooms requires careful orchestration and planning". Learners, for instance, should be shown when and how to carry out project tasks so that to make provision for interactive and meaningful tasks. Similarly, Ribé [9] suggests providing explicit guidance for both the teachers and the learners about project implementation, notably for EFL and ESL teachers who are not habituated with this instructional approach.

In a similar vein, the researcher experience with project work at secondary school shows that the Algerian EFL students consider project work as a tool for creating humor and fun in the classroom. During project implementation in an Algerian secondary school EFL classroom, the researcher attempted to trigger interaction to introduce the project topic, then one of the best students retorted saying "now it's ok. Let's start the lesson". This anecdotal incident shows that Algerian EFL students may be do not consider project work as what they expect to do in the classroom. As Beckett [10] points out, probably they consider serious learning as just the study of grammar and lexis.

On the basis of the above background, on the basis of the researcher's experience with project implementation in the Algerian secondary school, and on the basis of the researcher prior's study of project work in his Magister project, this study suggest an alternative plan for the application of project wok in the Algerian context. This plan takes into account the learners' and teachers' beliefs that have been investigated earlier by the researcher [11], the researcher's prior experience with project implementation under competency-based teaching for at least 7 years, and recommendation for project implementation presented in the expert literature.

2. Research methodology

The present study uses document analysis to analyze the first-year Algerian secondary school textbook, "*At the Crossroads*", using a set of criteria derived from the review of the literature. This is in order to identify the learning objectives, as well as to assess the effectiveness of the project work framework. Additionally, the study uses classroom observation to document and appraise the new project model.

2.1. Document analysis

Documents, according to Marwick [12], are written texts that give *"witting"* or *"unwitting"* evidence. That is, they provide the researcher with information either intentionally or unintentionally suggested by its writer. Since this study is concerned with textbook evaluation and with the development of a new project model, document analysis is of crucial importance for exploring the rationale behind the presentation and construction of the existing project work in the textbook and for identifying its objectives. It goes without saying that textbook analysis followed a carefully established scheme. For reviewing the criteria of analysis, please refer to Appendix A.

2.2. Analysed documents

The analysed documents are the textbook of first-year secondary school, its syllabus, as well as its accompanying documents. The textbook, "*At the Crossroads"*, which constitutes the major corpus of this study, is made up of five instructional units. Each unit revolves round a thematic issue and include one project, and each unit is, in turn, divided into sequences and sub-sequences (i.e., rubrics). Project work allegedly runs in parallel with the unit unfolding and it culminates at the end of each unit [13].

2.3. Classroom observations

The observation of the implementation of the new project model was necessary to determine its effectiveness. In other words, it is primary to look at whether the innovative project applied in the first-year EFL secondary school classes makes the application of the learning gains a concrete reality. As Bell states "Direct observation may be more reliable than what people say in many instances" [14]. Indeed, observation determines what actually happens in reality.

This classroom observation is carried out through a systematic observation scheme that is devised for this purpose. The criteria of the observation schedule (see Appendix B) are derived from the review of the syllabus objectives, that is, the first year textbook, teacher's book, syllabus, and accompanying documents.

The novel project framework was applied by the researcher in a first-year classroom at Slimani Slimane secondary school in djelfa in September and October 2019. A whole sequence of project implementation was showcased during six sessions. An observer (A colleague teacher) was trained to code the observation schedule during classroom observation.

The project was devised in a way to reflect the language forms and functions of the unit in the view of avoiding perturbation of the learner schooling course.   Additionally, the researcher opted for the same theme as the one suggested in the first unit of the textbook in question.

3. Findings and discussions

This section presents the findings from the analysis of the content of the first year textbook, "*At the Crossroads*", and its accompanying documents. The findings are organized in a form of generic topics (i.e. project layout and guidance, project work topics, content, methodology, and assessment.

3. 1. Project layout & guidance

•*Providing guidance on project implementation in the textbook /teachers' book*

The first year textbook package provides some guidance about project implementation. The teacher's book, for instance, invites teachers to form groups at unit opening and attempts to illustrate how project work realises the principles of competency-based approach. However, students are only supplied with a short paragraph at the beginning of the textbook that can be exploited to gain some information on project implementation. Showing learners when and how to work on projects may help implementing them, whereas relying on teachers' competencies to guide learners during project process, as implied in project assignment of the existing textbook (refer to [15]), might be a misleading assumption because teachers themselves are probably in need of guidance

• *Listing the project outline at the beginning of the unit*

The project plan is positioned at the end of units; only a very small note about project work is included in the unit preview; it sends learners to the project outline that is positioned nearly at the end of the unit.

Placing the outline of project work at the end of the unit adds evidence to the fact that this activity is simply considered as a more elaborated task to be carried out at the end of a unit. As such, project work is simply regarded as a more challenging task when compared to other tasks included in the textbook. In this case, it does not adhere to the definition stated in the review of literature which regards this activity as a complex endeavour consisting of a set of basic tasks which span throughout the instructional unit. Accordingly, it might be incapable of setting contexts for interaction while covering the instructional unit.

• *Referring to project work throughout the unit*

According to data collected from the textbook analysis, project work is not referred to throughout the whole unit. Indeed, the textbook, '*At the Crossroads',* includes no signposts (i.e., written indications) that show how projects relate to instructional units. In fact, the textbook package lacks a clear vision on how project work should be carried out, that is, whether it is to be considered as a simple task to be carried out by learners at the end of a unit of instruction or as an ongoing endeavour that develops in relation to unit sequences. It seems, unfortunately, that even the textbook writers have no clear idea about when to implement project tasks. This ambiguity is clearly reflected in the following project assignment stated in the teacher's book [16].

> Refer the learners to the Workshop section every time you start a unit and keep reminding them of the project tasks they have to do when you feel that they are well equipped in terms of skills to do so.

In effect, it is not easy, not to say impossible, for the teacher to determine when to work on project tasks because of the absence of direct link between project tasks and the sequences of the unit. The only form of guidance in the textbook is provided in the project outline, which provides the project subtopics.

3.2. Project work topics

• *Relating the topics of projects to the general theme of the unit*

The data obtained from document analysis suggests that of the three topics developed, for instance, in Unit 1 (i.e., *communicating through the internet, communicating through telephoning and communicating through e-mails,* only one topic (i.e., the latter) is related to '*Internet Users' Guide Project*'. The variety in unit topics can be explained by the fact that the sequences of the unit attempt to make provision for more than one project.

3.3. Content

• *Relating the content of the textbook to students' needs in project work*

The content seems to be relatively a strong point of the first-year textbook. The textbook actually caters for learners' needs in projects in terms of vocabulary and language functions. The data gained from documents seem to support these results; they show that the textbook, indeed, makes provision for project work in terms vocabulary, grammar, and project information. Still more, the textbook attempts to equip learners with interactional skills essential for project accomplishment. As a matter of fact, a rubric called 'Tactic Summary' is incorporated into the Developing Skills sequence to provide learners with the type of language needed in spoken interaction. For example, on page 149, this rubric presents learners the kind of language routines used for conducting meetings.

• *Authenticity of the content of texts and dialogues in the textbook*

The first-year textbook does not rely on authentic teaching materials; in point of fact that, most of the texts and dialogues are made-up. Authentic listening texts recorded in audio-tapes or CDs should be used for the teaching of the listening skill. Scripted listening texts might be less motivating for students learning a foreign language in a non-native context than would be authentic recordings with transcripts.

3.4. Methodology

• *The use of pair work tasks in the textbook*

One of the positive aspects of *'At the Crossroads'* is its wide use of pair work activities, though it seems that these techniques have been created for the purpose of language practice. Textbook analysis shows that pair work is mainly used in repetitive activities or cued dialogues in which learners are asked to make substitutions. For example, in the paired activity on page 81, learners are invited to complete and act out a substitution dialogue in order to practise expressing agreement or disagreement. Although this activity attempts to draw on learners' lives by using their own star signs, the content of the latter and the conventions of turn taking and discourse management are provided beforehand.

• *The use of group work tasks in the textbook*

Documents showed that the textbook does not incorporate a lot of group work activities which would facilitate interaction and prepare learners for working cooperatively in project work. In fact, it is suggested in the teachers' book [17] that some tasks in '*It's your Turn'* rubric can be done in pairs, in groups, or individually. This implies, as Jacobs & Ball [18] note, that the textbook writers tend to regard what was formerly individual activities as group activities. That is, these types of activities are not created in a way to increase the effectiveness of interaction and cooperation since they can be completed by one learner without seeking assistance from of his peers.

Paired activities which are widely used in the textbook cannot substitute for group activities. It is a truism that pair work activities, as

Willis [19] points out, produce more student talk, group activities, on the other hand, are richer in terms of interaction patterns.

3.5. Assessment

• *The use of self-assessment techniques in the textbook*

Concerning the assessment procedures employed in the textbook, '*At the Crossroads'*, the findings from textbook analysis show that only a self-assessment grid is incorporated into the textbook, *'At the Crossroads'* . This assessment procedure seems defective, firstly because it focuses mainly on accuracy and, secondly because it is summative (i.e., it takes place at the end of instructional unit). In order for this form of assessment to be effective, it should be frequently practised during the process of unit implementation. As Mansoor and Moss [20] point out, *"It is useful to introduce learners to peer and self-evaluation strategies prior to project work"*.

• *The use of peer-assessment techniques in the textbook*

Regarding peer-assessment, the textbook uses peer-assessment, though this is restricted to process writing wherein learners are asked to exchange drafts and to provide each other with feedback.

4. Description of the Project

The project proposal advises to explain explicitly to the teacher and the learner how project work is structured and should be carried out with the unfolding of the unit. It equally promotes identifying when and how to work on project work and how this instructional activity is tied up to the content of the unit.

In terms of the layout of project work in the textbook, the novel project advocates the inclusion of an opening unit workshop, a unit closing workshop, and a workshop at the end of each sequence (listening & speaking, reading & writing, developing skills, consolidation and extension). At the unit opening, the teacher should introduce the topic of the project, raise students' curiosity, motivate them, and brainstorm it. Next, the students are invited to form groups and set up the plan collaboratively. This plan defines the sub-tasks of

the project to be carried out, the language and functional contents of the project, the resources (see Appendix F), and defines the roles of each learner (see Appendix C).

During the coverage of the unit, the novel proposal invites students to note down in their project diary the newly acquired language forms and functions they will need to re-invest in the project workshop. The project diary (see Appendix G) explicitly makes a distinction between language gains and social skills, as well as the language skills (language competencies). Hopefully, this diary will raise their awareness towards the objectives of the units and allow them to re-invest these new gains in project tasks.

The global or project maxi-task is divided in the innovative project plan into sub-tasks, each of which are covered in a unit sequence. The four sequences of the unit of instruction then comprise for project sub-tasks. Each sequence caters for only one project task in terms of functional needs, language needs, and skills (language and social). After covering the whole sequence, the project groups implement in the classroom a project workshop of the project sub-task. This procedure makes the implementation of project work gradual and permits the learners to be accountable for their work and process the project data, instead of copying it from the internet.

The project workshop at the end of the sequence allows the learners to reinvest the newly acquired knowledge and skills more concretely and visibly. The teacher first reviews the content of the project sub-task, and then asks the learners to join their groups and use the collected data and their project diaries to compose their project task. Process writing is endorsed to make all the group benefit from the peer-help. Then, project groups exchange their written productions and correct for each other. The feedback is provided in a form of a letter (please refer to appendix D). Finally, one group or two present their product in open class and it is assessed by three student-judges appointed by the teacher using the peer assessment grid (see Appendix H).

After the end of the sequence project workshop, the new project framework proposes for the teacher to prepare a remedial session on the basis of the language shortcoming of the students during their implementation of the project sub-task. He/she advised to devise activities related to the students' difficulties in their use of language forms and skills. This procedure of project implementation at the end of sequences should be replicated in the remaining unit sequences.

Finally, the proposed project supports project wrap up and presentation. Once the four sequences of the unit are covered and the project sub-tasks have been completed in class, the teacher asks the learners to round up and present their whole project at the end of this unit. The teacher equally gives the some hints on presentation skills. Two or more groups present the final product orally in open class and two or three students assess the presentation using a peer-assessment grid that includes the language and functional objectives of the unit (refer to Appendix E).

5. Evaluation of the Project Proposal

Classroom observation sessions were carried out to evaluate whether the existing first-year project work sets contexts for learners to display and develop interactional skills and aptitudes that would enable them to tackle project tasks communicatively. The observed project, which we termed 'Internet Users' Guide Project', was about designing an internet guide for beginners. It is one of the projects proposed for students in the first unit of the textbook.

5. 1. Richer student-student interaction

The new project seems to open avenues for interaction. The project lessons (six sessions of the unit) observed seemed to be rich in interaction; as a matter of fact that, they consisted of 59 % of student talk and only 41 % of teachers talk (excluding other activities). Most of the classroom talk is carried out among the project students while implementing the project. This is because project workshops promoted group activities and facilitated interaction.

5.2. Use of self-and peer-assessment

The new project promoted alternative methods of assessment. Process evaluation, which generally keeps track of learners' progress, was quite conspicuous in the observed lessons. So was peer-assessment in the observed project workshops. Involving learners in assessing each other embarked them in discussing project objectives in face to face interaction.

5.3. Use of language functions and spoken interaction strategies

The observations confirmed that the new project plan managed to lead first-year learners communicate ideas in a more or less acceptable language, though their level of proficiency was low. Despite the shortage of an acceptable mastery of the basic language functions and spoken interaction strategies, the learners managed to use the language at their disposal to get meanings across in the target language. For instance, in the project opening workshop, the learners were able to use reasonable language to negotiate the topics, share their ideas, and from groups. However, in order for the learners to manage to communicate effectively in conventional language, they need more practice in this model of teaching.

5.4. Use of spontaneous language

The learners' ability to explain and improvise was quite weak in the observed classes. However, there were efforts to use the language they have at their disposal. It seems that the learners have been used to planned speaking; therefore, they need more time and practice to use language spontaneously and naturally.

5.5. Learners as active agents

The observed lessons showed that the students assumed an active role most of the time. As it is recommended in the textbook's

accompanying document; project topics, the format of the end-product, and project objectives were set up by the learners [21]. However, the students are more inclined towards the use of their L1 as they were sometimes incapable of using the target language. It seems that the learners need more time to practice learner-centeredness to manage to converse and work in the target language.

In summary, classroom observation confirmed that the new project model succeeds to some extent to fulfil its pre-specified objectives. However, it seems that the learners who are accustomed to teacher-centeredness need more time to get used to working in the target language and acquire the necessary basic conversational skills in the target language.

6. Conclusion

This study aims at promoting a context sensitive approach to project learning in the first-year secondary school EFL classes. As the other Algerian textbooks in middle and secondary schools follow the same teaching guidelines, this new approach could be applicable for them.

First, the existing project work is analyzed through an evaluation grid derived from the review of the expert literature in the field of project-based teaching. The findings from this corpus analysis shows that project work, as it stands, in the first-year textbook does not allow the project students to re-invest their learning gains explicitly in project tasks. This is mainly due to the following reasons: (1) the project outline is positioned at the end of the unit; (2) the layout is not effective as it seems confusing and fuzzy; (3) the teachers and the students lack clear and explicit guidance on how the project relates to the units of instructions; (4) the unit sequences do not sufficiently cater for the students' needs in the project, and there is no process assessment devoted for project work.

On the basis of the findings that were derived from the analysis of the present project work plan in the first-year secondary school

EFL textbook, *At the Crossroads*, an alternative project is formulated. It is based on a set of caveats for designing school projects in the Algerian contexts. Among these principles are the use of explicit guidance in the project framework, use of intermediary workshops at the end of each learning sequence of the instructional units, use of teaching devices such as the project diary and the project plan, use of process writing, and use of peer-assessment grids.

The evaluation of the implementation of the new project proposal shows its relative superiority on the existing one, as a matter of fact that, this new model allows the students to get familiar with project intents and prepare themselves for re-investing their learning gains in project workshops both at intermediary and summative stages. However, this preliminary application of the innovative proposal does not fully achieve the ultimate objectives of this instructional approach because the students are not habituated to working on project work and in an active manner. The students need a long time of practice in project implementation to bring it to fruition. In so doing, the student could get familiar with the project practices, acquire basic conversational skills in English, and interact meaningfully in the target language.

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Appendices

Appendix A : Content analysis grid

Statement	**Yes**	**No**
- The textbook /and teacher's book provide(s) guidance on how to implement project work		
- The project outline is listed at the beginning of the unit		
- The project outline in the textbook is referred to throughout the unit.		
The topics of projects relate to the general theme of the unit		
The content of the textbook is relevant to students' needs in the project		
The content of texts and dialogues in the textbook is authentic		

Appendix B: Observation schedule

Statement/question	**Yes**	**No**

- The students are active		
- They negotiate the topic of the project		
- They write and edit the project task collaboratively		
- They set up the project plan collectively		
- They interact spontaneously		
- They work in groups		

Appendix C: Students' roles

Role	Name
Group manager	
Group corrector	
Group secretary	
Group reporter	

Appendix D: Sample peer-assessment letter

Dear peers,

We like your project. It is interesting and clear. But, the description of the desktop needs improvements. The mistakes are underlined.

Good luck!

Appendix E: Assessment of the project end product

The group……………….	Very well	Fairly well	A little
describes a PC using appropriate vocabulary			
……………………………………………..			

Appenidx F: Project plan

Tasks	Students	Resources	Language functions	Language forms	Lexical expressions	Product
.....	…….	…...	……..	……..	………	…….

Appendix G: Project diary

Knowledge , skills, and competencies							
what I have learnt in this sequence /section							
			Competencies				
Language	Content	Social Skills	Speaking	Listening/ reading		Writing/ speaking	
…….	……	…..	……	………		…….	

Appendix H: Workshop peer-evaluation grid

Aspects of the task	Yes	No
The group mentioned seven words related to the internet		
…………………………………………………………		