

*Ask-Based Teaching: An Investigation through
Project Work in the English Department
of Tizi-ouzou*

*Ameziane Hamid
Guendouzi Amar
Department of English
Tizi-ouzou University*

The purpose of the present paper is to expose and discuss an experiment in foreign language teaching which has been conducted in the department of English of Tizi-ouzou University. This experiment is concerned with the teaching of communication methodology (journalism) and drama for fourth year students. It adopts the approach called task-based teaching (CBT) and aims at paving the way to the implementation of the BMD (Bachelor, Master's, and Doctorate) pedagogy in the department.

The discussion of the results reached after two years of the implementation of drama and communication workshops requires the following: One, the exposition of the theory which informs them; Two, elucidating the linkages that tie this theory to the BMD system; Three, the description of the projects and their outcome. Obviously, the scheme of organisation followed in this paper follows this order.

Task-Based Approach:

The theoretical framework underlying the implementation of communication and drama classes are grounded in task-based approach to language learning. The approach is classified in the category of analytic syllabuses which is “a non-interventionist, experiential approach which aims to immerse learners in real-life communication” and which “stresses the growth and self-realization of the individual” (Beglar and Hunt, 2002: 96).

Following White, Beglar and Hunt mention five characteristics inherent in the analytic syllabus. They are:

- 1- It is concerned with how the materials are learned
- 2- Some degree of negotiation between learners and teachers take place
- 3- The content is defined mostly by the learner who determines his contribution to the course.
- 4- The learner decides partially about the criteria of assessment.
- 5- Cooperative learning.

The task-based approach belongs also to Content-Based Instruction (CBI) which seeks to create “a student community of inquiry through authentic communication, cooperative learning, collaboration, and problem solving” (Stoller, 2002:107). Project work is the natural extension of CBI and is seen as no less than a more extreme activity as a task.

The appropriateness of project work to content-based instruction in general and to vocational teaching in particular (i.e. to the BMD pedagogy) is asserted by Stoller who writes that project-based learning “should be viewed as a versatile vehicle for fully integrated language and content learning, making it a viable option for language educators working on a variety of instructional settings, including general English, English for academic purposes (EAP), English for specific purposes (ESP), and English for occupational/vocational/professional purposes, in addition to preservice and in-service teacher training” (2002:109). Stoller (ibid.) quotes also Haines who sees project work “not as a replacement for other teaching methods” but rather “an approach to learning which complements mainstream methods and which can be used with almost all levels, ages and abilities of students”.

Project Work: Its Characteristics and Various Configurations

As it has been said, project work is considered as the backbone of CBI. Stoller (ibid. 110) lists six features inherent in it:

- 1- It focuses on content Vs language targets
- 2- It is student centred
- 3- It is cooperative Vs competitive task
- 4- It leads to authentic integration of skills
- 5- It culminates in an end product, but its value lies in the process as well.
- 6- It is potentially motivating, stimulating, empowering, and challenging.

Henry, quoted in Stoller (2002), distinguishes three types of project. They are: *structured projects*: defined by the teacher; *unstructured projects*: defined by the learners themselves; *semi structured projects*: jointly defined by the teacher and students.

Stoller (ibid.) distinguishes also different types of project, especially from the perspective of data collection techniques. The following types are recorded:

- *- Research project: concerned with the gathering of information through library research
- *- Text project: involves encounters with texts
- *- Correspondence project: requires communication with individuals in view of gathering information.
- *- Survey project: entails the creation of a survey, and then the collection and analysis of data.
- *- Encounter project: involves face-to-face encounter with people outside the classroom.

Description of the workshops:

The teaching of communication methodology and drama has been incorporated in the fourth year syllabus as optional replacements of the traditional research paper in which the students are required to write a 30-50 pages length on an academic topic

related to English and/or American civilisation, literature, or linguistics. The two workshops unfolded throughout the academic year and aimed at achieving the following objectives:

- To provide for the learners opportunities to practice their English in real situations
- To enhance the students' skills in reading, writing, and/or listening and speaking.
- To recycle and enhance the students' knowledge of English literature and/or civilisation.
- To encourage the students' initiatives and the spirits of autonomy and creativity.
- To experiment the teaching of vocational English (especially English for communication) and to assess the students' reception of such kinds of learning.

In the whole, the initiative received warm welcome from the part of the majority of students who found in drama and journalism an opportunity of sincere endeavour for self-fulfilment and assertion.

a- Organisation of Drama workshop:

The students who registered in drama workshop were supervised by a professional playwright who helped them to choose and perform the play to act. But before starting the rehearsals which led to the public presentation of the plays, a preparatory work had been done in the form of drama classes. The preparation consisted in:

- Selecting plays and reading them in the classroom with the presence of the teacher.
- Explaining and commenting the selected plays.
- Selecting the scenes to act.
- Simplifying the text/language of the scenes.
- Rehearsing the performance. During this phase the students were sometimes assisted by some teachers who corrected their pronunciation and intonation.
- Study and making of costumes and make-up.

b- Organisation of Communication Workshop

The students who registered in communication workshop, too, were assisted by an experienced teaching staff made of in-service journalists. Their work culminated in the writing of a twenty-four pages tabloid newspaper, by developing articles ranging from local and international news and politics, to sports, finance, and health pages. To help them achieve this task, the department mobilised teachers to supervise their written compositions. The whole project developed through the following steps:

- The students were given preparatory courses about the techniques of writing newspaper articles.
- The students were asked to organise themselves in groups of four to six students and choose a title for their newspaper.
- The students were taught how to conduct research work and asked to collect information, interview people, and gather data.
- When their source was not in English, the students were asked to translate it.
- The students were left free to decide on topics to develop and people to interview, but within the editorial line agreed upon with the supervisor.
- As practice in the classroom, the students were sometimes given lectures on the English and American mass media.

Results:

As we have already said, the workshops were warmly welcomed by many students, especially those who had always felt discontent with the type of academic work embodied by the traditional dissertation. The enthusiasm generated by the workshops helped to a great extent to ensure the success of the experiment, especially in its technical and formal aspects. In other words, the students who engaged in writing a newspaper showed great dispositions to engage in field work and achieve a fine presentation of the tabloid, and those who registered in drama succeeded to make up costumes and act convincingly on the stage. However, at

the level of content i.e. all that is related to understanding and writing skills, the students' performances displayed many weaknesses. Here is a more detailed description of the final outcome of the communication and drama workshops:

- The students succeeded to collect data from different sources, to work it, and to report it.

- Each time an article involved a text search in the library, the students were able to write coherent articles with a more or less good language standard. Thus, the culture rubrics were in most papers successful, since they gave the students opportunities to deal with artistic figures, such as writers and singers, who had already been studied in the classes of literature and/or civilisation.

- The interviews achieved through the encounter with people outside the university were mixed. Sometimes the students asked pertinent and interesting questions. But at other times they showed little knowledge of their topics and a lack of mastery in the way to conduct the interview. The students' inconsistencies led to inappropriate questions and incoherent interviews.

- The international and local news rubrics too were mixed. Thus, even when the students mastered the reported topics, they faced the problem of translating their data, especially that of key political or economic concepts, because they were not prepared for this task. The students' ignorance of translation led them to rely heavily on French words and idiomatic expressions.

- The problem of translation was most acutely felt in the sport rubric and the titles of the articles. In these two instances, the students were unfamiliar with the jargon of the rubric and the English idiomatic expressions. As a consequence, they abused literal translation from French or Arabic. This practice gave rise to clumsy articles, unintelligible for a non-speaker of the French and/or Arabic.

- In the drama workshop, the students faced problems with pronunciation and intonation, and tended to caricaturise the

characters they performed. The latter weakness shows a lack of understanding of the plays.

Discussion:

The results show that the students' performances were affected by four major areas of weaknesses:

- a lack in the development of linguistic skills (weak reading and writing skills, poor pronunciation skill)
- lack in the development of communicative skills (when interviewing people and reporting back information)
- non-effective use of collaborative learning especially in newspaper editing which led to unbalanced quality and quantity of newspaper articles
- lack in research and social skills

The discussion of these weaknesses calls the following comments:

One: the main reason behind the students' underachievement is that the two projects were launched until the fourth year, not as a natural outgrowth of a curriculum, but as disparate developed subjects. No lead-in tasks related to linguistic, cultural, or communicative support to the projects were integrated in the curriculum to provide prerequisites for the accomplishment of the end-products. This aspect could have been integrated in the "modules" of the 3rd year writing and 3rd and 4th year literature and civilization, especially for the project on journalism which demands more specific knowledge of newspaper editing and writing techniques, and involves visits to newspaper offices and specific researching about the history of mass media in the target country.

Two: the deficiencies can also find explanation in the fact that the two projects created a space for lexically, structurally, functionally, technically and professionally driven development to occur that obviously had not been taken in charge effectively all along the process by teachers and students alike, because both were

unprepared to cope with this new teaching/learning task-based methodology .

Three: Indeed the autonomy left by the project work for both teacher and students, who needed to escape the narrowly synthetic learning centred on the teacher, involved a never-ending process of making adjustments which was a true challenge for all the students who felt unprepared for such a task.

It has become clear by now that the students underachievement were also the result of the inadequacy of the teacher profile with task-based teaching. There should be therefore a redefinition of the teacher profile in line with the new requirements of task-based learning and autonomy. As Penny Ur (1996) puts it, teachers have to follow a ‘teacher education’ programme rooted in the ‘reflective model’ whose process of learning “develops moral, cultural, social, and intellectual aspects of the whole person as an individual and a member of society”. The reflective model is based on experience from which personal theories about teaching and learning are reflected before they are tried out in the field.

The presentation of tasks should also be redefined to permit a gradation of the complexity and difficulty of the tasks and the project as a whole. William Littlewood (?) proposed a teaching continuum with a focus on first, second and finally third generations of tasks. These three generations of tasks help to contribute to the students’ linguistic, communicative, intercultural and intellectual developments. The first generation develops communication, the second adds cognitive development and the third extends to students’ global personality. The two last types of tasks are carried out through project work. The relationship among the tasks is clearly stated in the following words: “The notion of ‘generations’ of tasks implies that each category has developed out of the preceding one and is in some way more advanced in the demands it makes on learners and teachers alike. It may thus be expected that learners and teachers will not start with second or

third generation tasks but begin with the simpler, first generation tasks and, as they gain in experience, gradually extend their repertoire to include those which are more advanced” (199?: p.)The benefits to be gained from this extension are summarised by Ribé and Vidal (1993: 4) who wrote:

Within this framework, students and teachers are no longer two separate poles (i.e. the teacher gives information and the student receives it) as in the more traditional type of teaching, but two entities working together, planning, taking decisions, carrying out the task, and sharing the final sense of achievement.

It follows from here that project work should be carried out in an integrative way so as to provide prerequisites and support in every stage of the process underlying the project which starts with presentation and discussion, and followed by preliminary activities and then main activities, before the materials are processed and the final product is achieved.

Following this line of thought and organisation, the scientific committee of the department suggested an intermediate performance objective which is likely to serve as a preliminary stage for the long term project of newspaper editing. Thus, students are given the opportunity to work with portfolios to be organised around thematic units related to literature and civilization modules they undertake during their university courses. Students are therefore given the opportunity to recycle and reshape the knowledge they gain in the two modules. We think that this remedial measure is likely to allow the steady development of the students’ skills by gradually immersing them in task and project-based pedagogy.

Although the bulk of the drawbacks discussed above seems to draw a rather bleak image of the experiment conducted with communication and drama workshops, we nevertheless think that the experiment should be seen as positive in the whole. The following reasons sustain our positive assessment of the workshops:

One: group work stirred high excitement among the students and enforced 'active' and 'interactive' learning for the project work, breaking thus away from the monotonous atmosphere of former teacher-centred method. In other words, the project work has immersed the students in the actual study of newspaper editing and drama performance on the stage, and gave them opportunities to visit newspaper offices, negotiate their learning with their supervisors, and acquire research autonomy.

Two: Task-based learning through project work has had the merit to diagnose the students' limitations in writing, speaking, and reading skills. On its turn the diagnosis led the students to achieve consciousness about their poor performances and the need for group and collaborative work in order to reach a better knowledge and use of the English language.

Three: through newspaper editing, the students were urged to meet people, interact with social problems (such as drugs addiction, road accidents ...etc) and behave as active members of society. Field work allowed them also to get an 'in live' view of many social evils that undermine our society, and to develop social skills which we would never be able to measure. In fact one can hardly dream of such 'social' as well as professional 'trainings' in such a short period of time.

Four: the search for information led the students to extensive use of the department's library and to acquire skills related to library research. Internet was the other source from where they 'tapped' information and from which they also developed skills related to this field. These two skills have further significance in the construction of the student's future learning.

Last but not least, the reason behind our satisfaction is to be found in the deep interest that the experiment has stirred in the students. This interest developed into motivation and triggered positive attitudes even from the part of average or low level students. In fact, it was as if the workshops have released energies too much imprisoned in academia, and allowed the students'

creative skills to express themselves freely in a field that they have always dreamt to work in. Taken in the context of the Algerian university's inability to meet the demands of the students' scientific needs, one can but rejoice at the prospective offered by communication and drama workshops. This is why at the end of the year the department delivered certificates for all the students who joined the workshops and succeeded in their exams.

Notes and references:

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