

# Feasibility and Evaluation of Project Work in EFL at Secondary School

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## Abstract

The adoption of a competency based approach in teaching/learning English as a foreign language entails the direct application of Project Work as a tool for competency development and evaluation. Project work, in essence, helps learners gain practice, achievement and autonomy in learning tasks. The present paper relies on teachers' own conception, practice, and evaluation of the feasibility and evaluation of project work inside and outside classroom settings of secondary school to show that despite the theoretical positive attributes assigned to project work, its practical process does not provide the expected results. The study determines that the application of project work- in a context where English is not a second language- does not help learners develop the expected competencies. Hence, methodological and realistic materials and media are suggested to give project work the role it deserves and assumes.

**Main Issue and key terms:** competencies, project work, learner autonomy, evaluation.

## ملخص

إن اعتماد منهج المقاربة بالكفاءات في تدريس/ تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية يؤدي عمليا إلى التطبيق المباشر لفكرة مشروع العمل كأداة لتطوير الكفاءات وتقييمها لأنه يساعد المتعلمين على كسب المعلومات واستعمالها لإنجاز المهام. تعتمد هذه المداخلة أساسا على مفهوم الممارسة والتقييم لدى المعلمين خلال عملية انجاز المشروع داخل وخارج فصول التعليم الثانوي . وتشير الدراسة إلى أنه على الرغم من السمات الإيجابية النظرية المخصصة لمشروع العمل، إلا أن إجراءاته التطبيقية لا تضمن النتائج المرتقبة. وتستنتج الدراسة أن تطبيق مشروع العمل في مادة اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة ثانية لا يساعد المتعلمين على تطوير الكفاءات المتوقعة، وبالتالي تقترح استعمالا منهجيا وواقعا لوسائل الإعلام لإعطاء فكرة مشروع العمل الدور الذي يستحقه.

### **Introduction:**

The competency based pedagogy cannot be explained without reference to the project work as a tool for teaching, learning, and testing. Since its adoption as a model of qualifications for job requirements during the 1980's and 1990's in America, the United Kingdom, and Australia, the idea of competency-based assessment through project work has spread through educational and vocational/non-vocational training courses around the world in order to prepare school-leavers, unemployed (unqualified) people and job hunters to find better jobs. The impact of this model of teaching, learning and assessing had an impact on the design and implementation of the Algerian educational courses in general and on the design and implementation of English as a foreign language in particular. This paper will then focus on the elementary key issues of the competency based learning through project work, its feasibility and assessment in the secondary school context.

### **1. Competence based assessment and Project Work**

The idea of associating competency based assessment (CBA) to project work (PW) was originally the concern of other vocational/occupational fields than education. According to Wolf (1995: 2-8), "the main three components of competency based assessment are:

- a-the emphasis on multiple outcomes, each distinctively and separately considered;
- b-these can and should be specified to the assessors, assesses, and "third parties" to understand what is being assessed and what should be achieved;
- c-the decoupling of assessment from particular institutions or learning programmes.

The author comments that “these are not specific to CBA but also very common in criterion-referenced assessment”. The latter was applied in main stream education with paper-and- pencil tests while the former was non-academic, vocational, and bound up with the idea of ‘real-life’ performance. Wolf (ibid: 9-29) adds that the competency based assessment was adapted in England and Wales as National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) after contradictory debates between “educational establishment” opposing reforms and industrial sector representatives’ wisdom towards vocational education and training. The result was a submission of required qualifications from the unemployed and future education leavers to the educational boards. In the late 80’s, these three bodies (employers, employment departments and educational boards) had to develop corresponding programme courses and NVQs assessment criteria.

Within the same scope, Fletcher (1992: 28-29) indicates that the purpose of competency based assessment is to collect sufficient evidence to demonstrate that individuals can perform to the specified standards in a specific role, referring to *work roles*, and therefore to *standards of occupational competence*, and to *workplace performance*. As we can see, the competency based assessment does not properly rely on classroom tests (which can be criterion-referenced) but requires the distinction of a real life competence to be observed and measured by three independent bodies in the context of a workplace. This type of assessment targets the individual’s potentials to carry out tasks for vocational (job) requirements that include a variety of skills and strategies necessary for job qualifications and career development.

Some European studies attempted to check the feasibility of Project work applications by investigating participants’ positive and negative attitudes. For example, Ritchie and Legard (Ritchie, J and R, Legard (1997: 17-39)) report on the application of Project Work (PW) to unemployed people who get social benefits and are likely / unlikely to look for a job. They note that the aim of PW may vary according to participants in this study as a very negative/positive experience (less pay for more work, distant workplaces or new horizons, acquisition of new skills); the participants had a political interpretation of the experience with PW (government bias of aims to gain popularity over unemployment rates and imitation of American system). The report shows that there are a few positive developments in attitude of participants and much negative criticism. Consequently the authors (Ibid) conclude that a few participants develop some competences which qualify them to take new jobs while the majority of the participants need to attend training sessions.

Various studies, consequently developed a criterion-referenced assessment based on ‘service learning projects’ (Peterson 2005) which clearly states the domain specifications, the performance standards and classification according to individual and group achievements. James (et.al,

2006), Harvey (et.al 2007), and Blachard (2009) consider that preparing school leavers or unemployed people to gain autonomy in learning for life experience has to take into account assessment for learning, strategy training, and (pre and in-service) problem solving activities. All three alternatives of competence development and assessment share one quality of being strategic. All scholars, mentioned above (Peterson 2005, James 2006, Harvey 2007, and Blachard 2009) apply a detailed criterion-referenced (formative) evaluation to the competence training and assessment which is based on strategy distinction.

Peterson (ibid: 55-57) suggests that competence development should undertake two major procedures which help trainees face real life experience. One is the *problem-based service-learning* which creates the contexts of performance and the other is the application of *academic content, community action, and self-reflection*. Both procedures require the application of memory/cognitive, socio-affective and meta-cognitive strategies. James (op.cit: 15-18) defends the ideas of *Assessment for Learning (AFL)* and *Learning How To Learn (LHTL)* which lead consequently to learner autonomy through the practice of strategy training. Harvey (op.cit: passim) and Blachard (op.cit: passim) straightforwardly indicate that the key solution to competence development is to focus on strategy training for both independent learning and formative evaluation. While Harvey provides a thorough strategy checklist to promote independent learning, motivation, management and organisation, cognitive and meta-cognitive functions to be used by both trainers and trainees, Blachard implements almost all the same strategies with detailed practical activities for *whole-school and continuing professional development*

## 2. Feasibility and Evaluation

From the above mentioned principles and characteristic features of CBA and PW, one can draw two major factors affecting the realisation of PW for occupational / vocational / professional development. The first being its feasibility in real life contexts and the second being formative evaluation criteria. Feasibility is related to the context (workplace, members, individual/team work, attitude, distance and income) where the PW is carried out. Evaluation is related to the formative, criterion-referenced, evaluation which fragments the participants' competence into observable strategies in order to determine the expected outcome for the participants themselves, the educational board, the employment board, and the employers. The specification of context features and evaluation criteria for all partners had consequent effects on the implementation of educational (training, pre-service), professional (in-service) and school programs (general education). It is our concern here to highlight the effect of such specifications (above) on the adoption of PW to program courses which aim at preparing school leavers to face future occupational/professional requirements. We need first to define precisely the competences and

strategies and then consider the PW types that can be carried out and evaluated during school programs.

### **3. Competencies and strategies**

The general outline of competency elements and developments discussed and defended by many scholars, focus on three major points which are very close to the various taxonomies provided by other scholars who categorized learning strategies. As we shall explain below, the three fold competence development –knowledge; performance; and behavior, correspond closely to strategy development –memory/cognitive; meta-cognitive; and socio-affective strategies.

#### **3.1. Competence**

A competence has been defined by various linguists, as far as language is concerned, as being linguistic (knowledge), communicative (performance), and strategic (behavioural). The amount of linguistic knowledge an individual has of his mother tongue, or other languages, represents the sum total of acquired/learned language items which make him/her able to use that language. However, the potential performance of using that knowledge accurately and appropriately varies according to the choices made by the individual in contextual communication. The latter reveals that the strategic choices made by the individual depend to a great extent on social parameters which shape his sociolinguistic behavior (setting, event/topic, members, and purpose).

When the same framework of competence/competency is explained in other fields of life, the amount of knowledge a person is required to have about a given profession or task is a minimum acquaintance with the issue/topic primarily. As a second requirement, performing that knowledge to perform tasks determines the skill development of completing the task successfully. Thirdly, the task performance may vary according to the variations in contexts; the strategic choices of knowledge and performance alternatives made by the individual indicate his/her successful integration of the framework into competence/competency achievement. McNamara (2000: 131) sums up these dimensions in just one statement defining competence as: 'a specific practical skill used in the planning and assessment of adult training outcomes. Training programs do care about preparing the trainees to undertake and successfully complete social and/or professional tasks in a workplace but they have no control over the degree of achievement unless other partners are involved in the evaluation process of the projects at the workplace according to criterion-referenced assessment where 'performances are compared to one or more descriptions of minimally adequate performance at a given level' (McNamara, 2000: 132).

### **3.2. Strategies:**

Learning strategies, as a consequent field of educational psychology, came as a result of investigations in learning styles, learner preferences and the good language learner characteristics. Almost all studies, although they slightly differ in categorization, consider that the memory and cognitive strategies integrate the amount of knowledge the individual is supposed to make use of. Both memory and cognitive strategies reflect factual and procedural knowledge of language in terms of linguistic items and language skills. Hence the accurate use of language and the performance of language tasks combine both knowledge of language and the use of language in performing pedagogical tasks. However, real life tasks cannot be undertaken at school because they need real life contexts for real performance to take place. The pedagogical tasks at school may prepare learners to perform strategically by providing meta-cognitive strategy training (planning, monitoring and evaluating) and socio-affective familiarization (cooperation, motivation, reward etc...), however they do not always predict the real life settings where the learners are supposed to act autonomously in real life tasks. Hence the autonomous learner is one who is supposed to gather all his strategies to perform a real life task, independently from the school context, and successfully complete his language project work.

## **4. Project Work in School Programs**

The so many supporters of PW at school provide endless positive arguments in favour of its adoption and application during school courses. Two major reasons are always put forward when positive arguments are enumerated. The first one advocates the development of learning strategies through strategy training for the achievement of course objectives and strategy use for further educational development and learner autonomy (Chen, Y 2007 and Griffiths 2007). The second one advocates the development of professional skills and strategies to assume real life tasks and work roles for future job applications and career development (Field, J 2007). In both cases, strategy training and development are targeted and assessed according to feasibility and criterion-referenced evaluation. However the PW types differ in their specific domains, standards, and importance for the learners' progression. We shall then examine the reasons and positive arguments in favour of PW at school and some of PW types (Queck, C. 2006) in order to show the norms (domains and standards) and the differences that govern their application.

### **4.1. Reasons and arguments for PW at school**

The claims for the application of PW in English as a foreign language are a twofold rationale which put forward two major reasons and arguments: Interactive effects of instruction on the one hand and social processes and outcomes on the other hand (Nuttal, G 2006). The instructional and interactive effects most frequently turn into particular focus on particular strategies which favour the development of language proficiency (Chen,

2007 and Buehl 2009) in a joint collaboration of teachers and learners (Griffiths, 2007). The social processing and outcome of these strategies are often carried out outside the school system in order to create a context for autonomous behaviour to develop and perform social roles. Nuttal (op.cit) considers that 'bridging the gap' between the interactive / instructional training and the social behaviour is of paramount importance to determine the effectiveness of project work. Peterson (2004) exemplifies this tendency by suggesting 'problem-based service-learning projects' for learners to use the acquired knowledge in solving problems of various types depending on topics chosen by the learners and the teachers. This leads us to open the debate over the crucial issue of project types and topics that would either focus on instructional/ interactive strategies in pedagogical tasks or focus on both instructional / interactive and social strategies in real life tasks.

#### 4.2 PW Types

Similarly to the distinction we made, above, about instructional/interactive versus social process and outcome projects, Queck (2006: 23-61) distinguishes under the same categories project-based learning from problem-based learning. Although correspondence in categorization is clear, detailed characteristic features in terms of goals and procedures of each category leads to further distinctions. Relying on previous research findings, participants' roles and choices, contexts, and evaluation procedures and criteria, Queck (ibid) provides further subdivisions to determine a variety of project work types that serve particular competency development:

**-Anchored instruction projects:** carefully focused problems or questions that both students and teachers agree upon and where learners learn techniques, facts, and ideas in long terms and transferable ways.

**-Apprenticeship projects:** direct immersion in the work environment to connect school with the real world; placement in a real job setting

**-Community-connected projects:** engage learners in learning experiences beyond the classroom to understand the nature of the field and how the workplace is related to the academic world

**-Contextual teaching and learning projects:** learners see how the content taught in class mirrors the community beyond the school and how there is real-world application in the learnt subjects.

**-Internship projects:** link the school setting with the real world in an experiential nature but still under supervision (future doctors and teachers) according to a training scheme

**-Mentoring projects:** partnership with an individual or a group for teaching, coaching and supervising in order to strengthen character, improve racial harmony and promote social change.

**-Problem-based projects:** integrate skills and concepts from many

content areas to gather information around a problematic question; analyse and synthesize, present findings to others on a real-world basis

**-School-based enterprise:** serve real customers in a business enterprise and bring the real world into the school to solve encountered problems and hence perform real work

**-Service learning projects:** experiential learning by rendering service in the school or in the community and reflecting upon that activity which is part of the curriculum

**-Situated learning projects:** undertake learning experience in particular physical and social contexts (home, workplace, community) which favour social interaction, activities and culture; indirect-unintentional social learning experience

**-Work-based projects:** integrate workplace or workplace-like activities into classroom content. A planned program for job training to match the students' abilities

From the above mentioned types, one can simply say that there is a lot of overlapping in the underlying learning principles, theories, and purposes. However, the contexts of project realization differ and hence provide particular characteristic features for each type. The feasibility and evaluation of project work, either in language learning contexts or other job / professional training contexts, require the determination of purpose and process, domain (topic theme) and standards (accuracy and appropriateness of applied skills), strategy use (knowledge and information processing), and final outcome or product. These are to be illustrated by the study we undertook with secondary school teachers who have been supervising project work for English classes in Constantine.

##### **5. The study design and concerns**

The study relies on a survey which explores the secondary school teachers' perception of the planning, proceeding, contextualization and criterion-referenced evaluation of secondary school projects in English as a Foreign Language. It consisted of a 20 item-questionnaire (see Appendix) addressed to 60 teachers of English during the baccalaureate exam correction in July 2009 at El-Hourria secondary school -Constantine. 48 respondents filled in the questionnaire and provided us with valuable data for analysis; only two respondents had less than five years teaching experience (Item 1). We present the findings from the collected information according to feasibility and evaluation criteria which have been discussed so far in this paper

##### **6. Findings, comments and suggestions**

The analysis of findings from the collected information focuses on the purpose and domain of project work, the procedure followed by teachers and learners, the setting (workplace and time) of application, the standards of criterion-referenced assessment, and the general competency evaluation.



### **6.1. Purpose and domain**

The purpose of PW, for 50% of teachers is to target learning goals and to a very low degree associate the goals to test learners' competences (Item 2). The lack of awareness of the testing value for Project work is a crucial element that may give them a wrong impression about its importance. This is consequently shown in determining the domain of application of project work as the highest attribute goes to the File/unit content and the lowest attributes go to language skills and communicative abilities (Item3).

### **6.2. Procedure:**

Right from the beginning of a given teaching Unit or File, a high majority of teachers introduce the topic of the project (Item4) while only a simple majority keep checking learners' progress and provide guidance throughout the File/Unit (Item 5). Although almost all of them indicate that learners seek a lot of help (Item 6), a simple majority of teachers supply guidance and orientations while others just correct the first drafts (Item 7). We can notice here that, among other kinds of help and guidance, supplementary information and resources are too low. This shortcoming will result in learners' dependence on other sources, as we shall see.

### **6.3. Setting/Context:**

The network centers -cybercafés- and home internet connections are the major workplace for learners (Item8); when learners are deprived of other sources of information -like the school library, school internet connections, and social/professional informants which are rarely used (Item8)- they turn to online providers. Project work is almost never dealt with during class sessions or spare time at school (Item 9); total independence of the learners in the social and physical setting may be a positive learning attitude as it may also be very negative if there is a lack of focus on particular resources and strategy practice. Learners' homes and Internet centres may not be the appropriate workplace.

### **6.4. Criterion-referenced assessment:**

The domain specification (Item 10) indicates that a high majority of projects serve the practice of the target language learnt in class, with focus (Item 11) on lexis, sentence structure, combination and tense but neglect to a great extent speech production (pronunciation, stress and intonation). Language skills practice, consequently, show that (Item 12) oral communication skills get very low rates while reading -and to minor degrees writing (note taking, summarizing and paraphrasing, composing) get some kind of prominence. We can see that learners' prerequisites to oral communication are completely neglected (listening, turn-taking, and interviewing).

Cognitive and meta-cognitive communication strategies -abilities- go along the same decline (Item 13); analysing, synthesizing, arguing and negotiating, predicting, interacting and socializing, and problem solving get

below average rates. However, inquiring, data gathering, and illustrating with pictures and drawings get very high rates. Knowledge accumulation and illustration are the major training strategies that the learners practice. Exposure to -and knowledge of- foreign language culture remains low (Item 14), in comparison to the local / national culture which is prominent in the learners' projects.

#### **6.5. Competence and strategy evaluation:**

Very negative rates are attributed to the major strategies that constitute competence development and evaluation (Item15); all cognitive strategies (knowledge and skills development) and meta-cognitive strategies (self-esteem, positive attitude and autonomy) get very low rates. However, the unrealistic context of project work, waste of time and effort get very high considerations.

#### **6.6. Teachers' evaluation of PW:**

Despite its importance, project work does not always get the required oral presentation and correction in class sessions (Items 16, 17 and 18); the majority of teachers correct the PW at home and give grades which count for less than 50% of the learners' general school evaluation in most cases. However, in rare situations, classroom oral presentations are organised

Despite all the above mentioned negative attributes to project work criterion-referenced assessment and global evaluation, a high majority of teachers' population sample consider that project work should be improved and they provide a number of recommendations and suggestions:

- Teachers and learners need more time to realize project work
- Teachers need to observe and guide learners' progression through the elaboration of the project, but not in network centres;
- Oral presentation of PW is necessary and requires special class sessions;
- School workshops should be oriented towards a limited number of resources to avoid downloading and copying irrelevant documents.
- Individualizing project work provides better conditions for the evaluation of strategy and competence development for every learner

#### **Comments and Conclusion:**

We have attempted, through this paper, to shed light on the prerequisites of competency based assessment through the feasibility and evaluation of project work at secondary school. Competence based assessment requires the determination of cognitive, meta-cognitive and socio-affective strategies which serve as a criterion-referenced basis for project work evaluation. The results of the survey show that the domain specifications of project work at secondary school are all biased towards knowledge and information gathering. Hence the PW assigned to the learners is based on anchored type

and should rather be based on more interesting topics and relevant to learners' real life context and problem solving tasks which require the use analytic and synthetic strategies because strategy training and competence development are highly neglected in the present situation.

Hence, we conclude that the contextual feasibility of project work is at risk and needs reform of its practical parameters in order to achieve the presumed objectives.

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## Appendix:

### Dear Teachers, Colleagues, and Friends

This survey investigates the suitability of 'Project Work' to learning strategies and competency development in English as a Foreign Language. Your answers to the questions below will serve to determine the utility of this teaching/learning procedure in a foreign language context where pedagogical and social factors may enhance or hinder competency development. Your viewpoints, as practitioners and professionals in this field, will provide sound value judgement and enlightenment for the present research. Your opinions will remain anonymous. Will you, please, tick the corresponding answer according to the choices provided or supply your own answer where necessary. We are very grateful for your help and collaboration

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1. What is your teaching experience?

1-5 years  5-10 years   
10-15 years  more than 15 years

2. Given the present educational reforms, for which purpose do you assign 'Project Work'?

Teaching  Learning   
Testing  All the previous ones   
3. Do not know  Others (please, specify):

.....  
Are the topic/themes of the projects related to?

File/Unit content  Language skills   
Communicative abilities  Information processing   
All the previous ones  Do not know   
Others (please specify)  .....

4. When do you usually ask learners to start working on their project?

At the beginning of the file/unit  At the last phase of the unit/file   
After completion of the file/unit   
At a particular step (please indicate that step):  .....

5. How often do you check learners' progression while they are working on their projects?

Frequently  Sometimes  Rarely  Never

6. Do your learners ask for help when they are working on their projects

Yes:  No:

7. Whatever your answers to the questions above, what kind of help, advice or guidance do you provide?

Supply information  supply documents  correct some first drafts

Give guidelines and orientations  Others (please specify .....

8. Where do your learners find the required information-in English- to carry out their projects?

At school library  At school internet-connections  At cybercafés

At home (parents/brothers/sisters/friends)  From social/professional community  Other sources (please specify): .....

9. Where and when do your learners really work on their projects,

During class session  Spare time at school  At home

Elsewhere (please indicate):  .....

10. While working on their projects, do you think learners use the language aspects covered in class?

Yes  No  Do not Know

11. If your answer is 'YES', will you please rate the rate of the language aspects used, in the table below; Add more if your learners use them.

Language aspects	High	A/average	Average	B/average	Low
Pronunciation, stress, and intonation					
Lexis and morphological combinations					
Sentence structure (NP+ VP correlation)					
Sentence and clause (subordination, embeddings, etc...)					
Cohesive markers					
Tenses					
Punctuation and spelling					

12.To what extent do you think learners use language skills -practised in class- during the elaboration of their projects? Add more if your learners use them.

Language skills	High	A/average	Average	B/ average	Low
Listening					
Speaking					
Turn-taking (dialogues and conversations)					
Interviewing (inquiring, investigating)					
Reading (for comprehension)					
Note taking					
Summarizing					
Paraphrasing					
Composing					

13.To what extent do you think learners use communicative skills and competences while elaborating their projects? The list below is not exhaustive. Add more if your learners use them

Skills and competences	High	A/average	Average	B/average	Low
Inquiring -data gathering					
Analysing - categorizing information (describing/narrating defining/classifying)					
Interacting - socializing					
Judging -arguing					
Instructing-advising					
Predicting-anticipating					
Negotiating (agree, disagree, accept, refute)					
Problem sensing					

and solving					
Illustrating (drawings, pictures, tables, maps, etc...					

14. Are there some cultural features - you generally notice- in the learners' projects?

Cultural features	High	A/Average	Average	B/ Average	Low
English speaking culture					
Local (Algerian) Culture					
International culture					

15. According to your experience, rate the positive and negative features of 'Project work'. The list is not exhaustive. Add more qualities if necessary

Positive / negative features (statements)	High	A/average	Average	B/average	Low
Learners develop language skills					
Learners apply what they learn at school					
Learners increase their thinking potential					
Learners develop a positive attitude towards learning in general					
Learners behave much more positively					
Learners develop self-esteem and efficacy					
Learners broaden their own knowledge					
'The Project Work' is Unrealistic in the EFL (Non-English					

Speaking) context					
Too demanding for teachers					
Too demanding for learners					
Learners download too much unnecessary materials- internet dependent					
Learners waste time, energy and money on internet sites					

16. Given time constraints and large classes, do you always correct your learners' projects?

Always  Often  Sometimes  Rarely  Never

17. When projects are submitted, do you correct them:

In class with oral presentation?  At home and provide written feedback on learners' papers?

At home and then organise oral class correction  Only at home

18. After correction, what kind of reward do the learners get?

Marks  Oral reward (encouragement, advice, etc...)

19. If you give marks, what proportion -of the average mark of the term- does 'The Project' get in comparison to other tests and exams?

10%  20%  30%  40%  50%  and more

20. Whatever your opinion and reasons, do you think 'Project Work' as a teaching, learning, and testing procedure, should be:

Improved? Through better teaching learning conditions (reduce class size, organise special workshops at school, diversify resources - materials and documents-, allocate more time, etc...)

Abolished? Because it causes much more troubles for both teachers and learners; takes too much time and energy without positive results in learners proficiency development

Will you, please, add more comments on a separate paper, if necessary?

THANK YOU