

FOSTERING LEARNERS' ENGAGEMENT AS WELL AS LINGUISTIC AND SOCIAL COMPETENCES BY ADOPTING THE PROJECT-BASED LEARNING APPROACH IN ESP

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to investigate the impact of using the project-based learning approach on students' linguistic acquisitions and on the development of lifelong competences such as personal engagement and social interaction skills. The students enrolled in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at the Faculty of Food and Animal Sciences and the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine were assigned specific projects in line with their specializations and with the requirements of their future careers. The tasks derived from topics approached during the courses and seminars and were designed so as to engage learners either in exploratory or creative tasks, or in presenting case studies from their practical training. The impact of the project-based approach on students' learning and development of social skills was evaluated by means of a self-assessment questionnaire. The responses revealed that working on projects has prompted students to enrich their English vocabulary with specialized terms, select relevant information and organize it in a coherent presentation, cooperate with their fellow students, improve their presentation skills, offer relevant feedback, and develop personal and social competences such as managing one's own emotions, adapting their discourse to the situations, and adopting the right attitudes in interactions with other people.

Key words: project-based learning, linguistic acquisitions, engagement, social competences, self-assessment questionnaire

Teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) requires a certain open-mindedness to the needs of the learners and a capacity to adapt to the demands of an ever-evolving labour market. Teachers are encouraged to acquaint themselves with these needs of the learners and offer support in the process of acquiring knowledge in their specific field. Rather than adopting a top-down approach, teachers should build the curriculum and use materials and activities meant to foster students' knowledge and abilities.

As Helle L. *et al* (2006) insightfully observe: "the strength of project-based approaches [...] lies in that they afford students the possibility and the motive to work their way to the solution in their own idiosyncratic way (in terms of content, sequence and pacing)" which serves "not only to activate, apply and acquire concepts and facts in a personally meaningful way but also helps to register experiential information". Project-based learning, as a student-based form of instruction, is founded on the most important principles of constructivism:

➤ Knowledge is built on previous knowledge and constructed uniquely by each learner according

to one's own experience and abilities to bring pieces of information together in a coherent whole;

➤ Learners construct meaning as they discover things and try to connect them;

➤ Learning is a continuous process and leads to understanding and anticipation of what may come next;

➤ Learning is personal and implies learners' active engagement – cognitive and sensory – so that the outcome may be relished at a personal level and with an impact on one's own development;

➤ Learning involves social interaction and leads to the development of social skills – either in connection with the teachers as guides and counselors or with the people involved in the unfolding of the project work – even projects done individually are assessed by somebody else or a community that offers feedback;

➤ Learning is experiential and contextual – the more relevant the context, the more profound the acquisitions;

➤ Motivation is a key factor in learning as it determines the level of engagement and the

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willingness to achieve the most satisfactory outcome.

Regarded as an inquiry-based type of learning performed in connection with the real world (Al-Balushi S.M., Al-Aamri S.S., 2014), project-based learning can lead to meaningful learning experiences (Wurdinger S. *et al*, 2007). Students' engagement is fostered by giving them the freedom to make decisions and the chance to design their own projects (Wurdinger S. *et al*, 2007) while a well-designed project reveals the interconnectedness between the students' cognitive abilities and their affective, ethical, and aesthetic values at work (Wrigley T., 2007). Barak M. (2012) argues that project-based learning can encourage the development of self-regulated learning and promote conceptual knowledge within a systematic process of documenting and reflecting on learning.

In the field of teaching ESP, establishing the topics for the projects can be done starting with the learners' needs and the requirements of their future domains of activity. In this respect, the teacher can perform an assessment of needs and decide on the best topic and layout of the project together with the students. Moreover, by scaffolding students' learning, the teacher offers them an insight into the content of the desired outcome and allows them to capitalise on the learning input provided in the classroom (Gresalfi M. S. *et al*, 2012). Negotiation and engagement are thus involved in the initial stages and may have a stronger impact on the future learner involvement as long as students feel empowered to make decisions for their own future learning context. Furthermore, project-based tasks are a good means for the ESP teacher to discover the students' areas of interest together with the areas in which they need to improve – such as various aspects related to the knowledge of English (grammar, vocabulary or pronunciation) or to the abilities to interact with people in various contexts.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The students involved in project-based learning activities were selected from the Faculty of Food and Animal Sciences and from the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine at "Ion Ionescu de la Brad" Iași University of Life Sciences. The students from the three specializations within the Faculty of Food and Animal Sciences opted for two types of projects. Those from the Control and Expertise of Food Products and those from Animal Sciences did projects in which they had to explore the cycle of plants from sowing seeds (conditions, geographic locations etc.) to harvesting the crops and using them in various products (focusing on nutritional value and consumption trends). They

were offered guidelines - the materials used in class prior to the assignment represented models of dealing with the topic in an organised and relevant manner. In addition to this, they had the freedom to choose the type of plant, the approach, and the layout of their presentation. The students opted for individual projects, given their own personal interests and perspectives.

The students from Engineering and Management in Public Food Service and Agritourism decided to do a project that stimulated their creativity. Even though the topic was centered around a type of restaurant and the food served – given the models approached in class – they had the freedom to think of their own concept of a restaurant and focus on aspects related to the type of food, its nutritional value and the manner of serving it, as well as on the location (décor, atmosphere etc.) that will make customers patronise the place. Some students opted for team work (with two students working on the same project), while others for individual work, given their personal profile and openness to cooperation. The students presented their projects in class and received feedback from their peers. Subsequently, a self-assessment questionnaire was applied to evaluate the impact of the project-based approach on their learning.

The points included in the self-assessment questionnaire were devised in order to check students' motivation, perception and usefulness of the proposed project-based approach. For six statements the responses were evaluated using the Likert scale with five points ranging from *strongly disagree*, *disagree*, and *neutral* to *agree* and *strongly agree*:

1. *I enjoyed working on a project for the English seminar.*
2. *The topic for the project was in line with my specialization and my future career.*
3. *The guidelines/ model text offered by the teacher helped me organise my ideas and have a coherent presentation.*
4. *Working on the project has challenged me to look for new words and expressions in English.*
5. *Working on the project has helped me improve my interaction with my fellow students - working together on the same project, giving or receiving feedback on projects.*
6. *I now feel a bit better prepared to do a project and present it in front of others.*

There were two more requirements in the questionnaire meant to encourage students to reflect on their experience and express in their own words the things they learned while working on the project and presenting it, and reveal the way in which they will improve their performance regarding similar project-based approaches in the future.

On the other hand, the students from the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine were encouraged to adopt an interdisciplinary approach. It consisted in students selecting a relevant case study from their

training practice. It was intended to cover aspects related to their future workplace context and was meant to activate knowledge from the perspective of Occupational English Test (OET) Veterinary Science Tests. The template offered to the students to work on started with the writing input offered by the OET materials and included headings that took into consideration aspects related to the patient's profile, health condition and treatment:

Name of animal:

Type/Breed:

Date of visit:

History (of condition especially, symptoms, etc.):

Clinical findings:

Diagnosis:

Treatment:

Moreover, it featured two extra questions meant to encourage students to reflect on the interactional dynamics inside a vet's practice:

Vet – Owner interaction and communication: use words that refer to the way they behave, show emotions and communicate.

Owner – Pet relationship: use words that refer to the way the owner talks about the animal and its condition, and to his/ her behaviour toward the suffering animal.

These last two points were meant to make students aware of the importance of effective communication and good emotional management competences in order to cope with unforeseen situations at the workplace.

The self-assessment questionnaire for the Veterinary Medicine students had as its purpose the evaluation of the usefulness of projects in using English for a specific domain and in helping students acquire lifelong key competences. It contained six statements students had to evaluate using the Likert scale with five points ranging from *strongly disagree*, *disagree* and *neutral*, to *agree* and *strongly agree*:

1. *I enjoyed preparing a case study from my practical training for the English seminar.*

2. *The topic for the project/ case study was in line with my specialization and my future career.*

3. *The headings provided in the template for the case study were relevant and helped me organise the information in a meaningful way.*

4. *Working on the case study has made me aware of the importance of clear and effective communication in the vet - pet/ animal owner and vet - student interaction.*

5. *Working on the case study has made me aware of the importance of managing one's own emotions and attitudes in the vet - pet/ animal owner and vet - student interaction.*

6. *Working on the case study has helped me activate and improve my knowledge of English for the area I am specializing in.*

The seventh and last point in the questionnaire aimed at giving students the freedom to use their own words in pointing out the

things they have learned while working on the case study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The objectives behind the implementation of project-based learning activities were directed towards the consolidation of the terminology used during the courses and seminars, the involvement of students in projecting their own enterprise or filling in a case study, as well as the development of critical thinking skills in accessing resources and designing the end version of their project. Furthermore, they pointed towards the need for fostering personal skills – engagement with a topic of interest, raising awareness of the factors influencing work in a certain domain and acquiring social competences from a double positioning – reflecting on the situation in the training context and on the emotions and behaviour of the participants involved (especially for the Veterinary Medicine students) (*figure 1*).

The first point in the self-assessment questionnaire aimed at evaluating the degree of enjoyment in working on projects, a feeling that may indirectly reveal students' motivation and involvement:

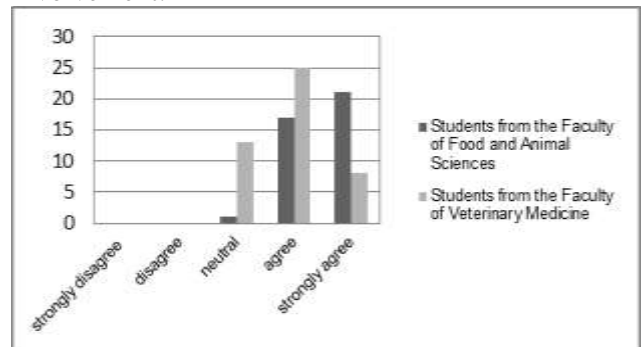


Figure 1 A comparative view of the students' responses regarding the feeling of enjoyment experienced while working on the project

Another aspect that was considered important was whether the topic for the project was in line with their specialization and their future career since the ESP classes aim at activating linguistic knowledge from the field in which students will work in the future (*figure 2*).

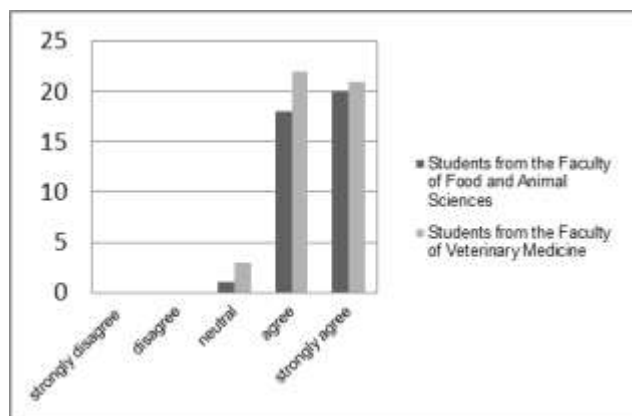


Figure 2 A comparative view of the students' responses regarding the relevance of the project for their specialization and future career

A further point in the questionnaire assessed the impact of the project-based activity on activating and improving students' knowledge of English for the area they are specializing in (figure 3):

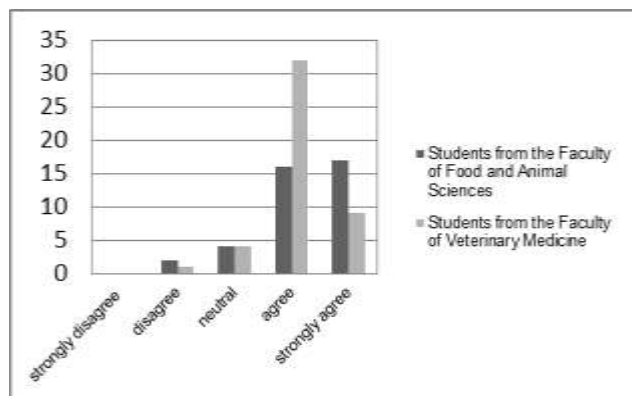


Figure 3 A comparative view of the students' responses regarding the activation and improvement of students' knowledge of English

This aspect was consistently supported by Veterinary Medicine students' free answers regarding the things they learned while working on the project. Many students admitted to having enriched their vocabulary with specialized clinical terms, names of animal breeds and illnesses. The students from the Faculty of Food and Animal Sciences have also mentioned the acquisition of new, specialised vocabulary as a positive effect of working on the project.

The two extra aspects addressed in the questionnaire for the Veterinary Medicine students were related to the importance of clear communication and the appropriate management of emotions while interacting with pet/ animal owners. The fact that they had to include this kind

of information in their project and then further reflect on the impact of these two aspects when responding to the questionnaire increased the awareness of a great majority of students regarding the necessity of mastering these two competences at the workplace.

CONCLUSIONS

Adopting project-based approaches in teaching ESP can be successful if the topic for the project is chosen in cooperation with the students, adapted to their long-term needs, and meant to provide the perfect context for fostering personal and social competences. Although there may be a slight degree of subjectivity involved in responding to the self-assessment questionnaire, the fact that it was filled in anonymously allowed for a certain freedom in sharing their opinions. The questionnaire also revealed students' eagerness to engage in similar project-based learning activities in the future.

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