

Design a website? Let's build one!.. Working with enthusiastic pupils

This article sets out to explore the process that led to a class taking an objective on their syllabus one step further. It looks at the way the methodology employed provided the necessary conditions for a project as ambitious as the creation of a website to occur. The elements of technology that were involved in the project are discussed and finally assessment by the parents is described.

Background

The class was made up of sixteen teenagers aged between 14 and 16. They had been studying English for a varying period of time at a private language institute in Lisbon, Portugal. Some had begun at 10, some only a couple of years earlier. The class level was B1 (Council of Europe Framework) and they had classes twice a week for 1 hr 30 mins each session. A course book was used as a background text to support a task-based syllabus. The TBL methodology suited this class of teenagers. It was a contrast to their regular school syllabus of text interpretation and grammar exercises which prepares them for national exams. The definition of a task here was 'an activity where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome' (Willis) It will be shown that this is precisely what happened with these learners.

The final task on the syllabus was one that may be familiar to many – 'Design a school website'. Immediately the students suggested that they weren't going to just design it but that they would build it. Everyone agreed.

Technology

This was the first aspect addressed. I confess that when the idea of actually doing a website, ie not just designing it, was suggested, as full of enthusiasm as I was, I actually had no idea how it was going to happen. I knew we would need computers - but that was the extent of my knowledge. Fortunately, the students knew – and there was a core group of 3 who really did ensure that the project happened.

Powerpoint is a tool that many children learn to use at school. This was the case with my students and as described by Jones (2004). Firstly the planning takes place and consequently all the language related, and the second stage is the content. Linguistically speaking, the language of discussion, negotiation, agreeing, disagreeing, persuading can all be fed into the class. Many choices have to be made and the stronger students - technically speaking are able to go further by adding animations – sound, effects etc. This is precisely what happened.

The content

Although some ideas were given by the teacher, the actual content was decided by the students themselves. The starting point was

- Educational plan
- the school building
- the staff
- our best work

An interesting process arose. The European Language Portfolio was something that had been mentioned in class and we had talked about choosing best work but it hadn't really been addressed. Now, however, was a perfect opportunity – and that is what happened. The students all began the selection process meticulously working their way through all their work - choosing, selecting, rejecting pieces that would go onto the site.

Diary Entries

One interesting piece of work that some chose was their diary entries. As with many students in Portugal, their speaking skills were superior to their writing skills. An article I had seen in ETP – April 2003 had the idea of 100 topics for encouraging students to always speak in English. Adapted to increase fluency in writing, students were asked to write on a topic for 15 minutes. This work is not overtly corrected by the teacher, but rather responded to – with a question or a comment. The students wanted to put some of these diary entries onto the website. But in their raw state, they were inappropriate. Correction was needed but a dilemma arose as this had not been the point of the activity. Was it valid to now correct them?

As a class we talked together about this, and a solution was found. Students swapped entries and typed up each others. This way many mistakes were found, and the whole activity was far more engaging for the students than had it been the teacher correcting. This also enabled the learning to become not only active but interactive.

Motivation

Motivation plays a crucial role. If students are motivated, then the chances of them learning are much greater and thus our job as teachers becomes more rewarding. The contrary is also true. The topic of motivation is a fundamental concern to any classroom teacher. It is a key issue amongst EFL practitioners. However, as Covington(1998) mentions: 'Motivation, like the concept of gravity, is easier to describe (in terms of its outward, observable effects) than it is to define.' So to clarify this, Tudor (2004) sets out features of positive motivation.

Positive Motivation

They participate actively and willingly with one another in learning activities

They are attentive to what the teacher and other students say and the questions they ask.

They do their homework regularly and prepare the next day's activities
They find input material interesting

They are willing to cooperate with one another or with the teacher when practical difficulties arise.

They come to class with well-organised notes.

They are willing to 'have a go' even if they find an activity difficult or unfamiliar. As Tudor continues, the characteristics of poor motivation largely mirror the above and thus they are not set out here. Thus student's motivation influences the classroom dynamics, and what can or cannot be achieved.

Skills developed

Many skills are needed for website building and ours was just a small effort. However, for the ELT classroom made up of teenagers many skills were developed. Cooperation, collaboration, understanding, listening, negotiating were among them, and of course the English needed for this. The project also allowed for creativity as defined by Fisher, 'Creativity means generating outcomes that are original and of value.'

The final product

This was of course the website. Actually it wasn't! It was a PowerPoint show that didn't make it to the world wide web. This was for several reasons – the school holidays, the class being split up and the teacher changing. It was disappointing but understandable. Our website had been created, everyone had participated and it was ready to be uploaded – whenever the circumstances arose. As we had all worked believing that it was going to be uploaded and with the fact that we decided to invite in the parents, the task was real. Thus it was not only motivating enough to do, but to finish

Inviting the parents in

When the presentation was finally finished, we invited the parents in for the launch of this our most ambitious project! As anyone who has ever invited parents into their classroom knows, for the most part parents and caretakers often have very little idea of what really goes

on in the ELT classroom. The students presented the project. They talked about what they had done and what they had enjoyed about it. Then, they showed their respective parents/caretakers what they had done on the computer. All the parents were impressed, and commented that really they had had little idea of what went on in the English Language Classroom.

Conclusion

Technology has evolved so much that writing this nearly a year later, I know that many of you will be familiar with power point presentations. For those of you who aren't, I strongly urge you to try this out with your students! It involves all the features of positive motivation and thus the necessary components for learning to take place. As I mentioned, you can't actually view this website.. as it didn't make it to the world wide web. But I hope that if you do feel inspired to do a similar project, yours makes it to the world wide web!

References

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Special thanks to my SB1 students at the British Council, Alverca, Portugal.

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Figure 1:
A screen grab of one of the slides showing the sound added.

