

# BEYOND THE TEXTBOOK: AN INSIGHT INTO CURRICULUM INTEGRATION AND PROJECT WORK IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper aims at raising awareness among language teachers concerning the potential work that may be carried out in English classes departing from textbook illustrations. It supports the workshop given on the topic, trying to put together the ideas carried out during the presentation and the discussion with the attendants. It looks at possibilities for School Curriculum and English Language Integration. The departure point is a unit of Blundel's Task Listening (Unit 10). It is also a call for a more fruitful use of textbooks and materials in order to enhance classroom performance and to broaden the students' scope of learning and reinforce other topics through the foreign language class.

Beyond the textbook first originated as "The Use of Road Maps in the Language Classroom", due to concerns about the way in which we can integrate other subjects of the curriculum with the foreign language class and the misuse of existing foreign language teaching materials by a large population of teachers. This article is also associated with the constant complaint about the lack of materials, from teachers working in isolated areas. Finally due to the potential that project work provides not only for the teacher to "elaborate" on curricular topics, but also for the students to practice the language forms they know and/or for developing the need to learn new ones.

In this paper we will refer to the foreign language class (*FLC*) because we, as teachers, know that practically any activity held in the English class may also be used for any other language, including the mother tongue. Besides many Colombian foreign language teachers are graduated in both English and French or either one of the two and Spanish. Foreign language teaching activities may also be applicable to other areas of the curriculum. Proof of this, nowadays, is the use of *Project Work* in foreign language teaching (*FLT*), an approach that, although is not new in the teaching field, is indeed new to the field of FLT.

If we analyze some of the factors of the learning process, we have to admit that organized learning (Friend-Booth, 1986) takes place in the classroom. Project work takes the classroom experience out into the world. Projects are multi-skill activities (Haines, 1989), focusing on topics or themes rather than on specific language targets. They help the language learner and teacher to bridge the gap between the language taught and what is actually required to perform tasks in daily routines either at school or in social interactions.

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Today's approaches advocate cooperation as a motivational factor, fostering interpersonal relationship to promote involvement and development of the individual (Community Language Learning).

Project work is student-centered and task-based. The teacher needs a more flexible attitude towards the students' work. Projects are not suited to a syllabus, therefore the language required in a project derives from the nature of the project itself and not from the textbook. The role of the teacher is valuable in helping students gain linguistic confidence and in the planning and the development stages where s/he plays the role of coordinator, facilitator and consultant or assistant.

Being theme or topic-based, a project allows for curricular integration, hence teachers require planning and timing for project preparation and development. These two aspects are time consuming and time bound. The length of time depends on time availability and on the nature of the project.

Project work implies a series of educational, institutional and linguistic factors for the foreign language classroom. There is nothing else that students like doing more than doing something enjoyable, something that involves challenge, expressing their creativity, and above all variety, an activity that allows them to be themselves. Project work provides the students with an opportunity to express their own ideas, to work at their own pace and to talk about themselves. Project work activities

also require a certain degree of flexibility on the teacher's part. It is an opportunity to bring into use the language forms already acquired or to create the need to learn and use new ones: forms or language which the teacher can provide the students with. Project work activities are flexible in that they may be carried out in a variety of ways. They may be carried out at home, at school, individually, in groups, in pairs or in a combination of these modes, allowing for cooperative learning to take place.

Another advantage to project work in the language classroom is that it leads the learners to develop their ability for critical thinking, research, selection, classification, evaluation of information, note-taking, report writing and organizational skills. These activities foster opportunities for integrating the four language skills.

In project work, it is also important to consider materials. Foreign language teaching materials to be more appealing to both the teacher and the learner are colorfully illustrated, in most cases, to enhance the introduction of work on each topic or unit. With the arrival of the humanistic and communicative approaches this aspect of materials design is more deeply taken into account by textbook writers and editors with the purpose of facilitating and promoting the development of activities such as brainstorming, prediction and inference. These activities are commonly proposed and/or used as warm up activities. Very often, language teachers go straight into the dialogue or the reading of each unit. By doing so teachers very often miss the opportunity to exploit other aspects of life and the school curriculum illustrated in the

pictures accompanying each unit. In addition, teachers also miss the opportunity to let students develop their cognitive skills, hindering the teaching-learning process in the language classroom.

The materials that gave birth to the first ideas on the development of this topic were the **In Touch** and **Life Styles series**. Then it was Blundel's **Task Listening, unit ten**. This unit is composed of a dialogue about a telephone call in which someone calls a friend to ask for directions on how to get to her place (as she is lost). The unit is accompanied by a city map on which the students (listeners) have to trace the route following the directions given. It also contains a distance chart and a map of northern England to support a writing exercise on which the students have to give someone directions to get from one place, in the south to another in the north, based on the map.

Considering this specific material the following has been the procedure used by myself.

**Brainstorming:** The tape is played to identify the telephone ringing tone. This is the opportunity to discuss cultural habits related to telephoning, distinguishing the telephone ringing tones and types of telephone calls and services. Then the tape is played to identify the caller, the topic and the recipient of the call. This activity takes a while since the tape has to be played several times. The brainstorming exercises provide the opportunity to speak and listen to in the meantime, as well as,

argue and discuss. The last 2 activities can be considered sub-speaking skills or even sub-listening skills if we consider that both processes take place at the same time.

As the listening-speaking exercise develops teachers may induce the students to talk about things related to the situation, e.g. if we consider the city map, the situation takes place in Oxford because Oxford Polytechnic, the place where the lost friend is calling from is located on the map. A point of reference here is then asking: Where is Oxford? Where in England is it?, What is it famous for?. A Project on Oxford is likely to take place at this stage. Students can investigate about historical facts, college life there, what's the area like?, etc. Then the discussion-talk may move to explore the map. The most relevant place on the map is Nottingham. It is famous for the soccer or football team Nottingham Forest, but it is most remembered for Robin Hood. This integrates literature into the class. During classtime the discussion may refer to the character and what he did. A student or group can carry out another project: do a presentation in class or prepare a display on the story of Robin Hood, considering historical and literary aspects. Work on math may also be introduced through the distance chart. The first activity can be conducted by asking questions about the distance between different British cities. Since the distances are given in miles, problem solving activities may be led by asking the answer in kilometers so the students have to do the conversion. At this point the lesson may be directed to

the students' own environment using regional or local maps (see appendix I, for instance), by selecting specific areas, specially circuit-like roads shown/seen on the local or regional map. Examples of this can be the surroundings of Bogotá, Pasto, Cali, Barranquilla, Medellín or neighboring towns where workplace is located. Through problem solving activities there are different types of problems that may be posed to the students with the aim of applying numerical operations: If the distance between Cali and Palmira is 9 miles, What's the distance in kilometers? If you travel at a speed of 80kms/hr, How long does it take to get from one place to another? A variety of problem-solving activities like this may be conducted through careful planning. Appendix II shows a distance chart of important places in Colombia.

If a circuit-like map has been decided to work on, for instance a group of students can work on the climate, agricultural products, tourist attractions if there is a known one of a city or town in the nearby area. Another group can do the same with another town. If you decide to lead your students to learn about maps, another activity may be to plan a trip from Pasto to Popayán for example. The students go to or telephone the bus terminal to inquire about bus or transportation lines travelling that route, the cost, the distance, the length of the trip, or even call airline offices about flights between major towns in the country. Another group/student can take another segment, let us say from Popayán to Cali, another one from Cali to Armenia, from Armenia to Ibagué, Ibagué-Bogotá, etc. A whole

class activity can include calculating the cost, distance and time taken for a longer journey between some of the points selected or from one extreme to the other. This kind of project work facilitates learning and reinforcement of geographical aspects integrated with other areas through the foreign language class.

A good way to promote language and skills development is by organizing oral presentations or even by just having the posters displayed or exhibited around the classroom or school. The exhibit will make walls and bulletin boards look colorful and attractive for everyone to look at. The students will feel proud of their work being exhibited and will be willing to explain it to observers/readers. We have enjoyed an exciting experience at Colegio Francisco Antonio de Ulloa in Popayán where one of the English teachers has made great and extremely successful efforts to integrate the school's PEI and curriculum: English, handicrafts, ceramics, and Spanish.

Summarizing some of the advantages of project work in the language classroom, we can list among others, the following ones:

- ❖ It becomes a challenge for the students and the teacher him/herself.
- ❖ It facilitates individualization, independence and autonomy.

Project work fosters the development of:

- ❖ Co-operative and team learning.
- ❖ Critical thinking.
- ❖ Self-evaluation.

Integration of skills:

- ❖ Linguistic.

- ❖ Researching.
- ❖ Organizational.
- ❖ Search, classification and presentation of information.
- ❖ Note-taking.
- ❖ Writing/giving instructions, reports, summaries.
- ❖ Evaluating.
- ❖ Suggesting.

Finally, projects can be of a varied type. Fried-Booth (1986), Haines (1989), and the Richmond Club Newsletter, No. 2 (February, 1996) offer a wide range of ideas.

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