ABSTRACT: The paper explores individual project assignments in ESP (English for Specific Purposes) at the Higher School of Economics in St. Petersburg, Russia, including their general framework, specific features, and stages of preparation. It also examines linguistic skills and competences that project work aims to develop. The main focus is on minimizing possible pitfalls that teachers and students are likely to face while working on the projects. Project assessment and evaluation are also addressed in the paper.

Keywords: project work, skills and competences, English for Specific Purposes.

INTRODUCTION

The goal of the ESP course is to help students acclimate to their chosen professional or academic communities by developing the skills and knowledge they need to use language appropriately in those environments. In recent years, it has become apparent that ESP courses must also aim to develop a range of other competencies (informational, socio-cultural, etc.) in addition to language proficiency. Today communicative approaches to language learning and teaching are gradually being replaced by socio-collaborative ones and, according to Gruba (2004), debates about pedagogy now center on aspects of learner autonomy, collaborative project design, and appropriate assessment practices (623).

No one questions the fact that computer technologies play an important role in the development of these competencies, facilitating learners’ autonomy and motivation. Arnó, Soler, and Rueda (2006) have confirmed the belief of many CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) researchers in stating that “it is no longer a matter of how to incorporate technology, but rather how to adapt LSP practice to a context of constant technological changes” (257). With regard to today’s students, Prenski (2010) uses the term “Homo Sapiens Digital”,

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explaining that the role of educators is to let “students learn by using new technologies, putting themselves in the role of guides, context providers, and quality controllers” (1).

Many adherents of the integrative CALL approach stress the importance of the computer as a “toolbox” that stands ready to be used in the construction of projects (Toyoda & Harrison, 2002). However, the majority of works devoted to various technology-based projects describe collaborative group project work. Debski (2000) has coined the term PrOCALL (Project-Oriented CALL) to highlight large-scale collaborative activities.

In 2006, the Higher School of Economics in St. Petersburg, Russia, launched a series of new ESP courses in an effort to update the university’s foreign language curriculum in English. In these courses students have been asked to do a series of individual computer-based projects.

This paper aims to show that computers can be successfully used not only in collaborative, but also in individual project work, in the context of individual projects carried out by second-year students in ESP courses. In the first section I identify specific features of project-based work and explain what is understood by individual ESP projects, their stages and the general time frame to complete them. In the second section I explore the skills and competences that the project aims to develop, followed by a presentation and discussion of the difficulties and possible pitfalls that both teachers and students are likely to face while working on the projects, and suggestions to minimize and overcome them. Finally, I address the problem of project assessment and evaluation, arguing that peer assessment should be used in conjunction with teacher-based assessment.

PROJECT-BASED LEARNING TASKS

The project-based method is a complex method that enables teachers to design a language course based on students’ interests. It provides students with an opportunity to plan and control their learning activity autonomously and to build upon their knowledge independently. Discussing the reasons for using Internet-based project work in a language class, Dudeney & Hockly (2007) stress that projects can be interdisciplinary, “allowing for cross-over into other … subject areas” (44). The authors believe that this approach gives the learner “a more ‘real-world’ look and feel, and provides greater motivation” (44).
For a learning project to be successful, it should be built upon the following principles:

(1) There should be a problem that is both interesting and significant for the student, and which requires some research activity. To investigate this problem the student needs to possess some foundational knowledge in his/her chosen subject area as well as an appropriate level of English.

(2) The stages and time frame of the project should be clearly identified and followed.

(3) The biggest part of any project work should be done individually by the student or collaboratively by a group of students.

(4) The outcome of the project should be visible and have some practical implication (for example, a project might result in an article in a wallpaper, poster, presentation, web page, or a conference report). In fact, the “visibility” of the final product is very important and distinguishes the project method from other similar methods of language teaching.

By individual ESP projects we mean preparatory work for a report on a given topic drawn from authentic sources. This work is done systematically at the end of each topic studied, resulting in 4 to 5 projects during the academic year.

Work on an individual project includes the following stages:

(1) **Articulating a research topic.** In this phase students choose a “narrow” topic from their broader area of study. For example, a student of sociology might choose to work on the subject of “Internet addiction,” a topic within the area of “Mass Media and Society.” It is very important to set a time frame and decide on an intended outcome of the project. In our case, students are asked not only to prepare an oral report (in which they are to speak from 7 to 10 minutes), but also to accompany the report with a PowerPoint presentation. In this stage the assessment criteria are also discussed. This work is done in class and usually takes from 1 to 2 hours of class time.

(2) **Collecting research materials** (conducted by students independently). In this phase students are asked to find several authentic sources on their chosen topic. They can be either research articles or magazine articles. As a rule, students find the materials on the Internet by searching specialized web-pages or e-libraries. Here enough time should be allocated for individual consultations in which students can get advice from the instructor on the quality of the chosen
sources and materials and to discuss any language difficulties they experience. It usually takes students about a week to complete this stage.

3) **Outlining the report.** Here students summarize materials and synthesize facts and ideas from multiple sources, preparing citations from the sources used. It is vital that for the report to be logically structured.

4) **Designing a PowerPoint presentation** of the report with appropriate visuals. To be able to do this, students need to have some basic skills in PowerPoint techniques. It takes from 1 to 3 days to complete stages 3 and 4.

5) **Presenting the report** to the class and responding to questions. This phase requires direct communication with the audience: questions, discussions, and debates.

6) **Assessment and evaluation.** The report is assessed both by the instructor and peers according to criteria that are previously distributed and discussed in class. The time allocated for the presentation and evaluation of reports may vary depending on the number of students in the group, and may take 1 or 2 class periods.

What enables us to call such activity “project work”? First, the student poses a research problem (even a small one) which is of interest to him or her and which is closely connected with the student’s specialization. In order to examine that issue the student needs to employ research methods, which are developed in successive projects. Second, project work cultivates students’ independent learning ability as they work on their reports mostly autonomously (both in the stages of collecting materials and in structuring their reports). The role of the instructor is restricted to that of a coordinator, facilitator, adviser, and motivator. The instructor often acts as an intermediary between students and the authentic language materials they find outside of class. Finally, the outcome of the project – i.e., the public presentation of the report – is highly “visible” and may have potential practical applications: students might apply the knowledge they acquired during the project work in other disciplines.

**WHAT DOES PROJECT WORK BRING TO AN ESP COURSE?**

Many researchers following Swales (1985) agree that the objectives of ESP go far beyond simply revealing subject-specific language use. Reviewing different
approaches to ESP course objectives, Basturkmen (2006) distinguishes, among others, the following groups of objectives:

- to develop target performance competencies;
- to teach underlying knowledge;
- to develop strategic competence (133).

The project work described in this paper may help to achieve some of these aims. For example, students are taught to structure their report and to present the information in public. In other words, they develop a ‘performance competence’ that they may need in their future profession.

Although all students have some basic knowledge of their discipline, they may come across some disciplinary concepts that are unknown to them. In such cases, the instructor of English has to introduce students to concepts from their disciplines (‘teach underlying knowledge’) in addition to other terms and expressions that they might need to express those concepts.

Project work also develops strategic competence (which is understood as “a means that enables language knowledge and content knowledge to be used in communication” (Basturkmen, 2006: 139) because it brings to the surface the knowledge of the subject area that students already possess, and creates opportunities for them to actualize this knowledge in English.

Overall, project work facilitates the acquisition and development of a range of language skills, such as using different reading strategies; summarizing; reporting findings from various sources; paraphrasing and using direct quotations; formulating questions; oral presentation skills; and communicative competence in general.

Apart from “purely” linguistic skills and competences, projects are aimed at developing a number of extra-linguistic skills. For example, to find the necessary information, students need to have effective web-searching techniques. Without any doubt, they know how to search the Internet, but very often their searching skills need to be further developed. While working on the project the students also learn to assess online resources and examine their own and others’ work critically. Project-based tasks help students to develop their ability to locate and use information and resources appropriately, to obtain relevant information, and to initiate, plan, organize and carry out a focused project. In other words, this work serves to promote independent learning, which is one of the intended outcomes of both ESP courses and the CALL initiative.
POSSIBLE PITFALLS

While working on technology-based projects, both students and instructors may encounter some difficulties. Some of them are discussed below.

Language Problems

The project work discussed in this article requires some basic knowledge of academic English. To succeed in conducting projects, students need to be familiar with academic lexis and grammar structures as well as have some academic reading skills. As projects involve a good deal of reading, it is very important that before doing project work, students develop such skills as understanding the main ideas of the text, distinguishing the main ideas and supporting details, evaluating the writer’s point of view, skimming to understand the gist of the argument, or scanning to find specific information. For this reason it is very important to incorporate elements of EAP (English for Academic Purposes) into ESP courses from the very beginning.

Web Research

It has been commonly accepted by both CALL researchers and instructors that the Web is “a potentially useful corpus for language study because it provides examples of language that are contextualized and authentic, and is large and easy searchable” (Wu, Franken, & Witten, 2009: 249). However, the authors warn that if tasks or exercises involve direct Web search, instructors “cannot rely on predicting what they will retrieve or knowing exactly what their students will see” (Wu et al., 2009: 251). Therefore, students should be given very clear instructions beforehand about the kind and quality of sources to be used in projects.

They should be also advised to search certain websites (including e-libraries) that contain texts of certain genres. In the case of preparing individual projects, students should clearly distinguish a research article from other sources. As the practice of using project work in the course of ESP shows, the most widespread authentic source that the students are likely to use is Wikipedia. This is quite understandable as the first hyperlink on practically any topic in any search engine
will be a hyperlink to Wikipedia. And though some authors view it as a valuable source for doing project work (Dudeney & Hockly, 2007: 44), sometimes it is necessary to restrict the students in their use of this source, as the articles in Wikipedia summarize information on the topic and the student does not need to use his or her analytical and critical skills to prepare a report. Students are advised to use this online encyclopedia only as a starting point for further search.

It is also advisable, especially on the first project, to make a list of websites and resources from e-libraries to be used by students. However, they need to understand that this list is open and that they can personally add any website that contains proper information on the chosen topic.

**Use of PowerPoint Techniques**

When used correctly, PowerPoint presentations can be a valuable tool to attract the audience’s attention to the content of the report. To achieve this effect, students need to be familiar with some general rules of designing an effective PowerPoint presentation. Among the common errors that the students make is the overuse of text on the slides and the overuse of visual effects. Because the PowerPoint program provides a wide range of possibilities for creating visual and sound effects and is rather easy to use, sometimes students take more interest in preparing the presentation rather than the report. And although the ability to use PowerPoint presentations spreads far beyond a language class, language teachers need to instruct students by giving them a set of rules and, if possible, by demonstrating good examples of visual presentations in public speaking in English.

**ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION**

Assessment is generally seen as a key component of any teaching environment (Gardner & Miller, 1999). When project work is used in a language course, instructors face the dilemma of what to assess: correctness in language use, or other factors, such as logical exposition of the report, quality of visual support, etc. It is a common belief among teachers as well as students that only language proficiency should be assessed in a language class. Nevertheless, if the goals of the language course are not restricted to the development of communicative
competencies, the objects of assessment should be modified accordingly. Assessment needs to be based on the general quality of the report i.e., it must take into account, besides phonetic, lexical and grammatical correctness of the language, a range of other criteria, such as: (a) the level of the materials studied; (b) the structure and logic of the report; (c) the ability to summarize; (d) the ability to refer to and cite different sources; (e) the ability to draw conclusions; (f) the ability to use PowerPoint presentation techniques; (g) oral presentation skills (the ability to speak using the notes, to catch and hold the audience’s attention; (h) the ability to interact with the audience. This list is not fixed and can be altered at the beginning of each project.

To ensure the overall success of any project work, it is crucial that students participate in the evaluation process. Little (2003) highlights the importance of peer assessment for the development of self-direction: “The capacity for private reflection grows out of the practice of public, interactive reflection, and the capacity for self-assessment develops partly out of the experience of assessing and being assessed by others” (Little, 2003: 223). Peer assessment helps students not only critically examine the work of their peers, but also better understand their own achievements.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion I want to emphasize that project work can be successfully used not only for language learning purposes, but also for developing a wide range of general competences. The practice of using project-based tasks in the ESP course demonstrates that projects can increase learners’ interests, activity and motivation, and create an atmosphere in which students are not only willing, but also eager to research their chosen problem and present their research findings.

REFERENCES


