Teachers for the Knowledge Society

Functional acquisitions by project work in the mother tongue class: Three case studies

Ana-Maria Grigore, Laura Neacsu*, Florina Paraschiv

University of Bucharest, Faculty of Letters, Edgar Quinet Street, Bucharest, Romania

Abstract

Our paper presents a joint effort in a research partnership. Our aim is to demonstrate that project work is a meaningful learning activity that supports a variety of groups of students to better understand operational concepts in the mother tongue curriculum. We planned project work activities in three different locations according to the various needs each of us identified. Our results highlight the fact that project work brings about quality learning. It does add value by helping students to assimilate in a personal system their personal exploration and reflection on their amazing opportunities in their own language.

Keywords: Project work; functional competence; operational concept; meaningful assessment; research partnership

1. Project work – a challenge

Before we got enrolled in a master program at the Faculty of Letters in Bucharest our understanding about project work was rather limited. We had read about various experiences with projects in schools mainly in the Methodological guidelines for mother tongue (2002) but we actually viewed the project as a complementary method of assessment as it is perceived by most of the practitioners in Romania. For us the project was a sort of generality that an experienced teacher might probably consider from time to time. The beginners like us did not seem very apt to organize such complicated scheme of assessment. But then we were challenged by our professors from the master to think of specific projects to being implemented in our classes. We gradually explored the benefits of project work beyond our cliché and we accepted a new perspective – the project work as a *modus vivendi* in our present world (Gardner, 2006, Davies, 2003). Out there, in the reality of life, people mainly work with projects. If the school subject we teach is to prepare the students to become effective communicators in this real world then we should make a profit of the project, bring it to the class and make it a teaching and learning instrument – which is inspired from the real world and that prepares for the real world. Moreover, if projects could motivate us, graduates in a master program, they most likely could motivate children in schools as well. Projects bring purpose to the learning, a structured way to approach a problem and a lot of involvement. Projects also require a lot of planning which we needed to deal with.

* Corresponding author – Laura Neacsu. Tel.: +40 (0)724-787-987.
E-mail address: lauraneacsu@yahoo.com

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The first one in our present partnership to seriously test project work was Ana Maria. She used a questionnaire with her students and found out that they did not like what they were supposed to do for the Romanian class. It was boring and difficult. They could understand why they did what they did. Ana then tried her first project as part of her portfolio in the master program. That first project did motivate the students and it did motivate her to try again and do better. Laura and Florina could see a very clear material proof that things improve with project work. This is how our partnership came into being.

2. Specific projects for specific needs

Project work is not a recipe one can implement as such. The general framework of a project design needs to be specified according to a particular class context. Consequently, we identified each our particular needs, discussed our plans, supported one another in developing the research instruments and started the project work.

In one group (10 graders in an average school in an average town in Romania), students had problems with text interpretation and communication competence in a functional approach. For this reason their teacher, Ana-Maria embarked in the very daring enterprise to organize the whole process as an overall project work activity. Each learning unit is a project in which students develop understanding by aiming a certain meaningful communication product which orient their readings and interaction as well as written tasks during a number of weeks. They explore both the literary text and daily communication within the project frame. Ana Maria’s hypothesis is that if students are involved in project work their communication improves. In order to check this, she developed and applied questionnaires and observation grids.

In the second group, the teacher tried to overcome the descriptive grammar stereotype and develop communication projects with her students so that they get to become aware of the language system in a functional approach. The students are bored with grammar when it is presented in the traditional way. They do not understand the reason of the standard examples and are unable to connect the grammar acquisition to everyday communication. Laura designed contexts of communication to support her students explore the mechanism of language variability. Laura’s hypothesis is: If I use an intuitive approach to grammar the students’ communication improves. The target group consists of lower secondary students from a school in Bucharest who are well behaved, diligent and purpose oriented. Yet when it comes to grammar they have a lot of difficulties. In order to organise her project work Laura uses a thorough planning, many working sheets she devised herself and tests to observe the students’ progress.

Last but not least, in her simultaneous rural school from the Teleorman county, Florina took on the difficult responsibility to try to do something for her already marginalized students. The simultaneous education bears the mark of failure in Romania. It gathers students from two or even four age groups due to the small numbers of children in the respective location. Very solid planning is needed for such situation and a lot of didactic innovation (Stoicescu et al 2005). This is how Florina started project work with her low attainers in a mixed group of 5 and 7 graders. In many respects their needs are similar – they do not have basic communication competences because they were never placed in the situation to reflect on oral messages and written texts. This is exactly what Florina tries to do in the heterogeneous group where she values the experience of the older ones and attempts to deconstruct the common misconceptions that the two grades share. Florina’s hypothesis is the following: if students in a simultaneous class work in group projects they will improve their acquisition. In order to implement her research, Florina designed integrated collaborative activities and applied a number of tests to study the progress.

3. The three projects in action

Ana Maria’s implementation expanded on roughly eight weeks (October and November 2010) and was centered on two projects embedded into two learning units – The Tale, respectively The Short Story. The first project retells the story of Harap Alb (a tale by a famous Romanian writer) by making a small image book with an appendix of symbols and literary terms. After agreeing on what is to be done and on the assessment criteria, the 10 graders worked in groups for three weeks, according to the following stages: the reading of Harap-Alb by Ion Creanga; the selection of materials (images, card, colours etc); the making of the book; the presentation of the image book by making use of argumentation. In each group, the students summarized the tale, decided on the final version, edited the text, designed the layout which comprises the illustrations, developed the appendix, decided upon the cover design, put everything together.
The second project, based on the exploration of the short story, gave the 10 graders the opportunity for more meaningful project work. Their challenge was to synthesize the characteristics of this literary species on posters for an intended audience – their colleagues in grade 9D. The latter were scheduled to see the movie Moara cu noroc (The Lucky Mill) based on a short story by a Romanian writer (Ioan Slavici). The nine graders were totally uninterested in the topic – there were just two students who had read the text. The difficult task of the 10 graders was to present the poster and to stir the interest of the younger students. The project took four weeks according to the following stages: agree on the assessment criteria; read the short story; develop the posters (see Table 1); present the results for interevaluation (the presentation as such was part of the assessment for the monologue).

### Table 1 – The posters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nr.</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ioan Slavici</td>
<td>Identify representative data about the writer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The short story - a typology</td>
<td>Gather information about the topic, draft a scheme including the various categories and examples of works under each category.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The structure of the work Moara cu noroc</td>
<td>Select passages for the theme, the space-time coordinates, the organization of the story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The mill – main symbols</td>
<td>Look in various dictionaries for the meanings of the word including the dictionary of symbols, look for other examples in other literary works</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>the characters’ network</td>
<td>Select images from the film, observe the relationships among the characters, draft a network, highlight the characters’ profiles by making use of excerpts from the story</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the end of the project work the students went to visit their younger colleagues and for two hours they presented the various posters as originally as they could. (Fig. 1).

In this new perspective, the assessment at the end of the learning unit was the most pleasurable moment. The students evaluated their peers’ posters and were quite thrilled when they found out that the poster presentation was a monologue for which they got good marks. Until then the “monologue” had been a notion in the dictionary and some hard tasks in the Romanian textbook. When experienced in a meaningful context, the monologue brought about meaningful assessment. Another excellent point of the project work was the reading of the whole literary text. Here is an excerpt from V.R’s feedback: *It’s the first time we were evaluated without becoming stressed. My colleagues praised me for my contribution and the poster presentation. I did read the story. It was fun. The kids from the 9D were amazed. They new I was one of the bad boys in the school, and there I was, presenting the poster. I’m going to read the novel Ion. I surely will. The Romanian class is not that bad after all.*

The feedback from the students, Ana-Maria’s observations as well as the data from the questionnaires show a clear change in attitude. The table below (see Table 2) synthesises the results of the initial questionnaire and the one
applied after the Short Story project. In between the questionnaires there were about 10 weeks out of which 8 were dedicated to project work. The drop from the negative perspective is tremendous in most categories.

### Table 2: Comparative data in the questionnaires

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>First questionnaire</th>
<th>Second one</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I learn with difficulty because I don’t understand why I need to learn</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel useless during the class</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When working in groups it is difficult to accept another point of view</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading is boring</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I cannot find words when I need to communicate something</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature is difficult</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Laura’s project work, with a focus on functional grammar, involved a lot of planning in order to reverse an unfruitful approach to language: *presentation of the rule – example – memorization*. This pattern is boring for the students and does not help them to actually improve their communication competences. The students can recite the definition, but nothing else happens. Laura looked for clues in the best references in Romania (Pamfil, 2008) and decided upon reconstructing the definition with the students (i.e. going on the same conceptual route the grammar expert takes in order to get to the concept). The change she tried was an inductive approach that invites students to carefully observe a language phenomenon and to identify the regularity. The following stages were considered in a project work for her 5 graders that focused the predicate awareness:

- remember the definition as it was given (and subsequently memorized without internalization in the 4th grade);
- identify a number of occurrences on a text then reflect on the predicate place in the sentence and its relations with other elements;
- retell a story they liked (*A Kid’s Diary*) by placing Greg (the main character in the story) in dynamic situations;
- select some excerpts from this story and again identify and discuss about the role and features of the predicate;
- observe differences among predicates and the verbs that form them;
- distinguish among the features of verbal and nominal predicates.

For the reflection phase the students developed a mural, actually a synthetic table that connected their observations concerning the predicate. After all, this is all that *important grammar people* do – they categorize. If the categorization is done by the students themselves then the internalization of the concepts is on the right track.

An interesting project was done with the 8 graders where a number of ads were analyzed from the point of view of the importance of polysemantic words and homonyms. Students enjoyed having a closer look to the ads. They have never before thought of analyzing ads. As ordinary consumers they considered them either funny or not. But during the project work they were able to observe how a short statement can actually play with the various meanings of a word or with the homonyms and, by that, draw your attention. Moreover, they tried to develop their own ads.

Here are two of the ads that the students mostly enjoyed:

*Dosia – a solution for your windows (ad for a liquid soap for the glass)*

*Visine - it’s good to have in view (ad for eyedrops)*

The feedback from the students shows their enthusiasm for the game-like atmosphere in the grammar class. During the observation, Laura noted down the children’s interest for developing analogies for the grammar notions. By that they demonstrate both their interest as well as their better understanding of the respective concepts.

Florina’s approach is quite similar to Ana-Maria’s though the planning is different – her project work is also focused on learning units but hers are always planned in interdependence in between the two classes with whom she works simultaneously (a fifth grade and a seventh grade). The products of the older ones are used as learning materials for the young ones (like in Ana-Maria’s example of the short story). For half a term, Florina planned and organized two learning units – *The book as a cultural object* and *Word & Text*.

The first unit offered contexts for learning the concepts concerning the “book”. In this respect, the project work was focused on developing a *book about the book* for the use of the 5 graders, the latter asking questions that
structured the work of the 7 graders. The children did their best to find resources and they even addressed a request to their IT teacher in order to obtain help to complete their work.

The second unit was organized according to the connections between the word as instrument of communication and the literary text in terms of reception - interpretation. For the first time, Florina tried to work on the same reading texts with the two groups trying to fill in the interpretation gaps of the older ones and incite the younger ones to try and do some extras. The children were happy to work together in the reading sessions of "Memoirs of little cow Mu" by B. Axtag and "Florin scrie un roman" (Florin is writing a novel) by M. Cartarescu.

The tests have showed a steady progress in the acquisition of both groups since project work activities were implemented. All the 5 graders managed to identify and describe the components of a book, two thirds of them managed the syntax concepts. In grade 7, all the children identified the author, the narrator and the character as well as the features of a frame story. Practically all the students manage to select details from their reading texts. The observation grids also showed improvement in basic skills such as correct writing. The involvement was also noticeable (Fig. 2) - the children were enthusiastic about doing something (a book, an exercise for the younger ones, a set of questions for the old ones). The questionnaires were also positive in terms of cooperating for the project. If in the initial phase, one third of the children were not sure if they like to work in a team, at the end of the two units they were all unanimous that it is good to work together. The best example in this respect is probably the one of Catalina (grade 7) and Bianca (grade 5) who are good friends and neighbours in the village. They used to spend a lot of time together. Throughout the project work experience they changed focus – they still spend a lot of time together but they do it in order to better work on the projects. This also brought about positive comments on behalf of the parents who can see that their children are committed to learning instead of wandering around the village.

4. Projects are cool

In all the three cases, the students' conclusion is that projects are fun. All the instruments we used show a progressive enthusiasm about project work in all the three locations.

In the same time, we could also notice a progress in the functional acquisition, as shown in the assessment grids.

Ana-Maria’s students are now more open to literature reception, definitely better in functional communication, more interested in their own learning process and operate quite easily with the specific language concepts.

In Laura's case, instead of memorizing the rules, students started to discover them and understand the connections. The result was an increase in motivation for learning and improved class interaction.

Probably the most spectacular results are to be found in Florina's simultaneous class - their level was so low and the project work in cooperation brought so much added value that they truly seem now two-new-groups-within-a-group. Students are motivated, they surprise their parents with the involvement in doing the tasks and their teacher with the good acquisition.

Our conclusion is, that despite the difficulties of planning and sometimes of monitoring, project work is highly rewarding in terms of motivation and learning in mother tongue, bringing our classroom practice next to the communication in the real world. Our partnership makes the more difficult parts easier as we have the opportunity to discuss and share solutions. Definitely we shall continue the project work in all the three locations.

References