

Students expressing themselves through project work

Expresión e interacción estudiantil

Los estudiantes se expresan entre sí a través del trabajo por proyectos

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Abstract

This article accounts for the process carried out with 10th. grade students. It is based on two constructs that are *meaning negotiation* as an area related to discourse analysis; and project work as a learning approach, which, for the purpose of this study, is called *students' initiated projects (SIP)*. The principal aim of the study referred here consists of analyzing and describing the linguistic and social events that occur when students interact in a project process and how group work and speech are shaped by the students' negotiations. Likewise, this study highlights *cooperative work* among the group of students, who assumed different roles during project work, and *prior knowledge* as elements to use and socialize linguistic knowledge and aspects related to the projects.

Key words:

Project work, cooperative work, prior knowledge, meaning negotiation, students' interests.

Resumen

Este artículo da cuenta del proceso llevado a cabo con estudiantes de grado décimo, el cual está basado en dos pilares teóricos que son la *negociación de significado*, como área relacionada con el análisis de discurso, y el *trabajo por proyectos*, entendido como un enfoque de aprendizaje, el cual, para el propósito de este estudio, se denominó *Students' initiated projects*. El propósito de este estudio es analizar y describir los eventos lingüísticos y sociales que ocurren cuando los estudiantes interactúan en un proyecto, y los efectos de su negociación en el trabajo en grupo y en su discurso. Otros aspectos importantes que se destacan en este artículo son el trabajo cooperativo de los estudiantes, quienes asumen diferentes roles, y el conocimiento previo como elementos para usar y socializar conocimientos lingüísticos y aspectos relacionados con los proyectos.

Palabras clave:

Trabajo por proyectos, trabajo cooperativo, conocimiento previo, negociación de significado, intereses de los estudiantes.

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Introduction

One of the main aspects that have always called my attention as a teacher refers to the development of the students' ability to communicate ideas in English. During my teaching practice with students' initiated projects (SIP), concept that was created as a specific way to call students' small scale projects in the English classes, I found out that students participated more actively and learned more when they were given topics that were appealing to them. In this sense, I can relate the project work with the performance task that Glatthorn (1999) refers to. Those kinds of tasks are either, the entire activity or stages in a long-term process such as project work. The first step in performance tasks consists of planning the different activities in a chronogram. Another common point that supports many of the activities and bases for projects is the importance of the interests, needs and prior knowledge of students when they develop projects. Glatthorn (1999) considers that it is important to offer students the basis in any topic in order for them to create more, based on what they know. This is what is called "scaffolding" the process in which the teacher prepares students for the future activity. In this sense, the teacher needs to practice that type of process to show and have students familiarized with projects. I consider that students need to know first what they will do, after that, we need to prepare, tell and show them how to do what we want them to do.

Taking into account the idea that students must be the center of every single process of learning and that they have the possibility to play a more dynamic role, Tudor (1993) states the idea that projects become important in the sense that students need to be given opportunities, through instructional activities and processes that require from them more than memorist skills. Consequently, English as foreign language (EFL) students face a new alternative to learn the language by using it while working in groups developing projects based on themes that are appealing to them. This whole process becomes a challenge for students who need to apply all their capacities and knowledge.

Furthermore, inquires about projects through group work provide good opportunities to analyze the kind of interaction and specifically, the negotiations that students undertake when they come up with group agreements and decisions. That is why I connected two important topics through this study, that are project work and meaning negotiation.

In this sense, it is also necessary to take into account two more topics that are highly important in the study described here, cooperative work and prior knowledge. These two topics are relevant because students learn more when two requirements are fulfilled. First, when the activities they are doing are meaningful for them, that is, when the learning activities are based on aspects for which they feel interest or attraction and that deal with their reality outside the classroom. And second, when students have the opportunity to give and receive ideas from others who are in the same situation, that is, their classmates. In other words, a learning process that is based on the students' interests, group work and students' interaction and negotiation of meaning is important because instruction can go beyond only learning linguistic contents; it can also consider social, cultural and psychological issues.

An important aspect that I have always wanted my students to develop was their capability to express themselves and interact with others in English. Consequently, it is important to consider some factors that may affect the process of communication such as giving ideas and opinions, asking for help, discussions, planning and giving responsibilities, among others. They are also factors that teachers have to take into account when discussing both projects and meaning negotiation.

Project work generalities

Taking into account that project work is one of the constructs of this study, it is necessary to provide an explanation based on my own vision of what a classroom project is. Furthermore, based on authors such as Fried Booth, D. (1996), Cuspoca, J. (2002), Goodrich, Hatch, Wiatrowski and Unger (1995) and Sánchez, J. (2002) and my experience, classroom

projects are short processes in which a group of students use their knowledge about the world and their interests and likes for solving problems. This sort of processes must have a final product or a problem solved, in which students are able to evidence their abilities to plan and design a project made in groups.

One of the most useful conceptions of students' initiated projects is provided by Goodrich et al (1995), who state that a project is a long process based on meaningful activities, and which brings many benefits such as motivation for students to learn about different literacy and thinking skills. They also suggest encouraging students to become more autonomous in processes of thinking and learning. Projects are useful for teachers because they can use them as new alternatives in teaching practices. Through students' initiated projects, students demonstrate progresses in the processes because they can obtain feedback from their peers, teacher and outsiders.

Similarly, Cuspoca (2002) understands projects as an approach that should be characterized by a systematic organization that has specific goals to achieve; otherwise, projects will become a set of disorganized activities that make both students and teachers waste time. Moreover, it is important to mention that projects do not have a specific amount of time to be developed for but provide students with plenty of opportunities to use the knowledge that they already have. These aspects are directly related to autonomy that, according to Allwright (1991), consists of moving or passing from a traditional way of teaching to a whole new way of working. This author provides a very interesting comparison between autonomy and an exotic foreign plant which does not have roots in an indigenous environment, that is why, it is necessary to create a whole new context in order to let it survive. In this sense, it is not only about giving students opportunities to decide about something in class, but allowing them to be the center of an entire process such as projects in which they have the opportunity to explore individual and group abilities in a theme that comes from their own interests. In this sense, I agree with Sánchez (2002)

when she states that in education, students need more opportunities to acquire the language and use it in different ways. I also agree with the author when she writes that learning by doing is the best way to acquire something that is the base of projects because it allows academy to become dynamic. Thus, it involves a process in which cooperative work is present because those are collective constructions that promote different tasks and develop interaction among students. By interacting, students are able to rethink and reflect upon what they already know to acquire new knowledge.

Stages in project work

There are some examples of stages, one of them is provided by Fried (1996), who writes that a project must move in three specific stages that are beginning in the classroom, moving out to the world and returning to the classroom. This idea of stages or steps is taken by Tiller and Sokolik (1993), who state that there are five different steps in the development of a project. They are: first, the less central role of the teacher as the authority. As Mitchell (1992) points out, the more students are involved in the project, the less authority the teacher has in terms of ordering what to do and how to do it. Consequently, teachers' work consists of being managers. Second, the teacher should familiarize students who have traditional backgrounds with project work because some students are not used to an active role in the class. Next, drafts and revisions of students writings are necessary to evidence a progress in the project. Then, teachers should be aware that they must guide students from the first moment of the class in order to avoid confusions throughout the development of the project. Finally, the teacher should take into account the time they have to guide and help all the students.

Moreover, it is important to mention some of the relevant characteristics of projects in order to have an idea of how students may start projects. Goodrich, Hatch, Wiatrowsky and Unger (1995) provide five key characteristics of projects: first, one project is good if the topics and activities are based

on genuine interest of the students and teacher, and if it is implemented and designed in a natural context of learning, that is, if the right context is created. Projects should be flexible in terms of task development, that is, there must not be a strict and exaggerated discipline in the activities. Another key point is that a project must encourage and enhance the self-direction and autonomy in students. The last point that the authors highlight deals with the clear goals and steps that will be followed by the participants since they are the ones who know what to do and how to do it.

After reviewing the possible stages in a project, it is necessary to account for different types of projects. In this respect, Mora (1999) adds two more types of projects: *bridging* and *full scale*. The first one can be taken as preparation for the second. The first refers to a short time project with not too many activities. The second is the one that needs to be the center in most of the classes in a period of time. It is longer than the first one and students need to devote all their time to develop it. In the case of this study, I focused on the second one since students were involved in a project for a certain period of time and every class they needed to develop different activities according to what they had planned. The type of projects varied according to the topic students chose; those projects could be short or long depending on what they wanted. Therefore, the time they devoted to the development of a project was different in each group, according to the plan and specific stages they decided to set up.

Moreover, working by projects, students are fully responsible for their learning process. According to Mora (1999), in project work the teacher switches from being a *provider* to a *facilitator*. That is, students are the ones who have the responsibility to decide what to work on and how to do it, teachers are there to help and to guide the process. This author states another important point about projects out of his research with students from Medellín such as something he calls *NIP* (needs, interests and problems). All these factors are included and considered in project work. I completely agree on this point since what he states is exactly what

I took into consideration when I decided to work with projects, the topics and aspects students were interested in or what they really needed and wanted to do.

Interaction and meaning negotiation in project work

When we talk about SIP through group work, it is necessary to mention that when students work in groups the aspect of interaction emerges. Traditionally, interaction and meaning negotiation have been related to specific aspects of discourse analysis such as turn taking, teacher talk and so on, but in order to be more specific, I focus on the negotiation of meaning that students make when they face a project in which all the opinions are valid. Many times students learn more when a classmate is the one who makes a point. Through the development of projects worked by groups, students need to interact with each other, come up with solutions and make decisions taking into account all the viewpoints. In other words, it is important to account for the type of procedural negotiation that, according to Ribé (in Breed, 2000), is evident when students are not focused on understanding others' ideas, but on expressing their opinions about proposals they face or communicate. In this sense, the process in which students learn a foreign language may be studied considering the aspect of interaction and negotiation, all these framed by project work.

Furthermore, the process in which students talk to each other, understand and value others' ideas is very important when they interact in project work because the language and its formal use are means to communicate, not the final goal of the process. Smith (2001) supports these ideas by writing that by cooperative activities, such as projects students can evidence a *social negotiation of meaning* in which the important thing is not the use of formal linguistic matters, but the way in which students make the language and topics functional to communicate ideas and interact with others taking roles in the group and organizing processes such as projects by themselves.

Ribé (in Breed, 2000) applies a project with a forty-student classroom in which he sets up systematically specific stages where negotiation is present in different ways. This kind of project has some characteristics that identify creative projects such as the trust in the students' capabilities, self-directed and autonomous work. The personal involvement is not only a matter of students, but also of the teacher, who uses negotiation to work with them and to guide them in the new process. The author describes the process in some stages. He calls the first one the "pre-negotiation" stage, where teacher asks and motivates the students to express what they would like to work on. Then, the teacher offers students a story in order to get their interest and asks students to reconstruct it cooperatively using the option of brain storming where teacher leads the students' ideas to the correct way of the story. Then the formal negotiation in group begins. The teacher displays a set of twelve possible topics and students select the topic they want to work on. Each group begins to work writing, asking questions and, what the author calls inter-negotiation, emerges, that is, students from different groups help each other. After giving feedback, students are ready to discuss and express opinions about the development of the process, that is the stage in which they show their agreement or disagreement and opinions, in general, about one decision or proposal; this is what the author calls *procedural negotiation*, that is not focused on understanding, but on discussing agreements and decisions.

In Ribé (2000), the oral report and feedback emerge where the members of the group share their posters with the information and incorporate the peers' feedback. After that, they are ready to present their project in a different setting. This research study is similar to mine in the sense that both are focused on the process of negotiation that students go through when working on projects and there are some factors that emerge also in my study, such as the assessment and evaluation, which in Ribé's study is done by applying a questionnaire, where students provide their opinion about different factors in the process. In my study, the evaluation from the

students is covered orally, that is, in the same oral presentation of the project they give their opinions about what to improve and what to encourage. On the other hand, the academic formal evaluation is decided in a way by students in the sense that they plan the activities they want me to evaluate and they decide also how to receive feedback from their peers.

It is important to consider different aspects of negotiation, for instance, students many times go through different stages and they do not always make agreements immediately, they have to discuss and negotiate with each other before. These types of performances are referred to by Tomas (1992) by stating that the process of interaction has potentially those two ways, cooperation or conflict. The situation and how it is developed depend on the attitudes and purposes of the participants and it is important their interpretation of the words, attitudes and intentions of others. In this sense, Lynch and Tomas (1992) agree on the idea that the most important factors to avoid students confrontations and conflicts in the interaction are the management and the preparation of the teacher when applying tasks. If the teacher does not prepare what he/she will do in class, and the first thing that comes to his/her mind five minutes before entering the classroom is the group work, probably the class will be full of conflict and arguments by students because there was not an appropriate atmosphere to work.

Breen and Littlejohn (2000) mention the *procedural negotiation* that refers to the process in which the members with different views and interests gather together in order to reach agreements. According to the authors, the main goal of this type of negotiation is to come up with a group solution and decision about a certain topic. This procedural negotiation entails two more types, *personal and interactive negotiations* but both refer to the discursive processes that a person or a group has to go through in order to understand and make themselves understood by others. I am interested in the procedural type of negotiation since it is what I observed in classes with project work in groups.

Prior knowledge and cooperative project work

Research related to meaning negotiation and cooperative work is presented in the article by Muller and Fleming (2001) in which the researchers deal with the aspect of interaction through cooperative work. They state that the type of conversation students have is not related to the formal aspect of linguistics, but on the way students organize, learn, communicate, develop their ideas and use their knowledge to accomplish the task.

Furthermore, cooperative work is a relevant element when dealing with SIP since students are able to discuss and help each other in aspects such as vocabulary, writing information, or planning what to do with the project. Related to this point, Kinsella (1996) writes about the benefits of cooperative work; she states that when students work in that way, they need to explore their own capabilities to discuss points and to solve problems. A process in which students face abilities such as arguing, questioning, organizing, applying materials etc., is useful for them since by doing so, they improve their comprehension and critical attitudes towards academic real situations. The kind of cooperative work I saw is the way in which students distribute their responsibilities in terms of looking for and socializing the material necessary for designing the project.

In the development of the projects, in which tenth grade students are involved, the cooperative and interactive work become relevant because students have the opportunity to deal with group activities that go towards common goals. In this way, students receive peer and teacher feedback making the whole process more collaborative. The collaborative and interactive work by students is another advantage of projects. In this respect, Mitchell (1992) refers to collaboration in terms of helping students in the classroom when they decide to work by projects.

Another key aspect to mention is prior knowledge which is discussed by Lynch (1996) when writing about the patterns that could exist between different

kinds of learners when negotiating meaning. He writes about one research carried out by Gass and Varonis, where they compared the type of negotiation that three different pairs of learners had in different situations. In all of the three pairs of learners, the researchers found a "push down" phenomenon which was a pause that the learners had in order to have the message that they were trying to convey clear. All partners worked doing negotiation cooperatively until they comprehended each other. That phenomenon of pushdown was leading very well to a process of meaning negotiation.

This concept of prior knowledge is mentioned by Fried (1996) when referring to project work by stating that it must go beyond the classroom. It is not another class activity. Students must be completely involved in the topic they are working on, so that they can relate their previous knowledge with the language processes used in the school. That is, since students are involved with the topic, they deal with it not only in the classroom but also at home and using all the sources they have. In that sense, students can take advantage of the teachers' guidance at the school and improve the project in their own context outside. Furthermore, doing projects, students can link the language studied in the class with the language used outside the classroom.

This prior knowledge is treated by Gass et. al (1989), when they deal with the problem of non-management of foreign language. The conversational interaction varies from culture to culture and from one context to another, but how can a non-speaker of English communicate in a foreign environment? This situation is similar to the one when an English teacher wants his or her students to actively interact in the classroom using the foreign language. These authors write about an instructional communicative inferencing model that is based on the capacity to infer that every body has to make themselves understood in other language.

In this aspect, Gillies (2002) provides a specific link between prior knowledge and cooperative work. The author writes that through cooperative work students have the opportunity to increase their capabilities in specific tasks. Also when students

ask for help in cooperative work they are more likely to receive and comprehend the information and to establish links between the new information and the prior knowledge. In this sense, we can find another commonality between these two terms in which cooperative work is a means for a better interaction with the new and prior knowledge, that is, cooperative work promotes group communication and enhance thinking skills.

It is also important to take into account what other researchers have found when studying the role of prior knowledge in different negotiated situations in order to have various points of views. According to Lynch (1996), in a mono-cultural one there are different visions of the same reality. This author expands on this point by writing about a specific phenomenon observed in a research carried out by Gass and Varonis in which negotiation is analyzed in a multi-cultural context. They observed the “push down” factor when learners were trying to understand and have the messages clear into the groups. The author explains that in negotiation it is important what the people already know and how they use that information to express ideas. The same thing happens in a mono-cultural context, such as mine, where students negotiate in groups every time. That is why students need to be provided with different tasks through their projects that foster negotiation among them, using their prior knowledge as the first element to interact.

When students organize their processes, they also apply their prior knowledge and experiences because they take into account only what they think they need, according to what they know and want. This aspect of students’ self-organization is mentioned by Breen and Littlejohn (2000), when they write about students’ personal agendas that are tools that students use to systematize the priorities, needs, strategies and functions they give to the language and members in the group. These authors

state that teachers need to play the role of mediator between the school syllabus and students’ agendas, that is how to link students’ needs with the school priorities.

Throughout this process, my role as a teacher was characterized by being a facilitator, a helper and a guide for students in every question and need they had. I would say that it is impossible to think of a process like this one without the active role of the teacher, who is the one that, as Mitchell (1992) states, leads the whole process, giving all the importance to the students’ decisions. This central role of the students is also mentioned by Tudor (1993), who states that in a learner centered approach students are able to assume a more active participatory role. The organization in the classroom activities will involve more the students if they are the ones who are able to decide on what kind of topics and activities will be developed in the classroom. Teacher has two main roles in this kind of approach; the first one refers to the teacher as the authority who decides everything; And the second role that is called “activity organizer”, in which teacher is the guide or the person who helps and orients the activities that have been discussed and negotiated beforehand with the whole population of students. This kind of role is necessary when a process based on students’ interests is going to be developed. Students may not be interested in a topic that the teacher imposes. When working with projects, it is necessary to guide the students along the process, but not ordering them what to do and how.

Furthermore, in order to illustrate the process with SIPs in a practical sample, there is a general description of the stages followed during the experience taking into account the theory reviewed and the specific needs and interests of the students in their context. In this way the stages could be defined as follows:


by groups allowed them to negotiate and interact in several ways that provided them with tools to develop their own processes. The use of second language in some stages of the SIPs allowed students to prepare themselves for communicating their ideas. Consequently, the language development was characterized not only for its use to express opinions but also because students were able to improve their knowledge about it by looking for appropriate words, expressions and alternatives to communicate their work and knowledge.

The role of meaning negotiation in project work was focused on the functional aspect of the students' speech. Meaning negotiation was used by students to socialize and make decisions upon different topics and stages in cooperative project work, in other words, meaning negotiation plays the role of factors that students used to socialize and organize a process that was led by themselves. The role that prior knowledge played in project work was to be an element on which students based all their ways and alternatives to carry out a process that was chosen also taking into account what they already knew and what was appealing to them. In other words, prior knowledge is the first tool students depend on to undertake any type of process. Prior knowledge is an innate dimension in the human being and its use is different according to each one's personality.

The result of this cooperative process developed through group work was the on going improvement on students' capabilities and abilities to carry out a specific activity. In other words, the roles that prior knowledge and meaning negotiation play in SIPs were evidenced in the performances that students undertook when working in groups. Furthermore, students are able to connect prior knowledge and new knowledge through the negotiations they had when they dealt with different pieces of information that the group needed to carry out the stages for

the projects. That is, students approached new information or topics by using the knowledge they already had about it.

The implementation of project work allows students to use what was meaningful for them and connect it to the academic process they dealt with at school. In that way, students were able to construct and organize, according to their capabilities, their own learning process using all they have gathered through their experiences in the context they live. The best way to be aware of students' needs is allowing them to express and work on the topics that really interest them and adapting them to the process we want them to follow at school. That is, all these processes are matter of negotiation between students' needs and knowledge and academic factors. In short, students are able to socialize what they know about a topic or how to develop the SIPs by expressing their individual contribution in terms of ideas and alternatives to work and including themselves in the roles and responsibilities that the group needed to fulfill the SIPs.

Furthermore, it is important to account for a different role of meaning negotiation rather than the traditional concept that it has been connected with. Based on Breed's ideas (2000) about the procedural negotiation in which students reach agreements and make decisions in a communicative process, I can affirm that more than sending and understanding messages and focusing on formal aspects, there are other procedural aspects such as deciding agreeing, questioning, organizing and so on, that play an important role when students in groups dealt with projects. Aspects such as adjustment and accommodation that were present in every one's discourse are important to be described through a negotiated process, but it is also relevant to account for the procedural aspect of students' discourse that has implicit the speech aspects but are not the only field to explore. 

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