English classroom projects:
turning experience into learning for both teachers and students through literature

Proyectos de aula para la enseñanza de inglés:
transformar las experiencias en aprendizaje para los profesores y los estudiantes por medio de la literatura

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Abstract

This article intends to reflect on the importance of thinking about the way of joining efforts to carry out projects that improve teaching and learning through literature in English classes. Additionally, it is necessary to think about how teachers can improve their own pedagogical practice through the learning process of their students.

Keywords

Classroom projects, pedagogical practice, literature.

Resumen

Este artículo reflexiona sobre la importancia de encontrar caminos que permitan unir los esfuerzos de los docentes de lenguas extranjeras en torno a la realización de proyectos de aula que maximicen la enseñanza y el aprendizaje del inglés mediante la literatura. Además, el texto plantea la necesidad de pensar la manera en que los docentes pueden mejorar su propia práctica pedagógica por medio del proceso de aprendizaje de sus estudiantes.

Palabras clave

Proyectos de aula, práctica pedagógica, literatura.

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Introduction

This article intends to reflect on the importance of thinking about the way of joining efforts to carry out projects that improve teaching and learning through literature in English classes. Additionally, it is necessary to think about how teachers can improve their own pedagogical practice through the learning process of their students. One way to do this is by asking themselves questions about their own teaching.

In order to reflect on this topic, which is really significant for language teachers, the text will first of all focus on the importance of having literature as a basis in the class projects; second, it will develop the projects that we have been carrying out in class and, finally, some conclusions are presented.

Why literature?

As teachers we always think about developing appropriate and relevant approaches to involve students in the learning of English. These approaches include, among others, how to encourage language acquisition by using motivating materials, as well as how to develop students' interpretative abilities, and how to acquire a cultural background. Consequently, we have found it to be important to teach English through literature; in the first place, in order to provide students with opportunities to study and use English in a language context while engaging them with the English culture because literature can provide students with access to the values and ways of thinking of the people whose language they are studying (Lazar, 1993).

In the second place, literature is an art that uses language as a means of expression and that is why literature books can be considered the best way to get in touch with it and understand it. Reading literature is a communicative process between the reader and the author and reading itself becomes an active, intimate relation that allows the building up of one's own reality. Borges (1980) says that literary works are the most awesome human instruments because they are extensions of memory and imagination.

This lets us see that the learning of meaningful literature is carried out through having contact with and living the literary texts since the process of reading fosters students' relation with their prior knowledge and the text and promotes activities where students need to share their feelings and opinions since literature is very rich in its multiple levels of meaning.

In third place, according to Lomas (1998), reading is understood as a profoundly personal act that favours the development of affective and cognitive objectives because it creates a positive attitude towards reading and because it allows the acquisition of cognitive abilities in order to make inferences, generalizations, and evaluations. This author also states that reading a literary book could develop linguistic objectives too because reading implies the ability to decode and interpret a discourse in context.

The projects

The major interest of this article is to reflect on projects that we have been performing in the English classes which have literature as the basis due to the permanent reflection on how to improve our own pedagogical practice through the learning processes of our students. Therefore, the main purpose of these projects is to let the students get involved as active beings, using real language and developing motivation, participation, group work and encouraging reading and writing as the fundamental keys of learning.

Another purpose for implementing this kind of projects in the classroom is to give students the opportunity to maximize their participation and creativity through literature, since its enjoyment is the beginning of understanding art which favours abilities and attitudes towards analysis and interpretation of texts as appreciation in the direction of the literary experience (Lomas, 1998).

Developing these projects not only aims to increase the students' communicative skills, but also their work outside of class and their getting to know each other in circumstances that motivate them to use English in places different from the classroom. This work demands dialogue, interaction, and communication from students and encourages them to

give a new sense to language learning. Thus, the projects assume the most important principles of learning communities such as taking advantage of each person's knowledge, monitoring objectives to check out what is being done to reach them, respecting others' contributions, learning from mistakes, learning from group work and, finally, negotiating, which fosters dialogue and intellectual discussion.

As a result, each person in the group is important because everyone is valued, recognized as a competent member and everyone enjoys the learning process (Pulido, 2004).

Next, two of the most representative projects will be presented.

Creating songs based on literature

This project considers the importance of connecting literature and music due to the fact that there is an inner value that relates music and language because sounds are the roots of both (Fonseca, 2000). Thus, the interaction between music and language acquisition is reconsidered. Additionally, both disciplines also share some common characteristics like pitch, volume, stress, tone, and rhythm, which are learnt through exposure; this means no language can be acquired without oral or written input.

Didactically, songs are also useful in teaching the rhythm of the language and informing the students about the culture of the speakers of that language. The other issue is that even just playing music without words creates a relaxed atmosphere that enhances learning (Murphey, 1990).

According to Gardner (1983), it is necessary to foster the musical and bodily- kinaesthetic intelligences among students because it is clear that we learn in different ways. Singing is an easy way of understanding and memorizing something; music not only seems to leave a particularly deep trace in our memories, but can help to improve students' pronunciation and language acquisition.

Taking into account the ideas mentioned above, it is necessary to say that the project, which is carried out by pairs, consists of creating songs after reading a book. That is, to tell the story with music in which the most important events that take place in the tale have rhythm. In This way, students, instead of writing summaries of the book, write songs about it.

As a result, students are encouraged to write a song based on the book that they have read and it is really important to give them confidence to feel free with the text, to comment, criticize, speculate and, above all, to offer suggestions to write the song. During this step they are supposed to apply, revise and reinforce everything they know, such as structures, vocabulary, and rhythm, among other things. Students need to work together as a team in order to invent and write the lines they are going to sing afterwards; moreover, they have to discuss and agree on the tune or melody they are going to use for their song. This work demands enthusiasm, planning and structuring as well as encourages learners to take an active part in the learning process by contributing their musical knowledge. Therefore, students become more confident in their learning ability and more motivated to continue learning the language.

It is important to say that relating music with language learning creates a comforting atmosphere needed to develop written composition activities as well as pronunciation skills because repeating, combining words and singing them have a positive effect on students' language acquisition level. These actions cause language learning to be an active process which gives students the chance to invent and re-invent language for themselves, a language which conveys their own feelings and ideas (Silva, 2000). Finally, authors such as Lems and Little claim the significance of studies which show that music, and particularly songs, helps second language learners to acquire vocabulary, grammatical structures and idiomatic expressions, to improve spelling and pronunciation, to build comprehension skills, to develop the linguistic skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening and to expand cultural knowledge. Besides, combining music and language encourages deeper processing information, as well as increases reading comprehension and invigorates the learning process. (McParland, 2000)

Selecting a literary text to write songs

Having in mind the students' need to understand and appreciate cultures and ideologues different from their own, we thought about a literary text as a perfect resource to interest them in terms of pleasure and enjoyment rather than in terms of the language learning itself, so reading a book like *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* could make them feel interested because of their likes and language level and because a reader who is genuinely involved with the text is likely to gain more benefits from exposure to the language of literature. As such, the text can be a vital support and stimulus for language development (Carter, 1991).

After reading the book and checking some facts to be understood in class, the students organized themselves by pairs in order to write a song based on a chapter of the book. They chose the ideas which could summarize the plot as well as textual aspects such as coherence of ideas and the rhythm, rhymes, grammar, etc.

Those activities described above were developed in two class sessions (four hours) and monitored closely by the teacher, who revised the written drafts in order to give the students feedback for the optimization of practice. Afterwards, the students recorded the song outside the classroom and presented it to their peers to be co-evaluated under previous criteria agreed upon by the whole class.

The following is an example of one of the songs written and sung by the students:

(They chose "Yellow Submarine" as the tune)

Harry Potter is the nephew

Of the Dursleys at Private Drive

They were all very happy

Except for Harry

They did and very good

Until they found he was the one

The one and only Harry Potter

The boy who lived

Chorus

Harry Potter is a special boy

He's the only boy

He's a special boy

Harry Potter is a special boy

He's the only boy

He's a special boy

He can kill Voldemort

Harry Potter went to Howards

Where he learnt to be a wizard

He met Ron and Hermione

Muggles names and Dumbledore

He had a lot of fun

In the summer at Griffindor

Chorus

Creating mock courtroom trials

The use of role play in class is a useful and an exciting way of focusing on conversational language since short plays are rich in dialogue, vocabulary and grammar. In addition, this activity offers students the possibility to learn a second language by working through the different competences. The dialogues in a skit or play of a trial differ from dialogues in everyday conversation in that they are "tidied up" in some ways.

This dialogue contains little hesitation, few pauses, and incomplete sentences, etc.; however, it can be used to highlight certain important features of conversational discourse. It is also possible to practice using more complex grammatical structures such as perfect tenses and the passive voice. It is important to remark that words in a play are quite different from words in other written works; on the other hand, it must be taken into account that they have to be familiar with the vocabulary used in courts.

Students put into practice the grammatical competence defined by Savignon as the ability to recognize the lexical, morphological, syntactical and

phonological features of a language and to make use of those features to interpret and form words and sentences. This author states that a person demonstrates grammatical competence not by stating a rule but by using a rule in the interpretation, expression, or negotiation of meaning. Moreover, students also develop the sociocultural competence because they require an understanding of the social context in which language is used: the roles of the participants, the information they share, and the function of the interaction (Savignon, 1983). The "ideal native speaker," someone who knows a language perfectly and uses it appropriately in all social interactions, exists in theory only.

Teachers will expose students to other features of conversational language; for example, expressions used just in courtroom trials so learners put in practice the discursive and strategic competence where they can interpret the written lines and can give sense to the dialogues. As such, students can express sarcasm, sadness, joy, etc., and make their own words more real and lively.

In other words, "to make sense of the dialogue, learners need to move beyond the surface meaning of what is implied by what the author says "(Lazar, 1993) because we are trying to perform a play of a trial. The play has to be interpreted not only with spoken language but with body language and thus bodily movements such as gestures and eye contact could be analyzed and discussed before and during the performance of the rehearsal of the play trial. This practice creates cohesion and cooperation in a group, motivates them and encourages them to learn through active participation.

Why use a novel?

Reading good literature is still felt to be an integral part of any demanding English syllabus that tries to capture learners' attention through offering them meaningful and authentic material for reading. Using a novel in the English classes provides a rich source of pedagogical activities if it has been carefully selected as to link in with students' interests. Furthermore, to draw on a novel also provides teachers with opportunities for educational and

linguistic development since it gives rise to its own set of difficulties, both practical and literary. "Using a novel can provide our students with tantalizing glimpse of another culture-a glimpse which has the imaginative appeal of "felt life" with all its nuances and contradictions" (Lazar, 1993).

Why *The Great Gatsby?*

The answer to this question is basically because this is a classic novel, with a high level of language proficiency. Even so, the designed activities could be applicable to most other novels. It is important to highlight that in the beginning this title was not very attractive for the students. It was necessary to think about different and motivating activities to attract the students' interest and which conform more closely to students' perception of what they need to read and to learn. It is well known that apprentices usually do not read classical books because they consider them to be old-fashioned and think those do not make up part of their lives styles.

> A major difficulty for students reading a novel is that its cultural background may seem inaccessible to them, and may also interfere with their understanding of crucial elements within the text (Lazar, 1993).

They do not realize that literature engages them intellectually, emotionally and linguistically; furthermore, they ignore that literature always gives the chance to think and speak in English; for this reason, teachers should encourage them to make interpretations and comparisons. It is important to inspire students to feel they have to consider different cultural backgrounds, including their historical, economical, and social aspects that are relevant to themselves, their society and learning.

The Great Gatsby Review–The Murder Trial

What to do

Learning a language cannot be separated from learning another culture in a foreign language teaching situation. This type of learning can be very imprecise since culture includes nonverbal communication aspects such as body language, which includes facial

expressions, special gestures, etc., which are not learned in regular conversations during the classes. In other words, "language brings along culture" (Miccoli, 2003). Since the trial is a kind of role play, the class moves from traditional to transformative learning. Role plays confirm that language comes alive through drama in an oral skills development class. For example, the confrontation of fears and the taking of risks, led to an improvement in their oral skills.

First of all, the students read *The Great Gatsby*, in which a crime is committed. The justification for this first part has two purposes: the first one is to know about a trial and second is to be involved in a real cultural awareness practice.

After students have read and established what kind of crime was committed in the novel, they will do some research on topics like what a trial is, who the principal characters are in a trial, and which functions they have. In addition, they have to investigate how a trial is carried out in the U.K., the USA and Colombia. The principal aim is so that the learners can contrast the differences and similarities among them and when they have to perform their own trial, they can identify with one of those models.

To review for the final test over *The Great Gatsby*, the class (of 25-30 students) will be divided into two groups. Each group will decide who will be the different characters such as Daisy, Tom, etc., in the novel. They will then decide who the defendant will be. The question to be answered is, "Who was morally responsible for the death of Jay Gatsby?" The defendant will have a defence team and there will be a prosecution team. The defence and the prosecution must notify each other of what they plan to do just as a prosecution and defence team do in real life.

The students may be creative with their storylines but the true storyline (as outlined in the book) must remain the same. This means that they may make up storylines for what happened behind the scenes but they cannot change such essential facts, for example, as Gatsby's getting shot with a gun. Each team will take turns trying their defendant. While the first team is performing, the other team is playing the jury. The jury will be able to vote guilty or innocent at the end of the trial. This lesson encourages students to discuss the different events that happened in the book. It causes them to think creatively and to use higher order thinking skills in order to create solutions to a problem.

Final remarks

Carrying out classroom projects in the English classes means empowering students by allowing them to experience success in using real language, giving them a voice outside the classroom, and giving learning a meaningful context. Besides, joining classroom projects with literature bring cultural enrichment, language enrichment and personal involvement. Hişmanoğlu (2005) says that additionally to the reasons given, there are some other factors requiring the use of literature as a powerful resource in the classroom context: universality, non-triviality, personal relevance, variety, interest, economy and suggestive power.

Moreover, it means for teachers the possibility of turning experience into learning, finding ways to motivate the students to learn English, as well as maximizing their participation and creativity and finding ways to solve classroom and language problems.

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