

COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS VIA THE INTERNET

by Janos Blasszauer

head of English department, Batthyany Grammar School,

British Council teacher trainer,

Nagykanizsa, Hungary

bjohnny@broadband.hu

<http://www.geocities.com/bjohnnyus>

Introduction

I am a Hungarian EFL teacher at an academic grammar school in Nagykanizsa and have been interested in the potentials of information technology in English as a foreign language (EFL) education since 1997, when I read about email projects in English language teaching journals (e.g., Tillyer 1995, 1997). I began to understand hardware and software, the use of teaching and learning packages, and some of the latest developments on the Internet, such as easy and free file and voice message exchanges and the opportunities of their use at schools supported by a scheme founded by the Ministry of Education. I started thinking about the application of the technology to meet the requirements of communicative methodology and the project-based approach. As an EFL teacher and a British Council in-service teacher educator, I had an opportunity to take an increasingly growing interest in developing teaching practices and methods.

Theory and Practice

Perhaps the best known perspective for looking at cooperative communication in the FL classroom is the interactionist approach originally derived from Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis. Krashen claims that second language acquisition providing optimal input in the classroom to foster the development of fluency does not mean teaching grammar. Krashen (1985) and McLaughlin (1987) concluded from the research on second language acquisition that it best develops in ways similar to first languages: in contexts where the negotiation of meaning, and not the correctness of form, is the central force, and where language exposure is real, extensive, and free of anxiety.

However, in most language classrooms, both ESL and EFL, language exposure is artificial, limited, and anxiety often arises. Krashen (1985) hypothesised that the best classroom L2 acquisition will occur when the input provided to learners is comprehensible, interesting and

relevant, not grammatically sequenced, provided in abundant quantity, and in such a way as to promote self-confidence and self-direction, while arousing little or no anxiety.

I had two motivations for starting to use the Internet in my English classes. First, I wanted students to be exposed to a range of English, wider than they usually encounter in their daily lives in Hungary, hoping to find e-mail penpals for them. Second, I wanted to encourage students to use English for pleasure outside class, and thought if I taught them the basics of e-mail (relying partly on regular letter writing; Morvai 1998) and netsurfing, they would be likely to continue these activities during their free time. When I tried using the Internet in the EFL classroom, these expectations were fulfilled, and I discovered many other reasons for doing such projects.

Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning

This term refers to the use of the computer and the Internet in the teaching programme which harnesses the main potential of the medium: that students can share thoughts and views on topics they are interested in, collaborate with partner classes focusing on a particular theme, and create online databases (Brandon and Hollingshead 1999; Fowell and Levy 1995). Warschauer (1997) suggested the term “computer mediated” collaborative learning, as opposed to “computer-supported,” as the technology serves as a medium, whereas the support is continued to be provided by the teacher. According to Warschauer, it facilitates many-to-many communication, synchronous tasks, time- and place-independent communication and student publishing, each contributing to the development of a language competence that is gaining importance: *interactive competence* (Chun 1998). The approach has been shown to have a positive impact on attitudes and achievement, in terms of language and cultural skills development as well as in becoming aware of group processes, if proper conditions exist (Gardner 1985; Braunstein, Meloni and Zolotareva 2000; Fisher, Phelps and Ellis 2000).

Telecollaboration, or tasks completed in groups via the Internet, enables teachers and students to establish connections with other online citizens and engage in activities using the FL. Telecollaborational projects include keypal exchange projects (Horváth 1994), live chats, global classroom exchange and electronic mentoring. Teachers can serve as mentors to help students correspond asynchronously or in real time to explore specific topics or study in an interactive format. This may take the form of data collection and analysis using online questionnaires, thematically related information exchange, electronic publishing (Gaer 1995; Kusunoki 1999) such as e-books, online magazines, newspapers, poems, recipes, collaborative problem solving, information searches and process writing. (For resources for

such tasks, see Blasszauer 1998; Windeatt, Hardisty and Eastment 2000; for the design of a successful project see Andres and Rogers 1995; “Marco Polo” 2000.)

Why to start Internet projects?

Projects in general engage students in authentic, real world tasks that enhance learning (Long and Crookes 1992; Prabhu 1987). Students are given open-ended projects or problems with more than one approach or answer, intended to simulate situations. Both contexts are defined as student-centred and include the teacher in the role of facilitator or coach. Students generally work in co-operative groups and are encouraged to search for multiple sources of information (Müller-Hartmann 2000).

Project-based learning typically begins with an end product or artefact in mind, whose production requires specific content knowledge and skills, and typically raises problems to be solved. Projects may vary widely in scope and time frame, and the end products also vary according to the technology level.

The project-based learning approach uses a production model. First, students define the purpose for creating the end product and identify their audience. They research their topic, design their product and create a plan for project management. They then begin the project, solve problems and deal with issues that arise in production, and finish their product, reflecting on and evaluating their work (Bellnet 2000).

The entire process is meant to be authentic, mirroring real-life activities and utilising students’ own ideas and approaches. Though the end product is important, it is the content knowledge and skills acquired during the process that are important to the success of the approach. In project-based learning the end products are elaborate and shape the production process, such as the creation of an online magazine or newspaper.

My first project was a school and town description, then a teenage life project, a cooking theme, and finally a project about discipline problems and violence at schools. The cooking project’s aim was to find out what French people eat at special feasts – the former school where I used to work was Thúry Gy. Secondary Technical School for Trade and Catering and had a twin-sister relationship with a French school. Students also got to know how people spend this time and where they usually eat out. They had to make surveys about what people eat in their own surroundings and after collecting, analysing and synthesising, two data files were composed. Students found pleasure in the activities and even cooked several of the recipes during the practice lessons at school.

Since September, 2000 I have been teaching at Batthyány Lajos Grammar School. After some initial practice sessions at the computer lab, sixteen students were asked to think about their dream holiday destinations and then find out as much information as possible about them. The Olympic Games gave another opportunity to focus on a topic which interested the vast majority of the students, which is also a theme in the school-leaving exam. I collected several inquiry-based projects on the Olympics. For instance, at the Olympic Primer Site students had to work in pairs and had to choose a topic and read about it. After they finished reading about it, they wrote a short quiz about the topic (5 or 6 questions). They could write a true/false quiz or a multiple choice quiz. Then they exchanged their quizzes with each other and then tried to complete them after reading about the relevant topic. Students were energised seeing that they could make good use of their English knowledge, and that they can polish their computer and Internet skills as well.

Recently my school took part in a European Union project and the possibility to join the project was due to the fact that by the means of the Internet I am on a constant lookout for meaningful project opportunities. The project “Europe? I believe in it”, was organized by an association which pursues an activity of European promotion, the Centro di coordinamento Info Eurogente in Benevento (Italy) and enjoyed the financial support of the European Commission. The objective of the project was to increase students’ awareness of the values which inspired the construction of united Europe and which still determine its choices in view of further enlargement. Five conferences were held: the first one on 20 January in Morcone on the theme “Solidarity, so that all the European be the same”, the second one in Duino on 3 February on the theme “Tolerance, so that European people can live together in peace”. The meeting in Nagykanizsa was on 23 February on “How to safeguard local culture in the united Europe”, on the 9 March in Malta on the theme “Culture, an integration tool among European people” and the last one was on 30 March in Brighthouse High School (Great Britain) on the theme “Democracy, as European power”. The following schools were involved in the project: Scientific High School, Morcone (Benevento - Italy), Junior College (Msida - Malta), United World College of Adriatic, Duino (Trieste - Italy), Batthyany Lajos High School (Nagykanizsa-Hungary) and Brighthouse High School.

As a follow up project I will work together with my foreign counterparts to work out and launch keypal exchange projects and thus deepen the connection between the participating schools and to put up and maintain a website for discussing matters about Europe and other themes which are relevant to our students’ interest.

The announcement of future events in this journal, *Teaching English with Technology* (Vol. 1, no. 2, March 2001), made me aware of another great possibility concerning collaboration, namely the European Schoolnet website (www.eun.org). Sometimes there are online chats about the EU and now my students are eager to participate in these chat events and on others such as the one which is to come on 16 November. This day is the “International day for tolerance” and the online event is organised by the Time website (www.timeproject.org).

There are several approaches to planning out a successful project. I observe the following steps when it comes to planning a project:

1. Decide on the project
2. Draft time frame
3. Plan activities
4. Plan for assessment
5. Begin project with students
6. Finish project and reflect

This framework is meant to help me plan my project and utilise website materials at each step. The framework is structured enough to guide my process, and flexible enough to adapt to my practices and needs.

1. When I decide on the project I identify what the major goal of the project is, what content will be incorporated, and to try to identify any constraints as well as to decide on the multimedia component and the scope of the project.
2. The time frame component means that I decide on the length of the project by writing down some due dates or checkpoints for project goals to be completed. I try to allow room for flexibility and changes in project.
3. Before I plan activities I usually browse the existing ones online and being on a constant lookout for new projects on the Internet I am always lucky to find some which caters for my teaching purposes and my students’ needs.
4. I assess students’ work in projects by using project rubrics such as the one at (<http://edweb.sdsu.edu/triton/tidepoolunit/Rubrics/collrubric.html>).
5. Beginning a project with students means that I discuss goals with the whole class. Students may also contribute to some of the initial planning of the project. I allow space for flexibility and I am on the alert to observe what is working and what is not. I always give time for my students to get the swing of new practices, to get the required skills needed for the project. My task as a teacher is to establish a meaningful project, to teach students the skills inevitable

for fulfilling the project, to stick to the original time frame or discuss with pupils any revisions to the project and to create a rubric which measures students' work.

6. When finishing a project I reflect on it. As a rule, I ask my pupils to fill in a questionnaire aiming at getting feedback from them. Having created my website I showcase the finished products (www.geocities.com/bjohnnyus/myict.htm) and jot down in my diary the main points of a certain project adding in it the suggested improvements for next time. I also take time to write down my personal reflections on the project.

Conclusion

I have found several benefits of ICT projects. They increase students' self-esteem as they realise that English is not only another compulsory subject they have to learn at school but it is a vehicle for communicating with their peers all over the world. My experiences with online projects also show that they accommodate different learning styles – e.g. shy students open up when it comes to writing emails; learners are encouraged and motivated to become involved in authentic communicative situations. In keypal projects students write for a real audience, usually to their peers instead of merely composing a piece of writing for the teacher. In addition, the privacy afforded by technology allows learners to participate cooperatively in the educational process.

I think ICT projects can reduce the feelings of isolation by linking schools with the global community, and by creating a student-centred learning environment the teacher's role changes from being the purveyor of information to the role of being an organiser, collaborator and coach. Students and instructors do not need to be masters at ICT skills. The only prerequisites of ICT projects are to enable students to communicate, search for and analyse information in an electronic environment.

The essential role for teachers in our era is, as I see it, to give students the opportunity to discover and take an active part in this new world, which has an increasingly important part in our lives.

Appendix: Telecollaboration opportunities (based on Blasszauer 1999a, 1999b)

Several "virtual places" on the World Wide Web can help us find *curriculum-based telecollaboration opportunities*. Particularly helpful, frequently updated telecollaborative activity indexes include:

Global SchoolNet's Projects & Programs (www.gsn.org/project/index.html). This is the most comprehensive of all of the K–12 telecollaborative projects directories. Don't miss the searchable Internet Projects Registry at this site (<http://www.gsn.org/pr/index.cfm>).

KIDPROJ (a part of KIDLINK, www.kidlink.org/KIDPROJ/index.html). These globally focused projects involve learners aged 15 and younger from many different countries. All student participants must answer four questions about themselves and their ideas for making the world a better place prior to project participation.

I*EARN Projects (www.igc.apc.org/learn/projects.html). These are primarily social action projects involving participants from very diverse geographic locations.

NickNacks Telecollaboration (www1.minn.net/~schubert/EdHelpers.html). This site contains many helpful suggestions about how to participate in educational telecollaboration. NickNacks also sponsors and points visitors to high-quality, curriculum-based projects.

Blue Web'n (www.kn.pacbell.com/wired/bluewebn/). This project-review service helps us locate telecollaboration opportunities according to curriculum area and four activity types: Web-based activities, Web-based projects, Web-based tutorials, and Unit & Lesson Plans. The contents of Blue Web'n large projects database can also be searched by keyword.

Innovative Teaching Projects (www.interserf.net/mcken/projects.htm). This is a comprehensive, frequently updated, alphabetized list of Web-based projects. It constitutes one section of a much larger set of online resources that assist and reflect “innovative teaching.”

Works Cited

- Andres, Y., Rogers, A. (1995) “How to Design a Successful Project.” Online: <http://gsh.lightspan.com/teach/articles/design.project.html>.
- Bellnet. (2000) Online: <http://bellnet.tamu.edu/pbl/pbl.htm>.
- Blasszauer, J. (1998) “A Guide to the Galaxy of the Internet.” *Novelty* 5.3, pp. 56-57.
- Blasszauer, J. (1999a) “Az internet angoltanításban való felhasználása” [Applying the Internet in English language teaching]. Workshop presented at Teleki Blanka Secondary School, Székesfehérvár, November 1999.

- Blasszauer, J. (1999) "Az internet osztálytermi felhasználása" [Applying the Internet in the classroom]. Workshop presented at Váci Street Primary School, Budapest, November 1999.
- Brandon, D.P., Hollingshead, A.B. (1999) "Collaborative Learning and Computer-Supported Groups." *Communication Education* 48.2, pp. 109-26.
- Braunstein, B., Meloni, C., Zolotareva, L. (2000) "The U.S.-Siberlink Internet Project." *TESL-EJ* 4.3.
- Chun, D.M. (1998) "Using Computer-Assisted Class Discussion to Facilitate Acquisition of Interactive Competence" in *Language Learning Online: Theory and Practice in the ESL and L2 Computer Classroom*. Eds. Swaffar, J., Romano, S., Markley, P. and Arens, K. Austin: Labyrinth, pp. 57-80.
- Fisher, K., Phelps, R., Ellis, A. (2000) "Group Processes Online: Teaching Collaboration Through Collaborative Processes." *Educational Technology and Society* 3.3 , pp. 484-95.
- Fowell, S. P., Levy, P. (1995) "Computer-Mediated Communication in the Information Curriculum: An Initiative in Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning." *Education for Information* 13.3, pp. 193-210.
- Gaer, S. (1995) "Collaborative Projects: Handouts from TESOL 1995 Presentations." Online: TESL-L Archives.
- Gardner, R. (1985) *Social Psychology and Second Language Learning*. London: Arnold.
- Horváth, J. (1994) "Electronic Penpal Projects: A TESL-L Experience" in *New Methodologies in Foreign Language Learning and Teaching*. Ed. Kohn, J., Wolff, D. Szombathely: Berzsenyi Dániel Tanárképző Főiskola, pp. 182-85.
- Krashen, S. (1981) *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Krashen, S. (1985) *The Input Hypothesis*. London: Longman.
- Kusunoki, F. (1999) "A System for Supporting Group Learning that Enhances Interaction." Paper presented at the CSCL Conference, December 1999. Online <http://sll.stanford.edu/CSCL99>.
- Long, M. H. and Crookes, S. (1992) "Three Approaches to Task-Based Syllabus Design." *TESOL Quarterly* 26.1, pp. 27-56.
- "Marco Polo: Internet Content for the Classroom." (2000) Online: <http://www.wcom.com/marcopolo>.

- Morvai, E. (1998) "Diáklevelezés" [Student correspondence] in *Kapcsolatok: Diáklevelzés és diákcsere az idegennyelv-oktatásban* [Connections: Student correspondence and student exchange in foreign language teaching]. Eds. Szablyár, A., Morvai, E. Budapest: Soros Alapítvány, pp. 16-30.
- Müller-Hartmann, A. (2000) "The Role of Tasks in Promoting Intercultural Learning in Electronic Learning Networks." *Language Learning and Technology* 4.2, pp. 129-47.
- Prabhu, N. S. (1987) *Second Language Pedagogy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tillyer, A. (1995) "'Modem' Times: How Electronic Communications are Changing Our Lives." *Forum* 33.4, pp. 2-9.
- Tillyer, A. (1997) "The InfiNET Possibilities: English Teachers on the Internet." *Forum* 35.1, pp. 16-25.
- Warschauer, M. (1997) "Computer Mediated Collaborative Learning: Theory and Practice." *Modern Language Journal* 81, pp. 470-81.
- Windeatt, S., Hardisty, D., Eastment, D. (2000). *The Internet*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.