PROMOTING LEARNER AUTONOMY THROUGH CALL PROJECTS IN CHINA'S EFL CONTEXT

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Abstract

"Learner-centered approach" and "Self-directed learning" have been a recent research focus in SLA, but few studies have touched upon how to develop learner autonomy, particularly in a computer-assisted learning environment. The paper first illustrates the importance of promoting learner autonomy in China's EFL context and elaborates the three main factors contributing to its development. Then it focuses on how the CALL research project promotes autonomous learning through a small-scale study in Suzhou University. Both quantitative and qualitative methods have been employed to examine whether in the CALL project learners exercise control over their own learning and evaluate its outcome . The final results indicate that due to a flexible syllabus, highly motivating research topics and the network-assisted environment, learners do take responsibility for most aspects of learning and thus the CALL project proves to be a promising approach for autonomous training.

Introduction

Along with the development of global communication and the coming of the information age, the English language has started to play an increasingly important role in our social and economic life. More and more Chinese college students are aware of the significance of learning the international language and are trying to master it as a tool and as an opportunity for their future development.

However, teacher-centered approaches and spoon-fed methods have been prevalent for a long time in China's EFL context. Teachers have been regarded as authority, knowledge-givers and error correctors, while students have tended to limit their work to what was taught in class. Classes have usually been driven by "teacher-talk" and depended

heavily on textbooks. Instruction in the classrooms has been based on the misconception that there is a fixed world of knowledge that students must know. There has been little or no room for student-initiated questions, independent thought or interaction between students. As a result, many learners have been accustomed to depending on teachers' feeding. Without teachers' timely and adequate help, students have felt disoriented, lost confidence and failed to pinpoint their goals in learning. The situation has become even worse with the expansion of school enrolment, increasingly large class sizes and inadequate teaching staff, who have found it harder to take every student's needs into consideration.

Many people attributed students' passiveness to EFL teachers' failure to adopt effective teaching approach. It is true that teachers' reform efforts do contribute to students' successful learning. Recent years have witnessed many teachers' reform measures both in methods and in testing. However, their efforts seem not to have achieved the desirable results. Lack of motivation and weak communication competence on the part of students are still evident in EFL teaching. In this case, we cannot help doubting our traditional perception on language learning, which placed teachers at the center of the learning process. Moreover, global changes in the availability of information indicate that there is no longer a fixed body of knowledge that can be transmitted to learners. It is no longer possible to teach all students all they need to know. Learning is a lifelong endeavor (Pemberton, 1996). Only when learners are able to avail themselves of each learning opportunity rather than simply react to various stimuli from the teacher can they be skilful manipulators of language in their language learning process. The situation calls for the urgent need of cultivating learners' initiatives and learner autonomy.

Furthermore, recent research in psychology, sociology and linguistics, has shed light on language teaching, learning and the role of learners in the language learning process. The process syllabus (Breen, 1987), the learner-centered approach (Nunan, 1988), Piaget's cognitive psychology and Volgosky's social cognition all emphasize a learner's central place in the classroom. According to Piaget's interactionism (Piaget, 1977), learning takes place when learners actively construct their own understanding and knowledge through their interaction with the world around them. Influenced by the concept, teachers have begun to attach more importance to learners' cognition, personality and motivation. It is learners who

are supposed to play an active role in the learning process and take more responsibility for their own learning. Learner autonomy used to be considered as a concept only suitable in Western countries, but is now regarded as an unquestionable goal and a prerequisite for lifelong learning also in China.

Theoretical Background

Related literature indicates that the concept of learner autonomy is closely linked with learners' actions and their perceptions toward learning. On one hand, it relates to learners' actions, ability or capacity to take charge of learning individually and cooperatively (Holec, 1981; Little, 1991; Dam, 1990; Stern, 1992; Pemberton, 1996). As Little (1991: 4) defined it, "autonomy is a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action". On the other hand, learner autonomy refers to learners' perceptions, beliefs and attitudes toward learning. Just as Carver and Dickinson (1987) claim, being responsible for one's learning is an attitude of mind.

According to Icy Lee (1998: 282), "learner autonomy involves taking responsibility for the objectives of learning, self-monitoring, self-assessing and taking an active role in learning". She also puts forward three factors crucial to the development of learner autonomy: learner choice, supporting environment and self-assessment. Learner choice implies that learners can work at their own pace, decide on questions of what, when, how and how often. Giving students choices in learning is congruent with the theory of constructivism which emphasizes that a learner builds up new knowledge based on the old and is an active agent in his own learning process (Thanasoulas, 2000). Supporting environment is also in accordance with the principle of social constructivism, i.e., "language learning is essentially a social process that occurs within a social context through interactions with others" (Donato & McCormick, 1994; Wertsch, 1988). One important criterion for establishing a supportive environment is flexibility in learning (Pemberton, 1996), which means that learners can change options (objectives, contents, process of learning) based on their needs and interests. Besides, the teacher's and peer's support are essential in the successful establishment of supporting environment. Self-assessment has been defined as checking one's own performance on a learning task after it has been completed (Richards & Platt,

1992) and is identified to be an important characteristic of autonomous learning.

With the advent of the Internet, networks in classrooms or labs have played an increasingly important role in language education and provide new opportunity for autonomous learning. CALL project is a case in point. As Deborah Healey (1999) pointed out, in a CALL project students have lots of chances to control the content, the structure of the learning, including the time, the pace, the path to the goal and the measurement of success. The development of learner autonomy does not mean that learners work in isolation or have complete autonomy in the classroom. On the contrary, as learners in China's context are too passive to control everything and they require "varying degrees of control" (Egbert & Hanson-Smith, 1999: 392), consultation with and feedback from the instructor are necessary. Thus, learner autonomy also involves the development of interdependence, through which a group of learners and teacher will collaboratively take responsibility for and control of their learning environment (Blin, 1999). To put it more specifically, the development of autonomous learning is a process of moving from dependency through counter-dependence to independence and interdependence (Boud, 1988). Besides, CALL project involves self-assessment, peer-editing and group evaluation, which raise learners' self-consciousness in learning and enable them to continue the self-monitoring after the course is finished. Self assessment has been identified as an important characteristic of a learner-centered classroom (Griffee, 1998). In summary, the successful experience of international colleagues proves that CALL projects facilitate learner autonomy. Recently some Chinese teachers have begun incorporating project-based Internet learning into language teaching with satisfactory results (Warschauer, 2001, cited in Liu, 2001), but few studies have been made on the development of learner autonomy in China's network-assisted learning environment. In order to explore the possibility and applicability of CALL projects on the promotion of Chinese students' autonomous learning ability, a small-scale study was conducted on the basis of a major-related CALL research project in the spring semester of 2001. The study tries to answer the following three research questions:

RQ1: How are students able to set their goals, decide the path to the goal and the pace of learning?

RQ2: In what way do their peers and teachers provide support and help?

RQ3: How do students take responsibility for self-evaluation and mutual assessment?

A Pilot Study on the CALL Research Project

Subjects

Thirty-two junior students majoring in Foreign Trade English at the School of Foreign Languages of Suzhou University participated in the project (March 1st to July 1st) with the teacher of their Intensive Reading Course as their facilitator and one postgraduate as a tutor. They volunteered to take part in this research project as it had a lot to do with their major and the course they learned. Their performance would be reflected by 15% of their final course grade. A background survey shows that all of them had an average of eight years of English learning and 90% of them passed Test for English Majors, Band 4 (TEM 4, intermediate level) with nine students scoring over 70%. Forty percent of them rated their knowledge of computers before participation as 'poor' and 35% as 'fair'. None of them had ever participated in any CALL projects before, so they had little experience in collaborative writing and online language learning.

Procedures

The CALL Research project is a major-related collaborative activity aiming at integrating students' language, research and technology skills. It lasted from March 1st to the end of the semester with the teacher of their Intensive Reading Course acting as a guide and the author of the present paper as a tutor. What students mainly did in the project was choose research topics of their interest, search the Internet for information, design questionnaires in English, make the social investigation and put their research reports on the Web. Their collaborative work was mostly done in the multimedia language lab of the School of Foreign Languages of Suzhou University. The lab contains 30 Pentium 100 MHz PCs, linked together by the communication software Microsoft Outlook. The lab is connected to the University's campus net and the Internet through the CERNET (China Education and Research Net), which makes it easier for students to search for information both in the school library and on the Internet. The lab is open during regular office hours in the daytime and on five evenings a week. Each student applies for a personal email account either from the university's network center or gets one from free Web-based email services.

The project consisted of five stages with one main task in each stage. In the first stage of the project (from March 1st to March 31st), the students were divided into seven groups of four or five according to their preferences. Each group decided on topics of interest or specific to their major and narrowed them down through group discussion and related literature surfing. Afterwards, an action list was drawn within each group and tasks were distributed to each group member under the group leader's supervision.

In the second stage of the project (from April 1st to May 1st), each group laid down the framework of the research report and the research questions, on the basis of which surveys were designed with group members' joint efforts. Then, they began to make social investigations, distributing the questionnaires to the consumers involved and interviewing related persons.

In the third and fourth stage of the project (from May1st to June 30th), each group finished the data collection, analyzed data gathered and sorted out supporting details with visual graphics of relevant data. In the last stage, each group started to finish their research report and conducted self-evaluation and group assessment respectively. After the revision and modification, they all got ready to present their final products either in a PowerPoint presentation form or through hyperlinked webpages. All the writing activities such as questionnaire making, data finalizing and research report writing as well as communication between the facilitator and students or interaction among students themselves like group evaluation were conducted in the computer lab. They were also required to keep a weekly progress report and share it with other groups for suggestions. A devoted technician in the lab was always ready to help in the whole process. At the end of June, students entered for their final Webpage Fair, which covered a wide range of research areas, including "the Study of the Successful Promotion of KFC in Suzhou", "Comparison of Human Resource Management between State-Owned Enterprises and Foreign-Funded Companies", "Success of Acer CM", "Challenge faced by Middle Managers", "the Study of the Success of Schindler", "Is Online Selling Gloomy or Promising" and "Human Resource Management and Work Efficiency". All of them can be accessed at http://call.suda.edu.cn/updates/stuprojects.html.

Data collection

Being one of the facilitators, the author of the present paper tutored and observed the whole process of the project. In order to find out whether the three factors crucial to learner autonomy take place in the CALL research process and what effects the major-related project has on learner autonomy, quantitative data were collected from the results of a survey by the end of the project. A statistical analysis was conducted to measure the degree to which CALL project promotes learner autonomy. Besides, a record of students' writing quantity was also collected.

Moreover, in order to gain further insights into the topic under investigation, qualitative data such as the writer's observation notes, students' responses to an end-of-project interview, students' weekly reports and reflections on the project were also collected.

Survey

One end-project survey was distributed to the subjects by the end of the project. It consisted of two parts. The first part concerns personal data including name, sex, class, scores of TEM 4 (Test for English Majors, Band 4) and results in provincial and national computer tests. The other constitutes 20 items to be answered on a five-point Likert scale, with 5 being the highest score. This part falls into 3 sections. Section I (Q2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 19, 20) contains statements concerning learner choice in the entire project. Section II (Q3, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 18) aims at examining whether learners get enough support and guidance in the whole process. Section III (Q1, 15, 16, 17) focuses on learners' beliefs and actions toward self-assessment and group evaluation.

Students' works and webpages

Students were required to save their works on a disk, including their outlines, surveys, reflections and the email correspondence with both the facilitator and classmates. The source of data enables the writer to keep track of their progress in language and computer skills. It also reflects the subjects' attitudes toward incorporating modern technology into language learning.

Students' weekly progress report

Students met their teacher of the Intensive Reading Course, who was their guide in the project twice a week. At the beginning of each meeting, the representatives of the seven

groups took turns to give a short report of what they had done and what difficulties they had encountered. The other groups would raise questions or offer suggestions. Each week's progress report and the discussion helped the author of the present paper to take a closer look at students' autonomous learning process.

Interview

An interview was also conducted on the subjects at the end of the project. Six open-ended questions were generally related to students' perceptions on the relationship between learner autonomy and the technology-based project. (See the interview questions in Appendix III)

Data Analysis and General Findings

For the end-project survey, 30 students' responses to the second part were calculated to get an overall mean. The mean score of each question for each student was calculated and compared with a hypothesized mean of 3. The Standard deviations (SD) were also calculated to see the variability of the mean distributions. For the sake of convenience, the writer divided the questions into 3 tables according to the 3 sections mentioned above (see Appendix I)

Generally speaking, the study confirmed the hypothesis put forward in the Introduction. The overall mean score for all students on all questions in Part Two of the CALL Survey was 3.89, significantly higher than a hypothetical neutral score of 3. All the mean scores of the 20 questions except Q13 were higher than neutral. The whole results indicate that there is a positive change of learner autonomy in the research project.

Moreover, the mean score for each subcategory of the 3 factors is also calculated to understand how the CALL research project enables students to take responsibility for their learning, how they work in a supportive atmosphere and in what way self-assessment and peer editing were carried out. As the following table shows, the highest two mean scores are given to students' perception on autonomous learning and their view on the change of teacher's role. Besides, the percentage of choosing "strongly agree" and "agree" to each item is also taken into account:

Factors	Sub-categories	Mean	%

Learner choice	General perceptions on autonomous learning	4.43	100%
	Decide to modify the way of doing the project	4.1	93.3%
	Decide to choose the materials	4.03	86.7%
	Decide on the topics	4.03	86.7%
	Decide on the way of doing the project	3.93	80%
Supporting environment	Views on the change of the teacher's role	4.2	93.3%
	Peers' discussion	4.03	86.7%
	Teacher support	3.97	86.7%
	Peer support	3.97	83.3%
	General perception on the supporting atmosphere	3.93	83.3%
Self -assessment	Group assessment	4.1	93.3%
	Opinions on the evaluation sheets	3.87	73.3%

In addition, when looking at students' responses to Q19 (the fourth highest mean score), Q20 (the fifth highest mean score) and the interview (Appendix III), we get the impression that the CALL research project enhances students' language proficiency and their overall abilities.

Discussion

On the basis of both the quantitative and qualitative analyses, it is claimed that the CALL research project provides a new opportunity for the development of autonomous learning. The effects of the project on the 3 elements of learner autonomy are discussed as follows:

1. Learners enjoy a large range of choices and take responsibility for most aspects of learning.

The highest mean score to Q10 (4.43) demonstrates that students realized the importance of taking responsibility for their own learning and looked upon it as a good habit. Moreover, the interviews and the students' individual reports show that learners did not wish to be spoonfed with the textbooks, which were considered to be the authoritative source. Instead, they were more interested in the CALL project, because the research topics were closely related to their major and the course they learned. Just as one student commented, "The project enlarged our knowledge related to our major and pushes us to read more, find more…" (Tao, group 1). To justify that, an example of group 5 who explored the success of KFC in Su Zhou market can be taken: they searched the Internet for information, designed an English questionnaire and emailed or interviewed English speakers to discuss the topic and finally put the hypertextual research report on the Web. Thus, they developed an

internalized thirst for knowledge as well as experience and in the meanwhile improved their language proficiency (Liu, 2001).

All of the questions (Q10, Mean=4.43; Q7, Mean=4.1; Q6, Mean=4.03; Q4, Mean=4.03; Q5, Mean=3.93; Q2, Mean=3.9) concerning learner choice in the questionnaire were higher than average. Answers to the Q6 showed that the majority (86.7%) of the students were able to decide how to use the computer lab, the libraries and the reference room to find the materials they wanted rather than being confined to textbooks only. They could access the extensive information essential to their research either through the search engines on the Internet or via the library's online catalog in the computer lab. Undoubtedly, the Internet provided a source of authentic, timely, relevant text in the target language. In the meanwhile, students learned to exercise their critical judgments for the source, validity, reliability and accuracy of the information so as to extract the precise data they needed. Just as one student (Jiang, group 7) remarked: "the Internet is the largest data storehouse in the world, containing so much information available to us. In order not to be drowned in the information sea, I had to improve my skimming and scanning skills to find the most relevant supporting materials". The success of the students' final projects, inevitably, results from their critical thinking and creation. From the statistical result of Q5 (Mean=3.93), we learn that 80% of the subjects were able to decide how to complete their share of the task in their own ways. And their individual reports and my observation notes also showed that learners could choose their preferred learning methods and styles in agreement with their interests and cognitive abilities. For instance, in group 7, tasks were divided based on each group member's strengths and weaknesses. "The one who was good at communication would be responsible for contacting the company and interviewing related people; the one who was skillful in writing was in charge of revising group articles…"(Liu, group 7). Obviously, in this way everyone would take an active part in fulfilling their learning tasks at hand and were able to bring about their initiatives into full play.

The research also shows that more than 93% subjects agreed or strongly agreed that they had the chance to modify their way of doing the group project when necessary (Q7, Mean=4.1). Take group 1 for example, originally they had intended to explore the differences between the two management systems from four angles: human resources

management, welfare system, productivity and manufacturing process. However, shortly after they conducted the research, they found out that they could not dig the last two deeper and the first two aspects in some ways overlapped with each other. In this case, they decided to leave out the remaining three and focus only on one aspect: the comparison of human resources management of state-owned enterprises and foreign-funded companies. Their research turned out to be a great success winning the credit for the "Overall Best Group" and "Best Cooperation Group" in their final group-work assessment. Their findings, in my opinion, do shed some lights on the management system of state-owned enterprises. For instance, they gave some specific examples of how foreign enterprises motivate their employees on different occasions through external and internal rewards, which enable the reader to have a better understanding why foreign enterprises are considered to be more advanced and charming than state-owned ones. It is no doubt that their successful achievements in the project can be attributed to their control over the learning method.

Furthermore, from the writer's observation and learners' individual reports, learners were able to choose their own time and place of learning in the whole project. The teacher did help to check the action plans and ensure that tasks in each stage got finished before the deadline, but it was each group which was responsible for planning the distribution in time, deciding when a particular aspect of the work should be started, continued or interrupted. Some groups reported that access to the Internet enabled them to hold group discussions, ask for other groups' advice or make literature research anytime they wanted. It was evident that the learning time and space extended far beyond the traditional class hours and rooms. Of course, different learners require varying degrees of self control, but just as McGarry (1995) concluded, if learners are encouraged to take responsibility for their own work by being given some control over what, how and when they learn, they are more likely to set realistic goals, develop strategies for coping with new and unforeseen situations and gradually learn how to be more efficient learners.

2. Learners work in a supportive atmosphere

Learner autonomy does not mean learner isolation or "teacherless learning". It has been widely recognized that autonomy is a dynamic social process, where teachers have a crucial role to play in launching learners into self-access and in lending them a regular helping hand

to stay afloat (Thanasoulas, 2000). This is especially true in China's EFL context, as learners are too dependent on teachers and they feel too hard to take control of every aspect of learning. The survey shows that more than 83% subjects considered the project-based learning atmosphere cooperative and supportive (Q9, Mean=3.93) and 87% of them agreed or strongly agreed that they could get immediate feedback from the teacher or the tutor on their thoughts, ideas and performance (Q18, Mean=3.97). Q11 (Mean=4.2), investigating students' opinions on the teacher's facilitating role, achieved the second highest mean score, which demonstrates that the learners obtained the teacher's systematic support. In the whole project, the writer witnessed a large amount of email-based or face-to-face interaction and negotiation between the teacher and the students.

In group 4, for example, most of the group members did not have a solid language foundation and they were slow in learning. Inevitably, they encountered many more problems when conducting the research on the success of Schindler. They were confused about the logical arrangement and the first drafts of their research report turned out to be highly disorganised. Fortunately, the teacher offered them very individualized suggestions and patient assistance, such as slight lowering the requirements, asking them to review the research methods and advising them to conduct peer-editing and learn from others first. Instead of being a traditional purveyor of information, the teacher became the counselor and manager of learning resources. Her guidance provided an avenue for learners to solve the problems on their own. Most importantly, she helped to build up their confidence in independent learning. As a result, group 4 successfully reorganized their independent research and analyzed the related factors from the following 8 perspectives, "training programs", "high quality product", "research and development", "brand", "solutions for wide applications", "after-sale service", "the way of gaining customers" and "credit". It is obvious that their findings are more specific and profound than during the first attempt.

All of the students' individual reports shared one common feature: they spoke highly of peer support. Just as Wu from group 6 reviewed, "Everyone contributes one's own ideas and efforts to the research project. If he or she has any problems, we will lend a hand to his or her. And we also often get some advice from other groups…" Peers' sparking ideas did contribute to their final achievements. And the Internet made it easier for them to contact

their teacher, peers, or friends outside the campus for advice conveniently and efficiently via email or ICQ.

Students' weekly reports proved to be another efficient way to for students to get mutual help. In addition to sharing their successful tips and effective strategies with other groups, they pointed out the difficulties they ran into. Then other groups and the teacher would give suggestions and advice for improvement. "When everybody adds fuel the flames rise high", all the obstacles, after a heated discussion, soon gave way to confidence and solutions. By learning from each other and sharing what they knew, students worked toward their common goals.

3. Learners are involved in assessment process in the CALL Project

Self-assessment is an indispensable component of autonomous learning (Dickinson, 1993). Its main objectives are to enable students to learn from practical experience, to encourage them to become more responsible for their own learning and to enable them to continue to have the ability throughout their adult lives. It plays a crucial role in networks in this CALL project. With the teacher's instruction, which is quite necessary at an early stage of self-directed learning, students in our project did various self evaluation and group assessment, such as an individual report on one's collaborative project experience, group comments on the webpage presentation and self-evaluation on the research report. The Intranet in the computer lab eased the process of self and group editing and commenting. Students' work could be freely sent to more than one recipient for comments. As a result, this convenient way of sharing files helped students get more feedback and ideas, just as Zhu from group 7 reported: "when revising pair group's project, we made a comparison with our own, which allowed us to know our merits and demerits clearly and absorb others' advantages to improve our own project". Since their overall performance throughout the project rather than a single exam could be taken into account for the final assessment, the self-assessment at each stage did help them to modify their learning strategies and make up for their weaknesses. Students' responses to Q15 (Mean=4.1, the third highest mean score) confirmed that more than 93% students checked their work before having it evaluated by the teacher. The teacher, according to the writer's observation, monitored the peer editing, making sure that each individual and group acted appropriately.

4. Learners are exposed to and encouraged to produce varied and creative language

Traditionally, students' language exposure was mainly from textbooks, which was not sufficient for language acquisition. According to Spolsky (1989: 166), "the outcome of language learning depends in large measure on the amount and kind of exposure to the target language." Getting plenty of exposure to language, especially first-hand language materials, is the prerequisite for successful language learning. The CALL project is reported to enlarge students' language exposure and improve their writing fluency through the intensive practice of meaningful writing. This is supported by the high mean for the related questions (Q19, Mean=4.07; Q20, Mean=4.04) designed to examine the subjects' language improvement. The Internet, books and email correspondents offer students encyclopedic sources for information. The example here could be group 7 , whose research focus was on *Success of Acer CM***,** a rising star within the computer manufacturing industry in the Post-PC Era. In order to find all the relevant materials on production, management and sales, they went to the library, emailed their friends for information and used the Internet. In consequence, they found themselves exposed to a variety of language input. In this case, they exercised their critical thinking to extract the useful information. Just as Warschsuer remarked in the TESOL'99 Preconvention On-line Workshops, "those who are able to access, adapt, and make use of information and knowledge, using new information technologies are those who will succeed in all walks of life". Instead of being the passive textbook readers, they become the skilful language manipulators .

Moreover, they were provided with sufficient opportunities to engage in meaningful use of language and to produce comprehensible language output, which is also a means to language development. As Wu reported,

> "I find my language ability improved greatly due to this project. We need to use English from beginning to end. Discussing, outlining, writing, proofreading, etc were all in English. We found mistakes now and then, and we corrected them as soon as possible. Because of these practices, we learned new words, new grammar, new idiom etc. We were just like sponge, absorbed all the wonderful knowledge."

In addition to the email correspondence and weekly report, they got themselves familiarized with different discourse patterns in the whole research report. For instance, they had to

know how to express their thanks in the acknowledgement, how to generalize their process in the abstract, how to describe their research in the methodology part and how to analyze their findings in the discussion part. When doing a survey outside the campus and holding discussion with their peers and the teacher, they had the chance to use English to communicate, formulate ideas and solve problems. In short, they were engaged in the use of English in the ways that native speakers normally are. The language production process, on the other hand, stimulated them to read more and find more. At last, when their writing products were put on the Web, technology helped refine and popularize their work so that they would get more feedback from authentic audiences.

5. Learners' real-world abilities are enhanced in the project

This project is regarded as a "quality-oriented education", during which students can put what they have learned into practice and acquire knowledge they cannot learn from books. All the subjects concluded that the project built up a bridge between books and real life. In the university, they did not have to worry about anything and took the teacher's and parents' help for granted. But once they stepped into the society, they encountered many more challenges than they had expected. Facing cold faces when distributing the questionnaire, getting refusal from the top managers or the executives of the companies, and even laughed at by passers-by in the street are just trivial difficulties in the whole process. Some students thought of giving up, but the consistent encouragement from the teacher and the classmates inspired them to continue. They learned to be patient, persistent and diligent; how to speak appropriately in different situations, how to contact people of all types and how to gain other people's understanding and support. In fact, this research project enabled them to gain a deep insight into the society before graduation from school. Many students have realized that book knowledge is far from enough for survival and they have to get well prepared both academically and psychologically. Others have come to see from the research that English and computer skills are just tools, they have to have a command of marketing and trade knowledge in order to be accepted by foreign-funded companies.

Most importantly, they learned one truth from their own experiences, i.e, "Everything is possible if one tries." Just as Warschauer (1997) commented, students are engaged in meaningful tasks and solve meaningful problems in the CALL project. They not only

bridged the gap between hands-on work and abstract learning, but also succeeded in tackling tasks which they would face in the near future, just as one group writes in their project research report,

> "During the research, we met a lot of difficulties. We have been refused and laughed at for many times. But we believe what we have done in this semester will benefit our major study and finally will be helpful to our future career" (Group 5, 98 Foreign Trade).

Implications

This pilot study witnessed how students explored knowledge in a way quite different from the traditional learning. Their initiatives and potential were to some degree brought into play in the self-directed learning process. However, since it was the first time for them to participate in the project, the weaknesses they displayed were unavoidable. Therefore, the students and the facilitators need to make joint efforts to compensate for those deficiencies so as to pave the way for more effective autonomous learning.

Firstly, pre-project training needs to be carried out. During the whole project, the writer found out that several subjects showed their passiveness and unwillingness in the course of doing their tasks, even if the tasks were of their preferences. In that case, their group leader had to shoulder more burdens. When analyzing the reasons, it turned out that those students did not have a clear idea of the purposes of the project. They seemed to be accustomed to the regular courses and did not wish to be disturbed. Some students were frightened and frustrated by the technical requirements because of lack of former experience. Therefore, it is proposed that a basic training aiming at building up students' confidence and equipping them with the skills of using related software be essential for participants to get actively involved in whole process.

Secondly, inter-group cooperation needs to be strengthened. Group works ensured that each member cooperated with others and worked together toward their common goals. However, this inevitably resulted in the fierce competition between groups. It is true that appropriate competition promotes healthy growth, but if it goes to the extreme, it will hinder the process. For example, some students did not like the evaluation sheet because each one tended to give his group the highest score. That is why only 70% students (Q17, Mean=3.87; Q1,

Mean=3.8) spoke highly of the group evaluation sheet. Thus, it is recommended that next time the evaluation sheet design work be assigned to students themselves.

Conclusion

Learner autonomy is considered as a highly desirable outcome of learning. However, autonomy is a process, not a product (Thanasoulas, 2000). One does not become autonomous; one only works towards autonomy. This is especially the case in China's EFL context, where the majority of students are still being taught in ways which promote dependence, leaving them ill-equipped to apply their school-learnt knowledge and skills to the world beyond the classroom. "If we just push the shoots to grow by pulling them upward." (Chinese idiom) and leave all the control to learners overnight, they would be at a loss. Therefore, a training process needs to be carried out between the traditional spoon-feeding method and learner control.

The research project just serves as a training process, taking students from their states of varying degrees of dependence to the state of the greatest degree of independence. It starts from larger groups towards smaller groups, pairs and finally individuals and from giving the students fewer choices concerning their learning and work towards many choices, and finally freer choices such as open-ended tasks, thus allowing students to make their choices entirely on their own. Besides, it provides the perfect opportunity for learners to go out and use their language. In becoming actively involved in the process of learning, students may set their own objectives. By working independently of the teacher both inside and outside the classroom and selecting and using the strategies best suited to the occasion, they may realize a sense of autonomy. This learner training process can broaden the horizons of the learner and may empower him or her to become autonomous in their present or future language learning.

The whole project not only involves the students' active participation and cooperation, but also sets a high demand on teachers. Many people assume that the teachers in the autonomous settings will transfer all responsibilities to learners, thus becoming a redundant part of the learning process. As a matter of fact, the success of LA enhancement depends to a great extent on an active role for teachers, whether in a classroom or a self-access center.

In other words, the teacher still plays an indispensable role in working towards autonomous learning, but instead of being the traditional knowledge giver, he or she will be a facilitator, a counselor and a helper. His or her guidance and encouragement will prove beneficial towards learners' autonomous learning, as all learners need to be prepared and supported on the path to greater autonomy (Jones, 2001).

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Appendix I

The following tables demonstrate the mean score, standard deviation, students' frequency and percentage of choosing "strongly agree" and "agree" to each item. The results of the 20 items are listed under three parts based on which the questionnaire is designed (F: Frequency; P: Percentage).

Table 1 Learner choice

Questions	Mean	SD	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Q2.After the task division, each member can decide what to do about his/her own task.	3.9	0.48	25	83%
Q4.I help my group to decide on topics for research and discussion.	4.03	0.55	26	86.7%
Q5.I can decide how to complete my share of the task in my own ways.	3.93	0.58	24	80%
Q6.Our group decides how to use the libraries, reference rooms and computer labs to search materials and process our data.	4.03	0.56	26	86.7%
Q7.We can modify our ways of doing the group project when necessary.	4.1	0.48	28	93.3%
Q10.I think being responsible for one's own learning is a good habit that we should get into.	4.43	0.50	30	100%

Table II Supporting atmosphere

Questions	Mean	SD	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Q3.I have chances to discuss problems and difficulties with group members at every stage.	3.97	0.55	25	83.3%
Q8.I enjoy the flexibility of this project-based groups learning activity.	3.77	0.50	22	73.3%
Q9.The project-based learning atmosphere is cooperative and supportive.	3.93	0.52	25	83.3%
Q11.The teacher or the tutor acts as a helper rather than a dominator in the whole project	4.2	0.55	28	93.3%
Q12.We cannot complete the task unless everyone contributes his or her best.	3.73	0.78	20	66.7%
Q13.My opinions and suggestions are often neglected in the groups work.	2.06(2.94 when reverse coded)	0.58	24	80%
Q14.I feel happy to play a more active role in the group discussion.	4.03	0.56	26	86.7%
Q18.I can get immediate feedback from the teacher or the tutor to my thoughts, ideas and performance.	3.97	0.49	26	86.7%

Table III Self-assessment

Questions	Mean	SD	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Q1.We find the project evaluation sheet enables us to assess our work from many perspectives.	3.8	0.71	21	70%
Q15.Our group check our own before having it evaluated by the teacher.	4.1	0.48	28	93.3%
Q16.We find peer editing valuable in our report writing process.	3.53	0.51	16	53.3%
Q17.We find the individual and group evaluation sheets helpful for our own assessment and peer assessment.	3.87	0.62	22	73.3%

Appendix II Survey

Part One: Background Information

Chinese name:____ English name:_____

Age:

Sex:

Class:

You started learning English from

Primary/Grade ___Junior/Grade___Senior/Grade_____

Your English mark for TEM 4 is_____

Other tests

BEC2___/BEC3____/CET4____/CET6_____/TOFLE___/GRE____/_____

Check if you have a computer at home____ or in the dormitory? ___

Please rate your knowledge of computers before participating in the research project.

Poor___ fair____ good___ very good____ excellent____

Please rate your knowledge of computers now.

Poor___ fair____ good___ very good____ excellent____

How often did you write emails before participating in the project?

Daily__ Weekly___ A few times in a month___ rarely___ never___

How often do you write E-mail now?

Daily__ Weekly___ A few times in a month___ rarely___ never___

How often did you visit English websites before participating in the project?

Daily__ Weekly___a few times in a month_____rarely___ never___

How often did you visit English websites now?

Daily__ Weekly___a few times in a month_____rarely___ never___

Thank you for your cooperation!

Part Two: Questions on Autonomous Learning

The following statements describe some feelings and actions you might have experienced during the project. Please select one number (1-5) that best fit your case and put it on the left margin of each statement:

1=strongly disagree 2=disagree 3=neutral 4=agree 5=strongly agree

1. (3.8) We find the project evaluation sheet enables us to assess our work from many perspectives.
2. (3.9) After the task division, each member can decide what to do about his/her own task.
3. (3.97) I have chances to discuss problems and difficulties with group members at every stage.
4. (4.03) I help my group to decide on topics for research and discussion.
5. (3.93) I can decide how to complete my share of the task in my own ways.
6. (4.03) Our group decides how to use the libraries, reference rooms and computer labs to search materials and process our data.
7. (4.1) We can modify our ways of doing the group project when necessary.
8. (3.77) I enjoy the flexibility of this project-based groups learning activity.
9. (3.93) The project-based learning atmosphere is cooperative and supportive
10. (4.43) I think being responsible for one's own learning is a good habit that we should get into.
11. (4.2) The teacher or the tutor acts as a helper rather than a dominator in the whole project
12. (3.73) We cannot complete the task unless everyone contributes his or her best.
13. (2.06) My opinions and suggestions are often neglected in the groups work.
14. (4.03) I feel happy to play a more active role in the group discussion.
15. (4.1) Our group check our own before having it evaluated by the teacher.
16. (3.53) We find peer editing valuable in our report writing process.
17. (3.87) We find the individual and group evaluation sheets helpful for our own assessment and peer assessment.
18. (3.97) I can get immediate feedback from the teacher or the tutor to my thoughts, ideas and performance.
19. (4.07) I have many opportunities to practice writing in English in the whole project.
20. (4.04) I think the research project is helpful for my language learning.

Appendix III Interview questions:

1. What do you think of the role that the computer-assisted project plays in your language learning?
2. Do you think that the project offers you a variety of activities that encourage you to use English meaningfully?
3. What do you think of the self-directed learning process in doing the project, helpful or difficult?
4. Could you monitor your learning process in doing the project?
5. What do you think of the role that the teacher or the tutor plays in the whole project?
6. What do you think of the role that the computer or the network plays in the whole project?

Appendix IV

Group 1: Comparison of Human Resource Management between State-Owned Enterprises and Foreign-Funded Companies

Group 2: Human Resource Management

Group 3: Is Online Selling Gloomy or Promising

Group 4: The Study of the Success of Schindler

Group 5: The Study of the Successful Promotion of KFC in Suzhou

Group 6: Challenges faced by Middle Managers

Group 7: Success of Acer CM

THE INTERNET IN ESL COLLEGE EDUCATION: A PROPOSAL FOR THE INTERNET-ENHANCED COLLEGE COURSE

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Introduction

In this paper I will describe a proposal for an ESL college course that incorporates technology into a linguistically-oriented syllabus. It improves learners' English language skills, develops their autonomy as language learners as well as helps them acquire the whole range of literacies that necessitate success in the information-driven environment of the 21st century. I will begin by specifying the needs for changing the traditional ESL college curriculum. Then I will present the objectives and the content of the course. I will conclude by discussing its practical aspects, with emphasis placed on anticipated problems.

The course designed and conducted by the author of the paper resulted from a growing need to adjust traditional ESL college standards to the requirements of the modern, information-driven world. It cannot be denied that the advent of the computer, and the Internet in particular, has brought about significant changes in the way the goals of higher education are perceived. The changes have deeply affected the areas described below.

Didactic teaching versus active learning

The point to note is that our schooling at all levels is still dominated by the didactic style of teaching. According to this model, the quality of teaching and learning is equivalent to the amount of factual knowledge mastered by learners. In this approach learning is passive, with students receiving linear sequence of facts authoritatively delivered via lectures, handouts or textbooks (Mather, 1996). Thus, the less distortion between the input (knowledge) and students' output, the better their performance.

The didactic pattern of passing and memorizing decontextualised knowledge, so typical of traditional instruction, appears particularly out of date in the light of modern technology achievements. An individual's ability to memorize and retrieve factual knowledge may

seem of no value in the digital, information-oriented world where all the data required can be easily and quickly accessed through the network of interlinked electronic sources – the Internet. In the era of narrow-field specialists the extensive knowledge of facts, dates or definitions seems at least redundant. Information of all kind is abundant on the WWW, it continues to double at an increasingly fast rate and as such is impossible to be acquired by an individual. What appears much more valuable in this situation is individual's ability to locate the required bit of information as quickly and efficiently as possible followed by their critical judgment as to its value and culminated in the intelligent use of the data collected.

Critical Thinking Skills

The authoritative nature of didactic approach combined with the use of textbooks as the primary means of information delivery favours the largely uncritical acceptance of information (Mather, 1996). As textbooks are static in nature, they usually present knowledge as it was at the moment of printing. What is more, they contain only views and facts that have been selected and thus pre-censored by an author. Moreover, in traditional curricula students have little opportunity to gain access to raw, unfiltered, even contradictory information that dominates in the real world. Consequently, they tend to slavishly accept and trust whatever sources they have access to.

On the other hand, the application of the Internet requires "new dimensions of thinking" [1]. It confronts its users with several, usually conflicting points of view on the basis of which they are supposed to form their own judgment. The realization that these requirements are beyond an average ESL college student's reach came to me while I was monitoring a group of 2nd year students working in a computer lab. Their task was to evaluate several webpages in terms of their reliability, usefulness, attractiveness, etc. The criteria for evaluation had been established and agreed upon and the task itself seemed relatively simple. To my surprise, students were unable to apply them correctly to the examples they viewed on the computer screen. Pages which appeared to include scientifically proven research work but clearly designed with the purpose of mocking the convention through a ridiculous subject [2] were classified as absolutely reliable by all the students. Mature and experienced language learners were unprepared to think critically, analyse and evaluate information and draw conclusions. Similar situations followed giving rise to the suspicion that at present content

knowledge is insufficient for students to succeed.

Indeed, as we have been presented with a new challenge: a wealth of information distributed with few restrictions and often limited information about the author of the material, teaching critical thinking skills to students appears absolutely crucial to their future success as workers, researchers or educators. Especially, as with the increasing use of web-based technology to collect and interpret information, success in today's world seems to be largely determined by the individual's ability to analyse problems and make thoughtful decisions rather than recall previously memorised facts.

Multiliteracies

Not a novelty any more, computers have radically changed not only the way we communicate, but also our perception of literacy. First of all, the main communication medium of today - the Internet, through its very nature alters the ways we read and write. As it makes use of hypertext, which creates a very different way of storing and presenting information, it fosters a non-linear pattern of exploration (Kasper,1999). Clickable phrases and the interlinked nature of electronic documents leave the choice of the exploration procedure in the hands of the learner. Accordingly, the sequence of viewed documents remains unpredictable and may vary from learner to learner giving them greater control over both the content and the whole process of reading or writing.

Warschauer (2000) observes that the shift of reading practices from the page to the screen is so substantial that it should bring about changes in how we teach skimming, scanning and guessing words from context. Similarly, the widespread use of computers and the Internet raises the profile of writing and the need for effective written communication since almost every computer user is a potential author writing and publishing for international audience. Additionally, as most of the writing, either formal or informal, is already done on a computer screen, it can be predicted that new writing/authoring skills will become essential and as such should be covered in school curricula.

The growing awareness of these phenomena gave rise to the concept of “multiliteracies" – a term coined by the New London Group which undermines the traditional understanding of the term “literacy". Instead, it is defined as a diverse range of factual, academic, critical and electronic skills that determine success in today's world. It makes the task particularly

difficult for ESL students, especially at college level, who are expected to become equally competent in four increasingly difficult areas :

1. functional literacy – the ability to speak, understand, read and write English as well as use English to acquire, articulate and expand their knowledge
2. academic literacy – the ability to read and understand interdisciplinary texts, analyse and respond to those texts through various modes of written and oral discourse and expand their knowledge through research
3. critical literacy – the ability to evaluate the validity and reliability of informational sources so that they may draw conclusions
4. electronic literacy – the ability to select and use electronic tools for communication, construction, research and autonomous learning

(Shetzer, 1998, cited in Kasper, 2000)

As it can be easily noticed, traditional ESL programmes focus on the first aspect of literacy only. This basic training is insufficient for the majority of college students, who at this level are expected to be academically and even critically literate. The point is that they are expected to already display such skills but have not been previously trained in them. The discrepancy between the requirements of an institution and learners' true abilities may culminate in students' failure to meet relatively high standards of performance set by colleges and subsequently expected by future employers.

Course description

The course called "WebProject" is based on the assumption that traditional ESL college training is insufficient to prepare students for the new challenges of the academic and workforce requirements in the 21st century. Thus, a new pedagogical model should be adopted to promote the idea of active, autonomous learning and foster critical thinking skills. Its imperative should be to incorporate information technology as an integral component and to aim at developing the range of literacies required for an individual to be successful in a digital society. "WebProject" also addresses the needs of 2nd year students of Wyzsza Szkola Lingwistyczna in Czestochowa, preparing them for the strenuous work of writing their B.A thesis (*licencjat*).

"WebProject" was first incorporated in the 2nd year Practical English (PE) module in the year 2000. At first it was conducted as a piloting programme and limited to one group only. At present it has been fully developed as an integral and obligatory part of the PE module. It combines the principles of inquiry-based learning,[3] project-based approach and cognitive constructivism and is intended to foster the following skills and abilities:

- The confident use of electronic resources to gather, use and interpret information, (electronic literacy)
- The acquisition of a wide range of lexical items from a variety of disciplines (history, biology, geography, social studies, etc.)
- The ability to conduct thoughtful research with the use of traditional and Web resources
- The ability to evaluate and select information obtained from the Internet (fostering critical thinking skills)
- Higher-order thinking skills (analysis, synthesis, comparison, contrast, etc.)
- The use of online materials in one's own learning

It also aims at:

- increasing learners' motivation through a variety of interdisciplinary tasks,
- activating and employing skills other than linguistic (visual, interpersonal, kinaesthetic intelligences) and directing them towards language learning,
- promoting cooperative learning.

In order to achieve the above goals the syllabus guides learners through activities that culminate in collaborative projects based on WebQuests – Web-based, long-term, interdisciplinary activities developed by B. Dodge and commonly used in American education. Although designed for native speakers of English, webquests, if carefully selected, can serve well in ESL education. First of all, they increase students' motivation by making them face an authentic task of tackling a controversial issue. As topics are complex, students work in teams developing expertise in one of their aspects. The overall understanding is gained due to students' cooperation in a later stage of the process (March, 1998). Webquests, either short or long-term, share some characteristic features that guarantee their efficiency and clarity of purpose. They contain: (from Dodge, 1995)

- The Introduction, which presents students with background information and captures their interest.
- The Task, which describes the activity's end product.
- The Process, explaining strategies students should use to complete the task, usually broken into clearly described steps.
- The Resources, or the suggested Web sites students will need to complete the task.
- The Evaluation which measures the results of the activity.

In order to carry out their projects successfully, learners are guided through the following stages of progressive complexity:

- Learning basic electronic skills (typing and word processing in general, using email, locating information on the screen, performing treasure hunts)
- Adapting Internet resources (e.g. creating an e-newspaper, implementing pictures, citing information found on the Web)
- Evaluating Internet resources in terms of their credibility, validity, attractiveness, authorship, etc.
- Performing a guided research in which the process of framing fundamental and essential questions is stressed [4]
- Creating a slideshow or webpage to illustrate the issue.

Participants of WebProject meet once a week for a 2-hour session in a computer lab. Each student has access to their own computer, although pair or group work is often suggested. All the classes are conducted entirely in English by a practising college teacher. Although the syllabus may seem Information Technology-oriented, all the tasks serve as a framework for language learning. Therefore, purely linguistic activities are stressed e.g., understanding the language of the news, using corpora to check collocations or using on-line dictionaries. Students are required to fulfil several assignments in a semester, all of which are to be sent to the teacher via email They range from reviewing search engines and websites to preparing web bibliographies on a given subject or writing a fictitious news item. (see the full syllabus and matching assignments in Appendix A). The work is checked, commented upon and sent back to the author in the same way. It is frequently used as a basis for typically linguistic tasks such as error correction, gap filling etc.

The point to note is that during all the classes students learn by doing The focus of each meeting is to complete a specific, authentic task rather than acquire factual knowledge. Thus, carefully designed handouts are prepared and distributed by the teacher to guide learners step by step through the whole process of completing the task (for a sample handout see Appendix B). This method allows for self-paced work and helps avoid the common problem of mixed-ability (in terms of computer literacy) groups. Students who visibly stay behind the others can be asked to omit some elements of the task and move on to the key issues of the meeting. Similarly, advanced learners can always find additional tasks to stir their interest and keep them busy. Students' progress is constantly monitored by the teacher, who is a facilitator and advisor rather than an authoritarian.

The syllabus culminates in webquests. They are used as a preparation for genuine research work that students will have to face in the 3rd year of their studies. Learners are allowed to find their group partners and choose a topic of interest to them. As webquests cover a variety of topics and disciplines such as architecture, biology or science, learners may activate their interests and, subsequently, their motivation to participate in a project significantly increases.

Table 1: Sample WebQuests Implemented in the Course.

Title	Overview	Available at:
Hello Dolly: A WebQuest about Cloning	Governments around the world are currently debating the potential impact of cloning on society. The purpose of this discussion is to determine how to legislate cloning. Students' task will be to ask good questions, access current information, analyze the validity of sources, reach consensus with their peers, take action, and explain the consequences. All in an effort to answer one primary question: What government policy should be established to regulate cloning?	http://powayusd.sdcoe.k12.ca.us/projects/dolly/
Comet WebQuest	A team of prominent scientists has just discovered a deadly comet headed for Earth. It will impact the earth in just one year. This comet has the potential of destroying the human race. Students work as a team of scientists to find solutions to this threat. They must present their findings to an international task force.	http://www.slc.k12.ut.us/webweavers/sueа/cometweb.htm

Global Warming	Welcome to the U.N. conference on climate control and greenhouse gas emissions! The 167 nations of the Earth have come together this week to agree upon a way to stop the process of global warming. You and your fellow U.N. specialty teams on climate control are here to decide on a piece of legislation that would decrease the emissions of greenhouse gases20% by the year 2005. After investigating the issues and questions facing your committee, you will present your conclusions and decide whether you will endorse the legislation.	http://students.itec.sfsu.edu/ITEC815/antaramian/

It is worth noticing that webquests ideally address the idea of inquiry-based learning. They never require students to find a ready-made answer. Instead, the process of arriving at it is stressed as learners are presented with a vast amount of information which must be critically evaluated, understood, selected and transformed into the final product. What is more, all the work requires collaboration. The participants are assigned roles within which they act as experts (e.g. a journalist, a scientist). In the process they learn to communicate, collaborate and they become used to the idea that nobody knows everything, but everything can be learned if there is such a need.

Students' final product is threefold. It consists of an oral, visual and written part. All the parts are equally important and together they compose the student's final grade. Each of them is evaluated according to the criteria known to learners prior to fulfilling the task. The criteria for evaluation are presented in the table below:

Table 2: Criteria for Evaluating Students' Final Performance.

Part	**Evaluation criteria**
Oral: a speech, a lecture, a presentation (no reading is allowed)	• Content and relevance to the topic • Language (vocabulary range, grammar, pronunciation) • Addressing the public (maintaining eye contact, using appropriate intonation)
Visual: a slideshow, a webpage, a model	• Informative value • Visual attractiveness • Clarity
Written: an opinion essay, a discursive essay, a report, an overview (no plagiarism is accepted)	• Language use: register, style, vocabulary range, grammar, coherence and cohesion • Content, relevance to the topic • Sources used - proper citing, references

All the presentations are given in public and are commented upon by students' classmates. Additionally, feedback and advice on future performance is given to each of the participants

individually. One of the equally important elements is a discussion about the problems that each of the teams encountered in the process of preparing their research. Surprisingly, learners seem truly relieved to talk to the teacher about their weaknesses and difficulties they had. Wise encouragement on the part of the teacher can convince learners that obstacles can be confronted and overcome, and one's weaknesses can be made into strengths.

Although the course syllabus is still in the process of creation, the course has already appeared extremely fruitful for both the teacher and the students. Their comments, surveyed in the final questionnaire proved the usefulness and applicability of the new subject, which was rated 8.7 out of 10. Most of the students either changed their attitude to using electronic media (30%), or strongly emphasized their usefulness in their self-development and future studies (53%). The subject activated even those students who had been perceived as weak and passive. Those of them who hardly ever participated in classes proved to be extremely efficient as group leaders, information seekers or graphics designers. It confirmed the suspicion that our schooling is traditionally skewed towards promoting linguistic or mathematical intelligences and only learners with these abilities are likely to succeed in a traditional classroom environment. Although it seems that integrating information technology with a language curriculum is likely to activate skills other than linguistic and, paradoxically, direct them towards language learning, further research is yet to be conducted in this area.

Anticipated problems

The course presented in this paper is likely to produce a number of highly positive outcomes, however a word of caution must be warranted at this juncture: integrating technology into a second language classroom is not only a rewarding, but also a strenuous task. First of all, the application of computer work must be fully justified by the content of the course and clearly linked to previous and subsequent activities. What is more, many teachers wrongly assume that all young learners are computer literate. Contrary to this popular belief, it can be almost taken for granted that in an average group there will be real techies as well as technophobes. Thus, apart from different levels of linguistic competence, the teacher is likely to be confronted with a mixed-ability group in terms of technical skills. Thus, designing a clear,

easy to follow handout that specifies the tasks and breaks them into a step-by-step procedure may be of great help both to the instructor and the learners, allowing them to work at their own pace.

Furthermore, purely technical problems cannot be left unnoticed. There are students whose work always results in a computer failure. However, an IT teacher's constant assistance seems a luxury few schools can afford. Having a few spare computer workstations might be a solution to individual cases. Also, it is crucial that a backup lesson be prepared in case of a major computer crash or slow Internet connection

Conclusions

Due to all the difficulties mentioned above, combining technology and linguistic content requires teacher's devotion and a lot of preparation. However, it is a very rewarding experience, too. Unlike most activities and interaction patterns that prevail in traditional curricula, infusing technology in the classroom may significantly contribute to the growth in learners' motivation, autonomy and thinking skills. If used constructively, it addresses the idea of active learning and stimulates the development of academic, critical and electronic literacies that undoubtedly determine success in today's world. New conditions pose new challenges and call for new skills, yet it needs to be stressed that computers can never substitute teachers. On the contrary, they can offer them new opportunities for better language instruction.

Notes

1. Term coined by R. J. Marzano and R. Brandt in: Marzano, R.J., Brandt, R.S. (1988). *Dimensions of Thinking: A Framework for Curriculum and Instruction*, Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

2. Feline Reactions to Bearded Men can be viewed at http://www.improbable.com/airchives/classical/cat/cat.html

3. Inquiry-based learning is a process where students formulate investigative questions, obtain factual information, and then build knowledge that ultimately reflects their answer to the original question.(from Jakes, Pennington & Knodle, 2000).

4. Essential questions frame the research. They require students to make decisions or plan a course of action e.g. "What plan can I develop for reducing the chance I will contract cancer in my lifetime?" Foundation questions and their answers provide factual information used to build the answer to the essential question e.g.

What is cancer?//What are the strategies to be used to prevent cancer? (from Jakes, Pennington & Knodle, 2000)

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Appendix A: WebProject Syllabus and Assignment Types.

Number of meetings devoted*	**Class content**	**Assignments**
1	Introduction to the course. Typing skills. The basics of word processing. File management. *Compuspeech*: defining basic computer terms	Making an exact copy of a document using a combination of various font types, sizes and colours, lists and tables. Students save it to a floppy.
1	Email skills – using identities, setting an email account, attaching and sending files.	Students are to introduce themselves to the teacher via email.
1	The basics of the Internet: navigating the WWW. Locating information on a computer screen – guided treasure hunts (with hyperlinks to particular web sites)	
2	Accessing the WWW with an URL and understanding its components. Using search engines and directories. Narrowing searches (Boolean logic).	Reviewing three search engines and emailing the text to the teacher

1	Performing simultaneous searches. Internet treasure hunts	
1 - 2	Evaluating web resources.	Writing reviews of various web sites.
2	Adapting Internet materials. Copying text and images. Copyright on the Web. Citing and summarizing Internet resources	Performing mini-research. Students make a bibliography of sources on a given topic e.g. *Recent floods in Britain.*
1	Creating Web bibliographies – a scavenger hunt	
2	Web-based research work – all the previous classes combined. Strategies for writing a research paper. Questioning strategies: essential and foundation questions in practice.	
1	Strategies to avoid plagiarism in research work: from theory to practice.	Using obligatory references in a short essay.
1	Distribution of webquests. Discussion of final presentation requirements. Hints and tips for giving oral presentations.	
2-3	Creating slide shows in Power Point	Creating a multimedia scrapbook devoted to students' interests or current affairs.
1	Magazines and newspapers online: understanding the language of the news	Writing a fictitious news item.
1	Word up! – exploring word meanings and origins using online resources	Using online dictionaries of various types to compile mini glossaries of interesting words and phrases.
1	Using corpora in language studies.	Checking and correcting an essay, with focus on collocations.
1 - 2	Evaluating web resources.	Writing reviews of various web sites.
3-4	Presentations performed by students	
1	Vocabulary activities based on students' presentations. Overview of students' written assignments. Some comments on academic writing.	
1	Summary to the course. Final questionnaire.	

* A meeting is a 90-minute session. The number of meetings may vary depending on students' needs, interests and computer literacy. The average number of meetings per semester is usually 14..

Appendix B: Sample WebProject Tasksheet.

The Language of the News

Your task for today:

I Visit the newsrooms and newspapers listed below. Choose one of the listed categories and find out what makes today's top news stories all over the world .

Take notes – you'll have to report your story back to the group. Be sure to include the main ideas and express them using your own words.

Categories:

- World news
- Business news
- Sports news

- Entertainment news
- Health/ science news

News can be found at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/text_only.htm, http://www.reuters.com/news/, http://www.sunday-times.co.uk/news/, www.cnn.com/WORLD/index.htm, www.the-times.co.uk/news/, www.usatoday.com, www.mirror.co.uk, www.telegraph.co.uk/, www.moscowtimes.ru, www.the-sun.co.uk, www.washingtonpost.com

II Work in group: What makes the language of the news so specific?

1

2

3

4

5

III Write 5 new words you have spotted/ learned today. Use them in context, give definitions and send to your teacher.

e.g.: Crash jet was on wrong runway (headline) – *runway is a landing strip, a long flat piece of land from which a plane can take off.*

IV Find out the following information:

What publicly owned news and information company was established in London in 1851?

_____

Your homework:

In a minute you will be given a headline e.g. *British PM to resign.*

Write a matching news item of about 350 words. Remember to follow all the rules we have discussed today.