Projects in the English classroom. Beowulf: a modern day hero

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Title: Projects in the English classroom. Beowulf: a modern day hero.
Abstract
The advent of the communicative approach and the emergence of learning through projects bring us to the subject of motivation, adventure and improvisation in the language classroom. Teachers must take account of students´ motivation in planning a literature lesson.When students first study Old English literature by the hand of the Anglo-Saxon hero Beowulf, they experience a certain amount of disorientation and disbelief as they see no utilitarian purpose behind it. It is our job as teachers to design activities that bridge the gap between literature and life and find the interconnections between 6th century literature and students´ 21st century world.
Keywords: Beowulf, Lucille Ford, heroes, kennings, alliteration, literature, projects, grammar and communication

Título: Proyectos en el aula de inglés. La leyenda de Beowulf: un héroe moderno.
Resumen
El método comunicativo y la enseñanza por proyectos conducen al desarrollo de factores clave en el aprendizaje como la motivación, el espíritu de aventura y la improvisación. Cuando los alumnos entran por vez primera en contacto con los orígenes de la literatura inglesa de la mano de un héroe anglosajón como Beowulf, su primera reacción será de desorientación o descrédito al no percibir una intencionalidad concreta. El éxito residirá en diseñar actividades que permitan identificar literatura y vida, los valores del héroe anglosajón y aquellos de los héroes contemporáneos que forman parte de la tradición socio-cultural de nuestros alumnos.
Palabras clave: Beowulf, Lucille Ford, héroes, metáforas, aliteración, literatura, proyectos, gramática y comunicación.

I. INTRODUCTION

The present article has attempted to show that projects all share certain features that must be met to succeed as such. These features can be developed through different tasks and in fundamentally different ways. The development of projects in the language classroom must keep in mind students´ interests and needs, all embraced in the socio-cultural contexts in which they live as inventiveness, adventure and improvisation play a crucial role in language learning.

In the past grammar instruction was an approach that tended to dominate over the others. Nowadays new teaching methods can benefit from grammar, although language is no longer seen as a set of rules with no functional purpose. Many of the problems of language teaching have been formulated in terms of rules without any utilitarian function. However, projects depart from normative grammar patterns as the only suitable way to instruct learners and they incorporate a touch of reality, functionally positive, related to the context of students´ utterances, as students´ performance will be dependent on a specific context of use. Language learning and production (accuracy and fluency) are both a long and hard process that cannot be achieved without external motivation. Students must be trained to take part in real life communicative situations without being constrained by the burdens of grammar. Grammar helps performance but no longer rules or dominates the whole communicative exchange.

With projects students are provided with a handful of tasks that move forward to a specific aim. Language efficiency is now based on communication without the interference of grammar. Language instruction is no longer about the number of correct answers a student may get in "fill in the gaps" activities or multiple choice tasks. It is about getting the message across, conveying attitudes, emotions and a whole cluster of aims. Grammar is about what you have to say. Communication is more about what you want to say. It is one thing to be accurate and quite another to be fluent. Language serves a higher purpose as it becomes a social function, a cultural exchange inasmuch as language is

communication. Projects bring freedom, social abilities and a variety of skills to relate to the world and to students´ surrounding environment, as language becomes functionally relevant. It would be erroneous to view language just as a set of rules with no purpose behind it. With new teaching methods, language gives students a sense of ownership of their lives as they are in possession of what they want and they need to say.

Grammar has therefore been challenged by the advent of projects and communication. Attempts to escape the unbearable boredom of grammar instruction have led to the exhilarating alternative of learning through projects. The inconsistency within language instruction where there was no room for communication gave rise to projects to transcend the limitations of the old-fashioned yet still necessary system of accuracy over fluency. The interconnections between both worlds, between the present and the past, give cohesion to the whole process of language learning and this stimulates students´ performance.

Language learning has often been phrased in dichotomous terms: grammar or communication, fluency or accuracy and over the years teaching specialists may be for or against one or the other. But more often than not it is possible and necessary to be on both sides as the divorce between the two usually leads to the destruction of the whole idea of language learning. There should be no conflicting pressure of one method over the other but rather the need for a balance between the two.

Projects have now moved to the forefront of teachers´ interests. Communication and grammar are not a matter of improving or worsening students´ performance respectively. The connections between them can raise or boost language in action. This tacit ban against grammar must therefore be replaced by a system of interconnections. The advantages of projects will be discussed more fully in the activities that follow, where we will use the world of videogames and films to introduce students into Mead Halls and Beowulf´s struggles to defeat supernatural beings. Students spend hours in their desktops and mobile phones fighting monsters and evil creatures from all walks of magic realms. Their thumbs are the weapons that defeat dragons and foes in much the same way as Beowulf killed Grendel with his bare hands. Dragons, monsters, sea creatures, heroes and villains are all part of their cultural tradition and this takes us to traditional reciprocities between Beowulf´s sixth century literature and students´ twenty first century world. The monsters students defeat in videogames are the same as those Beowulf fights in Denmark.

The values suggested in Beowulf are linked to the position students occupy in videogames, films and comic books. They become heroes trying to defeat hideous monsters and evil creature just as Beowulf had to confront Grendel in Heorot Hall. Honour and courage are the guiding principles that create a strong bond between these two worlds. Videogames and films such as *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Hunger Games* or *Dungeons and Dragons* are the embodiment of such values, which are all part of students´ traditions. In order to bridge the gap between the past and the present, fiction and reality, 6th century literature and students´ 21st century world, we have to offer students a context they can relate to as a way to enthuse them into the literary world of the kennings and alliterations of Anglo-Saxon poetry.

II. PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

Title: Heroes and villains.

Aimed at: 3rd year of ESO.

Works selected: *Beowulf* and Lucille Ford´s poem "*Heroes we never name*".

Objectives:

- Students will learn to use literary texts as a source of information about the society in which they were written.
- Students will be able to carry out a project and to develop it with grammatically, syntactically and lexically correct sentences.
- Students will become familiar with a wide range of literary terms, including figures of speech, prosody and Old English lexicon and grammar.
- Students will demonstrate an ability to synthesize ideas from literary texts.

Time allotted: half a term.

Competences to be developed: sociocultural, historical and linguistic competence.

Assessment: the creation of a portfolio with the activities proposed.

Beowulf: a modern day hero?

Warm up task 1: Myths, legends and folk tales.

People all over the world and from all walks of life are used to telling stories. Before the advent of television or radio, story-telling was the only form of entertainment. Telling stories about experiences we have had dates back to the origins of mankind. Nowadays we tell stories about films that we have seen or events we may have witnessed. Stories are often passed on from one generation to the next. All of us still remember the stories that our grandparents told us as children and some ancient stories are still present nowadays in the form of legends, myths, folk tales or fairy tales. In order to introduce students into the origins of English literature we can start with a quick reminder of the differences between myths, legends and folk tales through a simple matching-up task.

A. It is a **semi-true story**, which is passed on from one person to another and from one generation to the next and is full of symbolism for a particular culture. It is usually based on a true story and contains **historic facts**. These stories usually involve heroes or fantastic or imaginary places and often refer to **spiritual beliefs** and mythical qualities. (**Answer**: *Legend*)

B. It is usually a traditional story with symbolic meaning which helps to explain **universal truths.** It is also characterized by the presence of **supernatural creatures**. (**Answer**: *Myth*)

C. It is a **popular story** in oral form that includes **fables or fairy tales**. (**Answer**: *Folk tales*)

Task 2. Students listen to a summary of the legend of *Beowulf* taken and adapted from a catchy song: Luftballons by Nena. This is a good opportunity to enthuse learners into Old-Saxon literature with the help of music. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yiBaSqO7n9U). There are many different activities that can be used to exploit a song, like the ones illustrated below.

Fill in the gaps.

Anglo-Saxon _____ from circa AD 750,
though it's based on history, most is just embellished story,
passed down by scops - _____ of tales,
mixed Saxon's _____ with Angles'.

Correct the mistakes.

Beowulf hero of ***Meats*_____**
in a world governed by ***Tale*_____**.
(...)

Cross out any extra words.

In revenge, dead Grendel's <u>evil</u> mother
comes to bite and kill the king's best warrior.   **(...)**

Use these words to fill in the gaps.

Slay, kinships, struck, golden, rage, fight, ladies

Back to Sweden he returns
to the _____ he has earned
until one day late in his life
his realm is _____ with fiery strife.
(...)

Complete the words.

    Cremated, buried by the **s_ _,**
the poem drifts into **e_ _ _ _,**
(…)

    Task 3. **Write down some key words that summarize the content of this song.**

> *King, monster, warrior (…)*

    Task 4. With the help of this song and the key words from the previous exercise, students summarize the story of *Beowulf* **in their own words.**

    Task 5. As part of vocabulary development, students complete the crossword with words from the song.
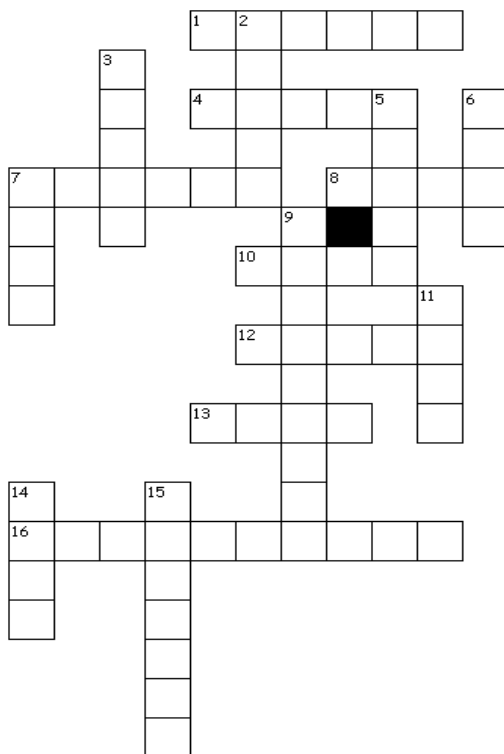
Across

1. Decapitar
4. Ir a la deriva
7. Conflicto
8. Guarida
10. Tiempos antiguos
12. Alrededor de
13. Matar
16. Embellecido

Down

2. Espeluznante
3. Hechizo
5. Señor
6. Sabiduría popular
7. Bardo
9. Relación de respeto entre Señor y caballeros
11. Edificio
14. Hazaña
15. Tipo de metáfora

    Task 6. To make the reading of *Beowulf* more appealing, we could start by discussing the world of videogames with our students. Medieval legends are all present in today´s computer games with their blend of magical elements, adventures, battles and conquests. The monsters, dragons, superpowers and the values of love, revenge and honesty are not alien to students as they have all been reproduced in these games to entertain them. Have you ever played video games? What are the values and features that you can encounter in *Beowulf* and in the heroes of the games you play? What features do video games and legends have in common, if any? If you enjoy videogames, you will also enjoy and learn to appreciate and cherish Anglo-Saxon literature by the hand of our old English hero *Beowulf*. List the qualities (physical or emotional) that describe a hero in the first column, and with the help of the song provide evidence of Beowulf possessing those features in

the other column. Think about heroes from videogames you play, comic books you have read or films you have seen. Make another list to describe the epic villain or monster.

Hero	Beowulf
A <u>hero</u> has to be: 1. *Strong* 2. ……………………………..	According to the song, <u>Beowulf</u> is: 1. ………………………………… 2. …………………………………

A villain/monster is always:	Grendel/the dragon is:

Task 7. We could work on the concept of "Heroes" by reading Lucille Ford´s poem "*Heroes we Never Name*", paying special attention to the title and to the last stanza ("*And what of the "everyday" heroes/Whose courage and efforts ne´er cease!/ Toilers who struggle and labor and strive/And hope for a future of peace?/Hats off to the worthy leaders; Their honor I´d ever acclaim – But here´s a cheer for the many brave,/The heroes we never name*"). With the help of this poem we could analyze the concept of the "everyday hero" in depth. Does a hero have to take part in great deeds (wars or battles) to be regarded as such? In pairs make a list with heroes from films, comic books, novels or TV series you are familiar with. What do they all have in common? Then think about a modern day hero. What would a modern Beowulf be like nowadays? It does not have to be a famous person like a footballer or a celebrity. Think about a member of your family (*your granddad who took part in the Spanish Civil War, your neighbour who saved a kitten from getting drowned…*). What special events did (s)he take part in to be considered a hero/heroine?

Task 8. We are now ready to plunge into the legend of *Beowulf*. The class can be divided into teams. We can pin up passages that contain different aspects of this legend on the walls. Students are given a battery of questions to answer (as in the example below). They circulate round the room and skim the different pages on the walls to find the answer to the questions provided. The first team to answer all the questions will be given some reward in order to make the activity exciting and competitive.

1. Beowulf is _____ lines long.   2. What is a <u>*scop*</u>?   3. When was *Beowulf* composed?

Task 9. Cryptogram. What is an epic poem? In pairs students try to come up with a definition of an epic poem. Then they make a list with epic poems in their own language? (e.g. *El Cantar del Mío Cid*). Are there any similarities and differences between *Beowulf* and *El Cid*? Students then solve the cryptogram to know more about epic poems.

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z
8				9							22						16		5						

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 A     E                 E               A   L         ,        E  R
 8  7  9  3 20 14    3 24  9 19    20  4  8  22 24  7 23    4  9 16 20 24 13  4

 ,     A  R  R  A  T        E     A           T     A                 R  T  A     T
 7  8 16 16  8  5 20 12  9    8 21 24 13  5    8  7    20 19  3 24 16  5  8  7  5

 E     E  T  ,        T  E                       L                 A     E  R        .
 9 12  9  7  5    24  2  5  9  7    20  7 12 24 22 12 20  7 23    8    15  9 16 24

       E        R  E  T  E        E     E  L           E     T
      21  9  2 24 16  9    5 15  9    11  9 12  9 22 24  3 19  9  7  5    24  2

       R     T           ,  E        E              E           L  A     E
      26 16 20  5 20  7 23    9  3 20 14    3 24  9 19  4    3 22  8 25  9 11

 A              R  T  A     T  R     L  E           E  E
 8  7    20 19  3 24 16  5  8  7  5    16 24 22  9    20  7    10  9  9  3 20  7 23

 A     R  E     R           T     E     R  E  A  T     E  E
 8    16  9 14 24 16 11    24  2    5 15  9    23 16  9  8  5    11  9  9 11  4

 A           T     R           A              T  R           R
 8  7 11    15 20  4  5 24 16 25    24  2    8    14 24 13  7  5 16 25    24 16

       L  T     R  E  .  T     E        E  R  E           A  L  L
      14 13 22  5 13 16  9    5 15  9 25    26  9 16  9    2 20  7  8 22 22 25

             R     T  T  E                          .
            26 16 20  5  5  9  7    11 24 26  7
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Task 10. Listening and reading. As a follow-up exercise, students read an extract of the legend of *Beowulf* as it was translated into modern English. They explain to their partner what they have read and make a list with the words they do not know. Then they listen to the same fragment in Old English. This is a good opportunity to talk about features of the Old English language like letters which are not present in English nowadays: þ, ð or æ, the use of inflections or the pronunciation and phonetic writing.

<p align="center">Ðunor cymð of hætan & of wætan = Thunder comes from heat and from moisture.</p>

The nouns *hæte*, 'heat', and *wæta*, 'moisture', both have the inflection *-an* because they are in the dative case.

Task 11. Figures of speech. How was Beowulf written. We begin by explaining the following terms: *kennings, alliterations and caesuras.*

a) Kenning: type of figurative language where a compound noun is used instead of a single word noun. Kennings taken from *Beowulf* include: ***sky candle** = the sun, **battle-sweat** = blood, **light of battle** = sword, **ring-giver** = king* and kennings taken from modern English are*: **bookworm** = a person who reads a lot, **rug rat** = toddler.*

b) Alliteration: a series of words with the same consonant sound, which are very common in tongue twisters as in: **P**eter **P**iper **P**icked a **P**eck of **P**ickled **P**eppers". They are also frequently used in the world of advertising: "You'll never put a **b**etter **b**it of **b**utter on your knife." (Slogan for *Country Life butter*) or "The **d**aily **d**iary of the American **d**ream." (A slogan of *The Wall Street Journal*).

c) Caesura: a break in a verse either marked by comas or the symbol (**||**) to indicate a pause or natural phrase end.

Once these key concepts are clear, students create their own kennings. For example: **God** = *world maker*, **clouds** = *sky cotton*. They will be encouraged to create power point presentations or flashcards containing a list of kennings that describe a specific term. They present their kennings to the class, who will have to guess the hidden concept, as in the example:

a love-giver	a heat-giver
a cake-maker	a sky-light
a child slapper	a tan-producer
a homework-helper	a heaven-face

a problem-solver   a moon-enemy   **Answer**: *the sun*
a discipline-monster   **Answer**: *a mother*

To practice alliteration, students can bring and read examples of tongue twisters in class as part of a light- hearted activity (*A good cook could cook as many cookies as a good cook who could cook cookies*).

And to practice prosody, students could read aloud a passage from *Beowulf* (both the Old English and modern English versions) and pretend to recite it with the sophistication and natural flow of a "*scop*". They must put an emphasis on *caesuras* and recite the poem with a dramatic impact. This will give us a chance to reinforce correct stress, rhythm and intonation. We could even run a *scop* competition for the best recitation of *Beowulf*.

Task 12. Writing and speaking. In small groups students prepare a speech to convince the class that they should be chosen to confront Grendel. They must talk about their courageous acts and their nobility of character, any special achievements, abilities or personal qualities that make them suitable to be selected by the king as the perfect warrior, able to annihilate a bloodthirsty monster. They must use examples of the 6th century vocabulary studied in class and, whenever possible, the figures of speech and prosody learnt in the lesson. Boasting and showing off should be the aim of this task.

Example*: My dear Lord, I am Beowulf, a fearless warrior of special courage and ability, with the strength of thirty men in each hand. I have come to you to help you defeat the immortal* monster that is terrorizing your kingdom…

Task 13. Vocabulary development: Monsters. Brainstorm evil creatures or monsters from ancient mythology or from the fictional world such as: *Monster, zombie, witch, hag, beast, giant, dragon, foe, fiend, villain, savage, werewolf, titan, barbarian, centaur, alien, dryad, satan, vampire, ghost, spirit, Hulk, phantom, ogre, medusa, devil, goblin.* Now match up these words (*Titan, zombie, vampire, witch, werewolf, alien, satan*) with the definitions below.

(1) The Lord of Evil, a rebellious angel that tempts humans to commit a sin. (2) A nasty person_____

(1) A giant in Greek mythology, son of Uranus and Gaea, who ruled the earth until he was defeated by Gods. (2) Big in size or powerful, someone who stands out for their great achievements._____

(1) Once a human, this creature came back to life, and it is often referred to as the walking dead. (2) Someone who behaves in a strange way due to exhaustion or illness. _____

(1) A dead person who comes back to life at night to suck human blood. (2) Those who prey on others._____

(1) An evil woman, usually old and ugly, who practices black magic. (2) Also, to deceive with charm_____

(1) A person who transforms into a wolf under a full moon. (2) Someone hairy_____

(1) A creature from another planet that comes from outer space. (2) Different in nature, character, appearance or nationality_____

Many of these words are used in everyday English nowadays. Students read the examples and fill in the gaps with the most suitable "monster" words:

a.   The new ship is a true _____ of the sea. (*Titan*)

b.   If I don´t have plenty of rest, I will be a _____ tomorrow. (*Zombie*)

c.   He described businessmen as _____ who made a living from the suffering of others. (*Vampires*)

d.   Softly-spoken, she _____ me with her lovely smile and charming personality. (*Witched*)

e.   It is completely _____ to my nature to deceive others. (*Alien*)

Task 15. Creative writing. The teacher makes a selection of pictures of monsters of different sizes, colours and appearance. Children´s books are a good source for pictures. Give one picture to each group of students (around 4/5 students per group). Students produce a creative piece of writing by describing the monster (physical features) and explaining its evil powers to spread terror among its kingdom. They present their stories to the class. Then they do the

opposite. They create a legend about a good monster that spreads peace and harmony around the world. For example, (this is an idea taken from one of my own student´s creative project), a monster that sneezes rainbows to paint the world with happiness and love. We should start by providing students with appropriate vocabulary and expressions (body parts: *wings, fangs, scales*; adjectives: *bloodthirsty, evil*...) as a springboard for production. Students should also be provided with a selection of sample descriptions to read through.

Task 16. Film viewing. To end this unit, students finally watch the film *Beowulf* and focus on the differences between the film and the book. They could study similarities and differences like how Grendel´s mother is portrayed or where Beowulf is buried. Do these differences have any significance? Why do you think that film adaptations from the book include such dramatic differences?

CONCLUSION

Projects manifest attempts to escape boredom in the bilingual classroom. It is advisable that students´ place in 6th century England should equal their place in the social and cultural structure in which they live. It makes little difference whether we discuss 6th or 21st century literature. What makes a difference is how students relate to these worlds. The only way to make the literature lesson work is to adopt the point of view of our students. We must look at teenagers from a variety of perspectives in order to adopt an appropriate teaching approach and adapt it to their needs. This includes looking at the world through the eye of students with a specific purpose in mind towards which the whole lesson is aimed. Students are an essential part of the language lesson, but they are often taken for granted. A successful lesson can only be derived from the way we treat our students as an indispensable factor to take into consideration when planning the literature lesson. It is "They", the students, and not "We" as teachers or "It" as the lesson itself that matters. As a result, their interests cannot be neglected as we must attempt to bridge the gap between fiction and reality, between the 6th century and the 21st century world by establishing appropriate interrelationships between the two realms. These two worlds are not so far apart as it may seem at first sight. They have elements in common. Beowulf and his enemy Grendel are present in the 21st century classroom if we succeed in demonstrating how such values as honour and courage prevail throughout history and are highly integrated into present day men and women.

The way students feel and think and the way their modern day heroes perceive the world around them is not different from the way Beowulf felt and reacted in 6th century England. The lesson must therefore be planned and devised with reference to the values students encounter in the world that surrounds them. Beowulf is Katniss from the Hunger Games, with her determination and courage. He is a superhero like Superman or the Incredible Hulk. He represents any of those heroes students encounter in comic books and films as the values these heroes embody do not differ from those present in our students´ surrounding environment.

The resistance to approach an old form of literature can only be overcome when the end corresponds to students´ everyday values and interests. In sum, the conditions conducive to the success or failure of the literature lesson arise from our ability to reduce the distance between students´ contemporary lives and Beowulf´s 6th century world.

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