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Developing communicative and interpersonal competences through research-based projects:

A student-centred approach

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Abstract

Presently, conducting research is a very relevant skill in academic and businessrelated contexts (Hunter et al., 2007). With this work, based on the idea that student-centred learning environments are likely to be more effective and conducive to a greater level of development of technical and interpersonal skills (Severiens et al. 2015), we aim at a) describing two project-works proposed to 2nd Office Management and Business Communication (OMBC) students that seek to integrate knowing and doing while developing students' research and interpersonal skills, and b) presenting students' perception of the activities. The collected data indicates that both technical and interpersonal competences were successfully addressed.

Introduction

In today's global and competitive labour market, mastering foreign languages is a valuable asset in an employe's skillset. As language and culture go hand in hand, intercultural competenceis also key for a company's success; in an ever more interconnected world, knowing how to communicate with stakeholders from diverse backgrounds is, therefore, an essential skill to master. Aware of this reality, the 1st cycle degree in OMBC, awarded by the Águeda Higher School of Technology and Management of the University of Aveiro, includes 9 second language for specific purposes curricular units (CU) in its course structure (Table 1), which corresponds to a total of 54 ECTS.

Table 1	OMBC	second	language	couses	
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1" YEAR				
English Language French/German/Spanish for Beginners	English - Translation Technologies French/German/Spanish Language			
24	YEAR			
English - Language and Business Communication French/German/Spanish - Customer Relations and Hospitality	English Documentation Technical French/German/Spanish			
y.	YEAR			
English - Language and Organisational Colture	-			

Following a learner-centred approach, two project-works were developed by 2nd year OMBC students during the 1st and 2nd semesters of academic year 2018/2019. These activities aimed not anguage proficiency, but also at developing cultural awareness, research competences and interpersonal skills. These projects as well as students' perception of the accomplished tasks are presented in the following sections.

Project 1: Profiling national cultures CU: English - Language and Business Communication (1⁴ semester) Number of students: 22 Task: to conduct research on a country of students' choice. The inclusion of the



Fig.1 Project 1 - targeted top

Product: gathered information was summarised in a poster and presented to class, simulating a conference setting. Purpose: development of English communication skills, cultural awareness, and research competences. Guidelines: the work plan and poster template were provided by the teacher. Assessment: work group (2 students); 40% of the CU's final grade.

Project 2: The impact of digital transformation on organisation

CU: English Documentation (2nd semester) Number of students: 20

Task: to conduct research on the impact of digital transformation on organisations, with a special focus on secretarial studies and business communication.

Product: research results were summarised in poster format. Purpose: consolidation of students' communication skills and research competences; pre-selection of posters for a real scientific event.

Guidelines: no targeted guidelines were provided; students had to more autonomously develop their own work plan and find the best approach to the

proposed theme. Assessment: work group (2/3 students); 20% of the final grade.

Students' perceptions

Before the end of the 2nd semester, students were invited to reflect upon the activities developed over the year and answer a short online questionnaire, which was anonymous and included questions related to the development of their competences. Answering the questionnaire was not mandatory and data from the 20 students enrolled in English Documentation was collected. A Likert-like scale from 1 to 5 was used. Data shows that, on average, students considered the accomplishment of both project-works as being very positive. As can be observed in Figure 2,

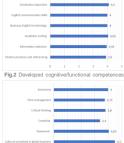


Fig.3 Developed interpersonal/social competence vocabulary expansion (4.1), academic

writing skills (4.0), English communication skills (4.0), and business English terminology (4.0) were the most developed cognitive/functional competences. As for interpersonal/ social competences (Figure 3), students considered that the most developed competence was cultural sensitivity (4.5); teamwork skills (4.0) and autonomy (4.0) also received two of the most positive ratings.

Involving students in higher stake settings

After the completion of Project 2, three groups were invited to respond to the IX Office Management Conference call for papers. After the blind review process, all three proposals were unconditionally accepted (Figure 4). More than a motivating and enriching extracurricular activity, the opportunity to participate in a scientific event and have their work published revealed the real-world impact of students' academic assignments. In an interview, involved students stated they would not only participate in an initiative of this nature again, they would also recommend it to their peers. Furthermore, they considered that responsibility, team cooperation and autonomy were the most developed skills in this process.

Conclusions

Considering the positive products of both projects, as well as students' perceptions of the developed activities, it can be concluded these student-centred activities were effective, with a beneficial impact in terms of academic achievement and personal growth. On the one hand, students' business English skills and intercultural competence were successfully addressed and developed; on the other hand, the proposed tasks gave students the opportunity to create a product" through research, teamwork and collaboration, and then to present it to an audience, which gives real-world relevance for learning and contributes to the development of a broader set of knowledge and competences that can be transferred to real scenarios. The chance to enter the workforce with experiences in the areas of research, team cooperation, critical thinking or even project management will constitute a significant advantage for these students.

References

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IX JORNADAS DE SECRETARIADO E ASSESSORIA	IX JORNADAS DE SECRETARIADO E ASSESSORIA	IX JORNADAS DE SECRETARIADO E ASSESSORIA	
Communicating in a mobile, connected workt the impact of digital transformation on the University of Awrino	AdRA and Prokura: two Portuguese companies on the path to digital transformation for insertance insertion to the second dimension	e future is now. The impact of digital undermation on business models and reports communication	

Fig.4 IX Office Management Conference: English Documentation participating students / posters

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