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"A Multiple Intelligences approach 2: project-based assessment"

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Abstract

The present paper presents a case study for primary students who learn English as a foreign language, as well as following the progress they made when they rediscovered their *world* and renamed it intuitively in the target language. The aim is the use of interactive multiple intelligences tasks that support the young learners to improve their awareness of the language system of regularities.

The research consists in implementing school assessment that highlights the abstract and concrete concepts that are at hand in the youngsters' environment. I also consider that intuitive techniques can support effective internalization of the concepts and in-depth learning.

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1. Introduction

Traditional English lessons did not allow games, songs and poems. They were permitted only at the end of the lessons and not every time. They were like a dessert that came along with students diligently to fulfil the tasks required. This is one of the observations used in a previous paper that I conducted with one of my university colleagues and that has been the predecessor of the present one. The main focus in this second paper is the assessment that needs to prove itself in order to establish the desired results among students.

Modern methods and in particular Multiple Intelligences Theory, bring along these desserts in the current activities. Along these there has been an observation made regarding the learning process extension to the period of assessment. This being the case, assessment becomes one of the main focuses in order to provide the best learning environments for our students. The literature provides both theoretical and practical information in support of these modern methods and regarding the manner in which a child assimilates new knowledge from the environment

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through active and intuitive teaching methods and as well comes with a range of extended forms of evaluation that may come to prove themselves as soon as they may be applied in class. The most complicated aspect is the one in which the children are aware of their learning strategies and want to be more and more involved. I felt that it is necessary to do a research that regards children groups who were exposed to different ways of assessing – one more traditional – done by the class teacher – and a more modern one – in the same way they were accustomed to learning a foreign language.

The hypothesis that I support is that "if we use the project assessment, then the students will be evaluated more accurately, thus permitting them to acquire knowledge of foreign language without effort". My target groups are children of primary school (second and third graders). I present below the research by means of a case study.

2. Assessment Method

Projects are one of the most fun and creative forms of evaluating students' progress. The Traditional English Class focuses on providing a more objective – or so they say – form of evaluation – though tests and oral examinations. These forms provide a fixed form in which students must produce language in a sterile and usually non-realistic way. These cases have reflected upon students and they came to dislike assessment periods, came to not understand the meaning and the use of evaluation and as well came to the point of losing their interest in that particular subject. This being the case, I found it to be very important to change the face of this process and to present it as a follow-up on the key concepts of learning.

The plan was to create a programme in which the students would have fun and come to like this exact period in the process of learning. The study was conducted on the same children that have started learning a foreign language intuitively, with the support of MIT. The method was implemented on a large period of time – 2 years and has come to proven itself as very effective.

One of the main advantages of using project assessment was the focus that shifted from the outer layer of knowledge to the inner one – the emotional intelligence. Children have become aware of their strengths and their weaknesses and have found different way to go past their differences. This shift was the biggest surprise given to me by the study itself and, at the same time, the biggest joy a teacher may receive from his/her students. This awareness brought the children to the verge of independence and gave them wings to dream and fly as high as they can, knowing that there is a way in which they can relate to others and others to them.

One of the downsides of the method was the fact that, dealing with such young learners, the difficulties of language and the barrier of less extended vocabulary may prove to be more than they could cope with. Some of the children felt excluded from their groups if their level of English was not as good as their colleagues'.

3. Case study and experimental results – 2nd Graders

Having experienced a lot of traditional teaching, I have come to the conclusion that something must be done in order to keep the children interested and fascinated by the study of English. I have observed a tendency of receptivity increase in those periods in which the focus changed from the topic onto the student production. Children tend to have a more pronounced way of saying what they like and what they don't, thus test became their enemies. Secondly, from a teacher's perspective, I could observe that I only tested some areas of my students' interests and strong points, never all or at least half of them. As children learn especially by doing and by undertaking connections between concepts and their own form of representing, so there must be a way in which they could benefit from one another's gains. The programme of project evaluation came into being. It had a fixed project at the end of each unit – changing only its form – from visual to auditive or mimicry. This form led the way of using more than word per session of assessment and at least 20 fixed structures, in new contexts and in their own phrases.

Project presentation and accuracy were the main focus of the research, although the background was focused on children's accumulation of new knowledge in English and assessment. Research on 2nd graders children group took place during one year of study. The available time was 5 hours per week. The children, in a total number of 74 students, were divided into two groups: those who had first contact with English and those who had studied English a year before.

Since the beginning of the study, the children were involved in presentation activities, as well as in the departure ones. Bruner (1983) claims that teachers must engage in a "struggle against passivity". Thus I chose different projects for each and every unit and as well added some extra project for the main holidays or the main events in the school year calendar. These allowed children to best express themselves in the best suitable way for each one and to provide a learning environment for all those present. The projects proved to be very attractive and appealing o children of all levels of English. A breakthrough was the presentation form in which every child got to sit in front of the class and have his/her moment of glory for 3 minutes. In order to get them started I chose a reward system for the entire class. Any project presentation would gain 1 point for the class. The class that first won the 10 points got an even greater prize: a set of winning Spectrum Points (an internal school reward that our school conducts monthly). This got them all started up and willing to help them class win. This act for the greater good gave the students the opportunity a chance of taking the stand and helping all their colleagues and themselves.

Thus, I aimed the understanding of structures and expressions in new contexts, through verbal repetition, mixed with suitable gestures and movements.

During the study, a mascot was used, personified in the role of a friend of the children's movement. This puppet, named Freddie, asks the children to perform certain actions such as "present your classmates", "talk about", "tell me", "describe to us". Freddie became the children's best friend and the person to trust will give you a good score no matter what. This being the case, oral presentation flourished in the second grade. The tough part was the beginning, like all beginnings, but the fact that they started talking in English when they were assessed was a groundbreaking moment for all English Lessons.

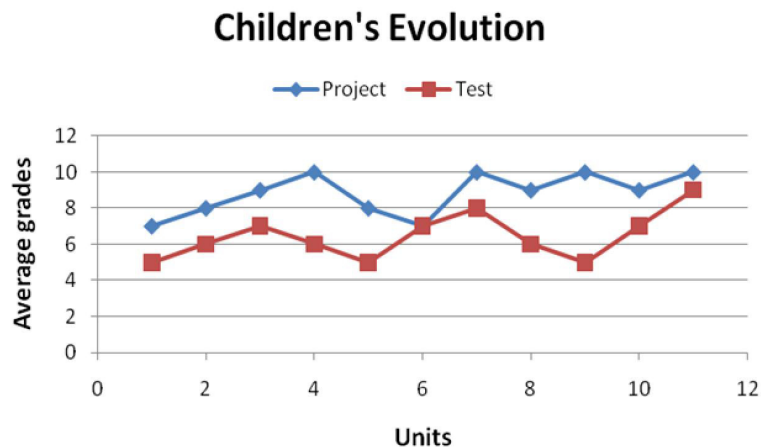


Fig.1. Children assessment chart

Another phase of the research was the introduction of some big and very big presentation posters. These contained everything the children needed in order to have their project started and finished during a 2-hours session. The elements were assessed through posters in various contests. They were put on the walls and assessed by colleague or by school colleagues or by themselves with a pre-designed chart of assessment criteria.

After these activities we needed to analyze students' progress in order to draw conclusions. As the children are asked to produce language and to formulate their own presentation shedule, progress could be verified only through systematic observation. Projects proved to be, as games always were, activities where children participate in a natural way, and they contribute in a friendly way to testing things that children should know or for the strengthening of certain skills. The systematic observation was made through watching the children's attitude and their answers to Freddie, to other mates and to the teacher. I also prepared a chart that allows data collection in terms of student progress.

At the end of this research period I can also speak about results. Although at the beginning projects seemed to be unreachable and their English presentation chaos, along the way, students perceived this tyope of assessment as

relevant – very relevant- and fun – very fun. The challenge faced was the love the children have for attention and these representations have proven themselves to give them a sense of fulfilment and even security. Almost all students managed to assess themselves and their colleagues in an objective and pertinent way, approximately 90% of students obtaining a good and very good score in the systematic observation.

When learning and assessing children learning a foreign language, there should always be remembered that children can understand more than they can say.

4. Case study and experimental results – 3rd Graders

Studies have shown that project tend to bring children closer to school and to life. They do not learn it if they don't use it! The situation being so, the project programme was extended to a higher level of students, the 3rd Grade students. Along a traditional testing system, the system of projects was kept and observed. If the progress for English study was so great in the previous year and if the desire for making projects was so great, why not? This being said, the students were assigned a new set of project-based tasks for assessment. Their full evaluation system was based on projects. This time a more complicated system came into place as the puppet Freddie that they so much loved was removed and the teacher replaced with what used to be the assistant.

The main ideas around which assessing in such a manner was developed are the following:

- learning develops with involvement;
- use of language to structure concepts;
- language rich assessment environments;
- development as learners.

This fourth idea concentrates on the importance of creating learners, not only students able only to reproduce a known fact. The development as learners, asks of the children to extend their language experience outside the controlled environment of the class – of any class that is. We also need to prepare the children for a more formal study of the language and its contents in order to meet later challenges and we can only do that by making them aware of what is going on around them. As the children develop as learners, both in their command of language and in the underlying concepts, the project presented becomes a kind of package for other questions.

At the starting part of these project assessments, students were once again reluctant to speak and to produce as much English communication as they could. This clear limitation was a downside of this evaluation form, but we can support this process by providing different questions and maybe even some activities to get them started. Another way in which I encouraged children to produce as much language and to acquire as much language as they could was through song and creative poems written for that special unit. Encouraging them, I provided them different alternatives, going to the point in which I asked them to try to have a tongue twister for every project that they would like to present their classmates. A means of checking for comprehension was even to use such tongue twister or to elicit choral production for the new language structure produced. For them, such means of encouragement were able to move the stone they had around them and started to produce different materials and started participating more and more in the class activities.

The pronunciation model was a part that the students came to understand a little bit later and they always came with some new language in these evaluation periods that made it easier for new language structures to come up in their current use of the English language. This was possible due to the number of students in a group: 12-14 children.

The purpose of this project assessment was especially to shift the focus from the teacher evaluation to the peer-evaluation structure and to make each and every student aware of the importance of participating in class.

Through the project work the children do with the stories behind these presentations they will develop the kind of literacy skills which will support their language learning, such as: sequencing, predicting, drawing conclusions, observing character development and so on. These skills are essential for developing the language competence that we are aiming for. Furthermore, they are essential if the children are to eventually reach an acceptable standard of written English, as well.

For many children – over more than 40 out of the total number of 74 students -, their only exposure to English is in the classroom with their teachers and thus it is very complicated for them to feel safe in using a new language and

preparing for class.. We know that language learning requires a lot of exposure and practice and this is why it is suggested to view all the situations in the classroom as potential learning situations and take maximum advantage of the time the children are present. This being the case, assessment is made even more difficult for such students to integrate themselves and to participate in class. The assessment was a negative situation in their opinion. But project-based assessment changed all that.

The project presentation establishes a means of evaluation without effort and without stress. By doing so, the environment is secure and it asserts a certain type of interaction. Moreover, the child will understand that it is also very good to speak a second language and they will also be provided with the environment in which they could do so.

5. Conclusions

The present research has shown that so far my hypothesis has not been denied! The project –based assessment establishes a secure environment .in which a constant language acquisition is of 50 or more words in a month's time. These words are not just *label words* as they are used in different main structures or/and to construct a functional language, proven by all project presentations seen so far.

In addition, there were no limitations to the present research, the results obtained having been unaltered during the whole period of the study.

The group that was involved has shown that a variety of tasks may be better understood and better dealt with if they have a finality suitable for the age group and the social environment in which the group activates. The dynamics of the project-based assessment allowed young students to enjoy effortless activities that motivated their constant learning. This project based assessment, in combination with an intuitive form of language acquisition proved to be a success in all classes, despite the minimal setbacks that occasionally appeared.

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