

Tom Hutchinson

INTRODUCTION TO PROJECT WORK



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Project work is not a new methodology. Its benefits have been widely recognized for many years in the teaching of subjects like Science, Geography, and History. Some teachers have also been doing project work in their language lessons for a long time, but for others it is a new way of working.

The aim of this booklet is to provide a simple introduction to project work. I shall explain what project work is, what benefits it brings, and how to introduce it into the classroom. I shall also deal with the main worries that teachers have about using project work in their classrooms.

The ideas in this booklet are based on the real classroom experience of a large number of teachers and students of English. I hope that after reading it, you too will be encouraged to try project work.

What is a project?

The best way to answer this question is to show some examples of projects. The following pieces of project work were done by students aged 11–15 in Slovakia and Hungary.

- Here is an example of a very straightforward and popular project: *My Favourite Animal*. The students choose an animal and write about it. They illustrate the project with pictures (photographs, postcards, etc.).

Project 1

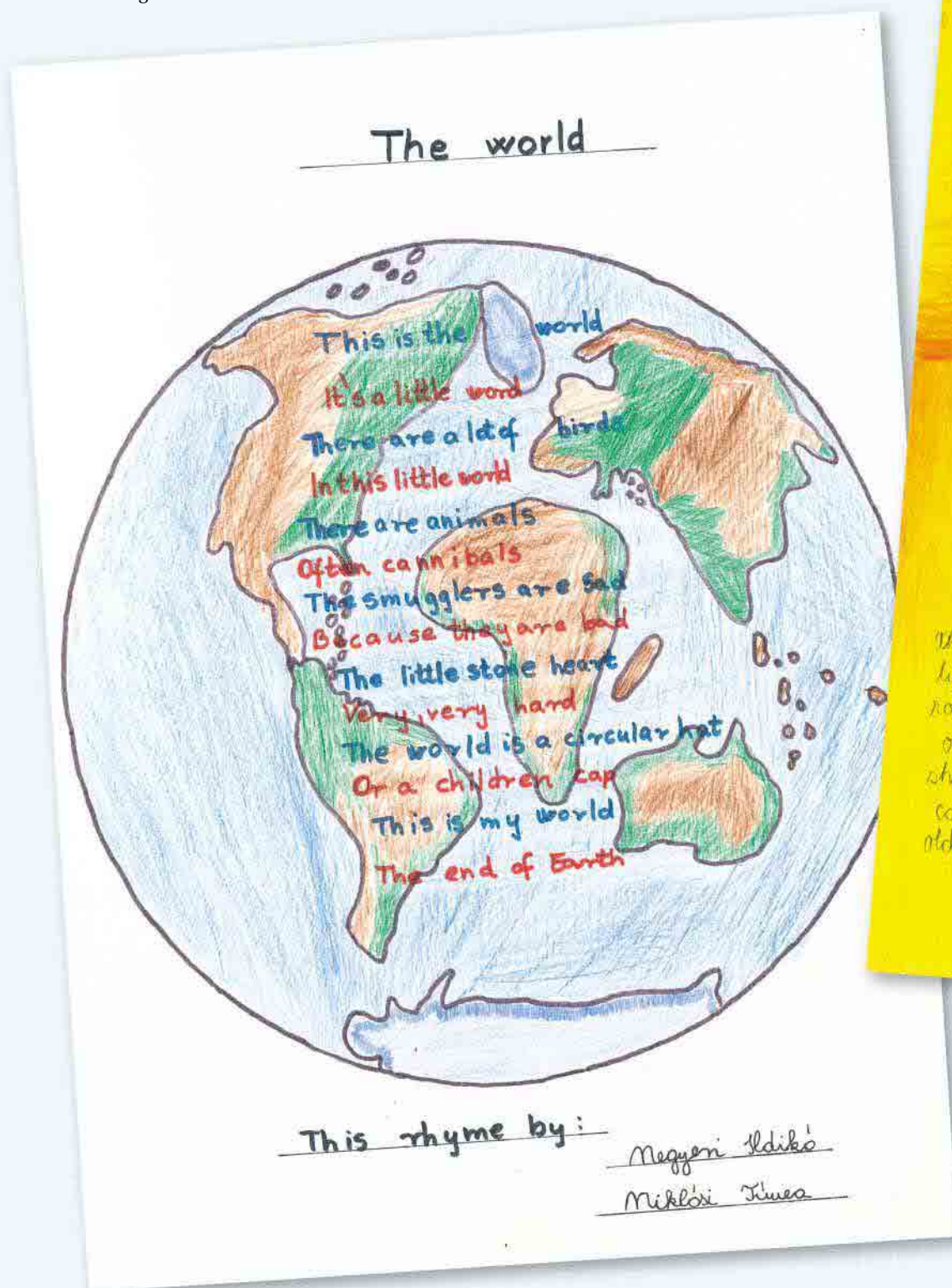


- 2 Projects allow students to use their imagination and the information they contain does not always have to be factual. In this example of a project which required students to introduce themselves and their favourite things, the students pretend they are a horse.

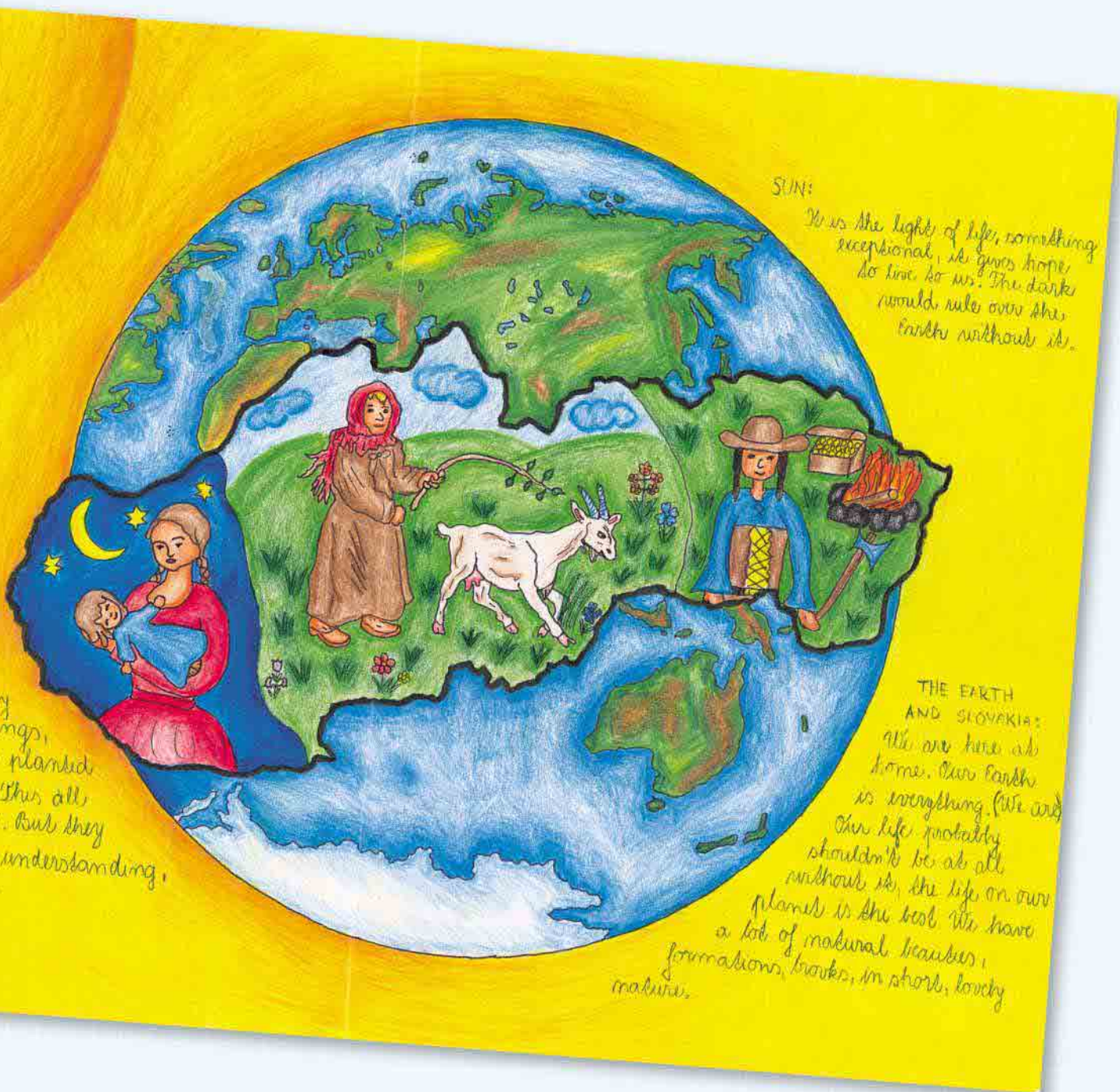


Project 2 by Katorina Pokorná and Klára Kucejová

- 3 One of the great benefits of project work is its adaptability. Here are two examples of the same project task. These two projects on *The World* were done by students at different levels. The first project is a poem using the simple present tense only. The second project, however, has been done by intermediate level students, who have been able to use a range of different structures.



Project 3a by Megyeri Ildikó and Miklósi Tímea



Project 3b

- 4 You can do projects on almost any topic. They can be factual (4) or fantastic (5). Projects can, thus, help to develop the full range of the learners' capabilities.

Project 4

2000

WHAT WOULD SURVIVE ? TO THE NEXT MILLENNIUM ?

3000

First of all love, friendship and life.

Love

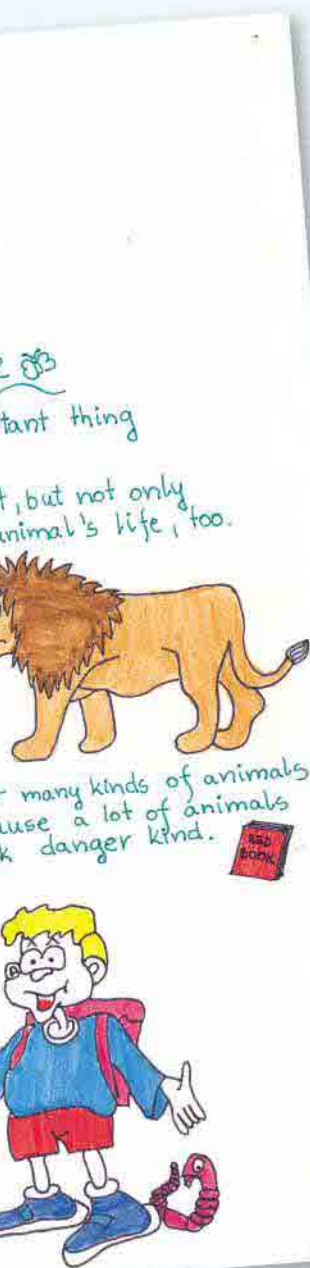
- is the most beautiful feeling
- it can be between two:
 - between boy and girl
 - between man and woman
 - between child and parent
 - between person and animal
- it's when you like somebody, help him with problems and be support for him
- it would survive, because it's very important for next life on the Earth

Friendship

- is very important, because it's ground of society
- when you're friend with somebody, you:
 - do crazy things
 - go together to the cinema
 - go together in town
 - go to shops
- your best friend help you with subject matter and with other problems.

Life

- is the most important in the world
- we would protect people's life, but...
- we would protect in danger, because are in red book



- 5 Projects are often done in poster format, but students can also use their imagination to experiment with the form. In Project 6 the student has used her creativity to produce a fashion project entitled *This Year's Fashions* in the shape of woman, while in Project 7 the student has been inspired to use the shape of mountains for his presentation on climbing.



Project 6



You will probably also note that project work can produce errors! Project work encourages a focus on fluency. Some errors of accuracy are bound to occur. I shall deal with this important issue on page 18.

Project 7 by Ivica Kukurová





What are the common characteristics of these projects?

Hard work

Each project is the result of a lot of hard work. The authors of the projects have found information about their topic, collected or drawn pictures, written down their ideas, and then put all the parts together to form a coherent presentation. Project work is not a soft option.

Creative

The projects are very creative in terms of both content and language. Each project is a unique piece of communication, created by the project writers themselves.

Personal

This element of creativity makes project work a very personal experience. The students are writing about aspects of their own lives, and so they invest a lot of themselves in their project.

Adaptable

Project work is a highly adaptable methodology. It can be used at every level from absolute beginner to advanced and with all ages.

As the examples show, there is a wide range of possible project activities, and the range of possible topics is limitless. Here are a few more possible topics and tasks:

A project on *Families* might involve:

- labelling a photograph of your family
- drawing a family tree and writing about your ancestors
- writing a story about your parents' or grandparents' life
- comparing life today to life in your parents' childhood
- comparing different kinds of families in different countries
- a survey on who does what in the home
- writing a play about a family argument
- writing a poem about your family

A project on *Food* might involve:

- writing recipes
- conducting surveys on favourite foods, what people eat for breakfast, etc.
- compiling a tourist guide to the restaurants in your town
- describing eating habits in your country
- finding out about and comparing the diets of rich and poor countries
- writing about diet and health

A project on *Space* might involve:

- finding out and writing about early space flights
- drawing space creatures
- planning a city on the Moon
- writing a science fiction story or play
- making an advertisement or brochure about holidays in space
- describing the latest space flight
- finding out and writing about the planets, how rockets work, the problems of living in orbit, etc.

These are just a few examples of possible topics and activities for project work. Which activities are actually done will, of course, depend on many factors including the age, level, and interests of the learners, the resources available, and the constraints of time and space. But hopefully the examples given here indicate the potential range of things that you can do.

So, let us now return to the original question: What is a project? In fact, the key to understanding project work lies not in the question *What?*, but rather in the question *Who?* Who makes the decisions? A project is an extended piece of work on a particular topic where the content and the presentation are determined principally by the learners. The teacher or the textbook provides the topic, but as the examples in this section show, the project writers themselves decide what they write and how they present it.

This learner-centred characteristic of project work is vital, as we shall see when we turn now to consider the merits of project work.

It is not always easy to introduce a new methodology, so we need to be sure that the effort is worthwhile. What benefits does project work bring to the language class? This teacher from Spain expresses it very well:

Pupils don't feel that English is a chore, but it is a means of communication and enjoyment. They can experiment with the language as something real, not as something that only appears in books. (Marisa Cuesta, Spain)

As this teacher indicates, project work captures better than any other activity the two principal elements of a communicative approach. These are:

- a *a concern for motivation*, that is, how the learners relate to the task.
- b *a concern for relevance*, that is, how the learners relate to the language.

We could add to these a third element:

- c *a concern for educational values*, that is, how the language curriculum relates to the general educational development of the learner.

Let's look at these in a bit more detail:

a Motivation

If I could give only one piece of advice to teachers it would be this: Get your learners to enjoy learning English. Positive motivation is the key to successful language learning, and project work is particularly useful as a means of generating this. If you talk to teachers who do project work in their classes, you will find that this is the feature that is always mentioned: the students really enjoy it. But why is project work so motivating?

Personal

The first and most important reason has already been mentioned on page 10. Project work is very personal. There is nothing simulated about a project. The students are writing about their own lives: their house, their family, their town, their dreams and fantasies, their own research into topics that interest them. What could be more motivating, particularly to the young learner? And because it is such a personal experience, the meaning and the presentation of the project are important to the learners. They will thus put a lot of effort into getting it right.

Learning through doing

Secondly, project work is a very active medium. It is a kind of structured playing. Students aren't just receiving and producing words, they are:

- collecting information
- drawing pictures, maps, diagrams, and charts
- cutting out pictures
- arranging texts and visuals
- colouring
- carrying out interviews and surveys
- possibly making recordings, too

Project work is learning through doing.

Sense of achievement

Lastly, project work gives a clear sense of achievement. It enables all students to produce a worthwhile product, as another teacher from Spain comments:

There is feedback from the students as they realize what they can do with the English they have learned. (Jesús-Angel Vallejo Carrasco, Spain)

This feature of project work makes it particularly well suited to the mixed ability class, because students can work at their own pace and level. The brighter students can show what they know, unconstrained by the syllabus, while at the same time the slower learners can achieve something that they can take pride in, perhaps compensating for their lower language level by using more photos and drawings.

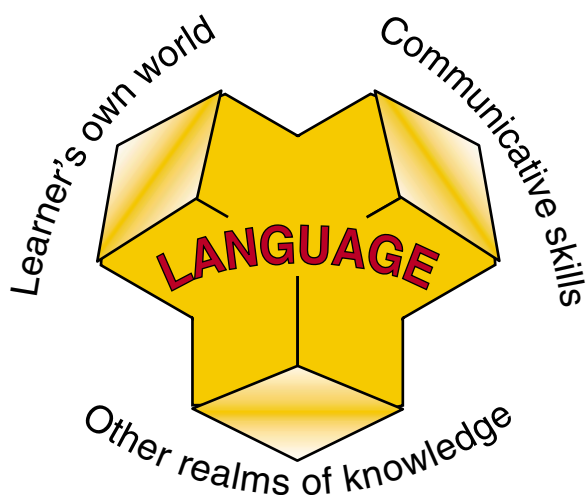
b Relevance

In looking at the question of motivation, I have been most concerned with how students feel about the process of learning, that is, the kinds of activities they do in the language class. An equally important and related question is how the learners feel about what they are learning, the language. A foreign language can often seem a remote and unreal thing. This inevitably has a negative effect on motivation, because the students don't see the language as relevant to their own lives. If learners are going to become real language users, they must learn that English is not only used for talking about things British or American, but can be used to talk about their own world. Project work helps to bridge this relevance gap.

Integration of language with other skills

Firstly, project work helps to integrate the foreign language into the network of the learner's own communicative competence. As this diagram shows, project work creates connections between the foreign language and the learner's own world. It encourages the use of a wide range of communicative skills, enables learners to exploit other spheres of knowledge, and provides opportunities for them to write about the things that are important in their own lives.

Project work and integration



Real needs of language learners

Secondly, project work helps to make the language more relevant to learners' actual needs. When students from Athens or Barcelona or Milan use English to communicate with other English speakers, what will they want to talk about? Will it be London, New York, Janet and John's family, Mr Smith's house? Surely not! They will want, and be expected, to talk about aspects of their own lives – their house, their family, their town, and so on. Project work thus enables students to rehearse the language and factual knowledge that will be of most value to them as language users.

Language and culture

This last point raises a very important issue in language teaching: the relationship between language and culture. It is widely recognized that one of the most important benefits of learning a foreign language is the opportunity to learn about other cultures. However, it is important, particularly with an international language such as English, that this is not a one-way flow, like this:

Language and culture in a traditional approach



The purpose of learning a foreign language is to make communication between two cultures possible. English, as an international language, should not be just for talking about the ways of the English-speaking world. It should also be a means of telling the world about your own culture. Project work helps to create this approach. As the diagram below shows, with project work the language acts as a bridge enabling two cultures to communicate with each other.

Language and culture in a project approach



c Educational values

There is a growing awareness among language teachers that the process and content of the language class should contribute towards the general educational development of the learner. Project work is very much in tune with modern views about the purpose and nature of education.

Independent investigation

Firstly, there is the question of educational values. Most modern school curricula require all subjects to encourage initiative, independence, imagination, self-discipline, co-operation, and the development of useful research skills. Project work is a way of turning such general aims into practical classroom activity.

Cross-curricular studies

Secondly, cross-curricular approaches are encouraged. For language teaching this means that students should have the opportunity to use the knowledge they gain in other subjects in the English class. Project work clearly encourages this. Here, for example, is a project which required knowledge of the history and geography of Slovakia.



Project 8 by Anna Maňková

And here are project tasks that bring in knowledge from Geography and Science classes: They are taken from the *Project* series of books.

PROJECT 3

Make a project about a country.

- 1 Choose a country. Find some information about it. Try an atlas, an encyclopaedia, the Internet, travel agencies, and the country's embassy.
- 2 Write a few paragraphs about the country.
- 3 Illustrate your text with a map and pictures.

PROJECT 4

Make a poster about an environmental problem.

- 1 Choose your topic.
- 2 Do some research to find information and illustrations.
- 3 Design your poster and write your text.

In this section I have considered the merits of project work in terms of the process of learning, language content, and educational values. From all three points of view, project work emerges as a practical methodology that puts into practice the fundamental principles of a communicative approach to language teaching. It can thus bring considerable benefits to your language classroom.

In the previous section we looked at the benefits of project work. You are probably wondering by now, what's the catch? For every benefit there is a price to be paid, and in this section I'll take a look at some of the main worries that teachers have about project work.

a Noise

Teachers are often afraid that the project classroom will be noisier than the traditional classroom and that this will disturb other classes in the school. But project work does not have to be noisy. Students should be spending a lot of the time working quietly on their projects: reading, drawing, writing, and cutting and pasting. In these tasks, students will be working on their own or in groups, but this is not an excuse to make a lot of noise.

Project work is not inherently any noisier than any other activity. Obviously there will be a certain amount of noise. Students will often need to discuss things and they may be moving around to get a pair of scissors or to consult a reference book. And some activities do require a lot of talking. If students are doing a survey in their class, for example, there will be a lot of moving around and talking. However, this kind of noise is a natural part of any productive activity.

Indeed, it is useful to realize that the traditional classroom has quite a lot of noise in it, too. There is usually at least one person talking (and teachers generally talk rather loudly!) and there may be a tape recorder playing, possibly with the whole class doing a drill. There is no reason why cutting out a picture and sticking it in a project book should be any noisier than 30 or 40 students repeating a choral drill.

The problem is not really a problem of noise, it is a concern about control. Project work is a different way of working and one that requires a different form of control. In project work students are working independently. They must, therefore, take on some of the responsibility for managing their learning environment. Part of this responsibility is learning what kind of, and what level of, noise is acceptable. When you introduce project work you also need to encourage and guide the learners towards working quietly and sensibly. Remember that they will enjoy project work and will not want to stop doing it because it is causing too much noise. So it should not be too difficult to get your students to behave sensibly.

b Time

Project work is time-consuming. It takes much longer to prepare, make, and present a project than it does to do more traditional activities. When you are already struggling to get through the syllabus or finish the textbook, you will probably feel that you don't have time to devote to project work, however good an activity it may be.

There are two responses to this situation. The first is a practical response and the second more of a philosophical point.

Outside the class

Firstly, not all project work needs to be done in class time. Obviously, if the project is a group task, most of it must be done in class, but a lot of projects are individual tasks. Projects about *My Family*, *My House*, etc. can be done at home. You will be surprised how much of their own time students will gladly devote to doing projects.

Rich learning experiences

Secondly, when choosing to do project work you are making a choice in favour of the quality of the learning experience over the quantity. It is unfortunate that language teaching has tended to put most emphasis on quantity, i.e. as much practice as possible of each language item. And yet there is little evidence that quantity is really the crucial factor. What really matters in learning is the quality of the learning experience.

Project work provides rich learning experiences: rich in colour, movement, interaction and, most of all, involvement. The positive motivation that projects generate affects the students' attitude to all the other aspects of the language programme. Learning grammar and vocabulary will appear more relevant because the students know they will need these things for their project work.

Think back to your own learning, or for that matter to your life in general. It is the rich experiences that you remember. Looked at in this way, project work is actually a very cost-effective use of time. There is no substitute for quality.

c Use of L1 (the mother tongue)

But surely the students will spend all their time speaking their mother tongue? This is true to a large extent. It is unlikely that most students will speak English while they are working on their project. However, rather than seeing this as a problem, we should consider its merits.

Natural working environment

Firstly, it is a natural way of working. It is a mistake to think of L1 and L2 (the language being learnt) as two completely separate domains. Learners in fact operate in both domains, constantly switching from one to the other, so it is perfectly natural for them to use L1 while working on an L2 product. As long as the final product is in English it doesn't matter if the work is done in L1.

Realistic translation work

Secondly, project work can provide some good opportunities for realistic translation work. A lot of the source material for projects (leaflets, maps, interviews, texts from reference books, etc.) will be in the mother tongue. Using this material in a project provides useful translation activities. In projects on *Life in the Past* students usually have to interview people in their native language but report their findings in English.

Writing practice

Thirdly, there will be plenty of opportunities in other parts of the language course for learners to practise oral skills. Project work should be seen as a chance to practise that most difficult of skills, writing. There is no need to worry if the students use L1 to discuss it.

d Different levels

Some teachers are concerned that without the teacher's firm control the weaker students will be lost and will not be able to cope. Again, the answer to this worry is to see the positive side of it. Not all students want or need the teacher's constant supervision. By encouraging the more able students to work independently you are free to devote your time to those students who need it most. It is often the case in the traditional classroom that the weaker students are neglected because the brighter students take more than their share of the teacher's attention.

It would be wrong to pretend that project work does not have its problems. It certainly demands a lot of the teacher in terms of preparation and classroom management (see pages 16 and 17). It requires a change of attitude about what is really valuable in language teaching, and you also need to work with your students to develop a responsible working environment. But, in practice, most teachers find that their worst fears about project work do not materialize. The work is so motivating for the students that it produces its own momentum. The noise of the well-managed project classroom is the sound of creativity. And that's what we want to encourage, not suppress.

4 GETTING STARTED

So, you've decided to introduce project work in your classroom. Good. How do you get started? The key to successful project work is good preparation.

a You'll need some basic materials and equipment:

- scissors
- rulers
- glue
- large sheets of paper or card

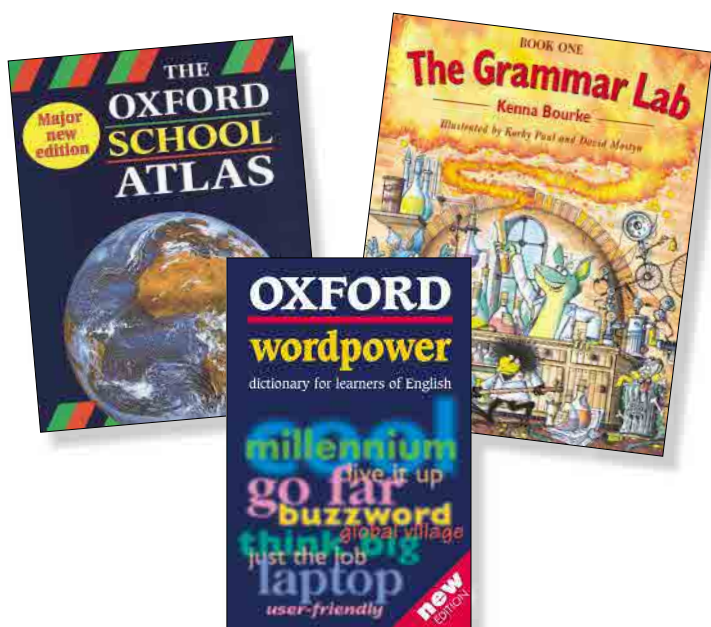
b It's a good idea to have some reference books available:

- a dictionary
- a grammar book
- an atlas

- The material does not have to be in English. Indeed, as already noted, material in L1 can provide opportunities for some creative translation work.
- You do not have to provide all the material yourself. Encourage the students to provide material as well. They will often have old comics and magazines at home.

d Start with concrete, small-scale activities. Don't start with an ambitious project like *Space Travel*. Try something simple and well-defined. For example, you could start with a project such as the one on *Communication in Project 1*.

PROJECT 1



Students will want to know new words or constructions for expressing their ideas. And if you haven't got reference books available, the students will ask you! This will not only become tiresome for you, but it also misses out on an opportunity for learners to become more independent and to develop some useful research skills.

c Try to keep a stock of magazines, maps, and leaflets in the class. You need to develop squirrel habits! Collect any material you can find. It's amazing how much printed material is available free from shops, travel agents, banks, etc. Remember two important points:



A straightforward project like this is a good way of introducing the students to project work. From this they can progress to more extensive projects.

- e Teach your learners how to do project work. Before starting any project, discuss with the students how they will tackle it: What materials will they need?, Where will they get them?, etc. If the project requires a particular kind of activity, such as an interview, a graph, or a chart, make sure the students know how to do it. Give some practice activities if necessary. Use each project not only to learn and practise language but also to help your students to learn a bit more about project work.

- f Project work works best when it comes at the end of a chapter or unit. In this way you teach and practise the language in the unit that the students will need to express their ideas in their project. So, for example, before a project on *Free Time* you would first teach or revise the names of sports and hobbies, days of the week, etc. and some useful grammar, such as the present simple. In this way the learners are provided with the basic tools for doing their project.

But do bear in mind that you can't anticipate all the language the learners will need. Nor do you need to. A lot of language learning goes on during the actual project work itself, as students look for new words or expressions. In project work, learners not only learn new vocabulary, they also develop the skills of looking for words they do not know or alternative ways of expressing what they want to say.

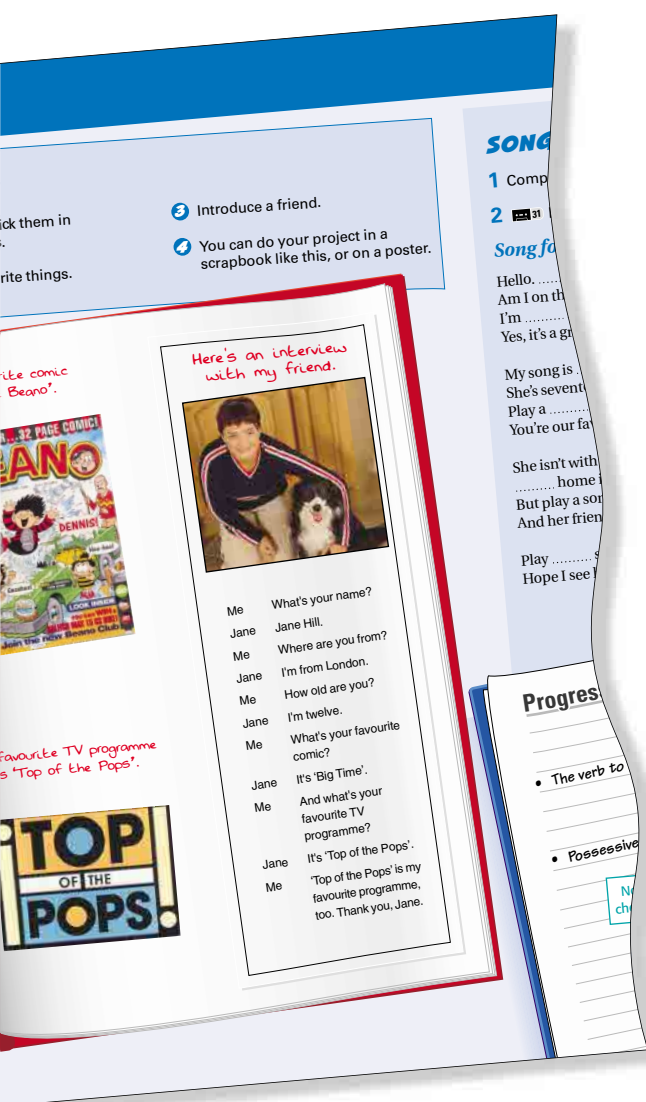
- g One of the most important features of project work is presentation. The form of presentation you choose will depend on the topic, the way of working, and the needs of your teaching situation. But it is important to present and preserve projects neatly. You don't want lots of bits of paper lying around. Projects can be presented in two ways:

- *as a poster.* Students arrange their pictures and written texts on a large sheet of paper or card. The poster can then be displayed on the classroom walls. This is a particularly useful form of presentation for group projects.
- *as a book.* Students keep their own project book. This is the best format for individual projects. Students can make two kinds of book. They can do their projects in a large format (A4 or A3) scrapbook. Alternatively they can make a project file: students do their projects on separate pieces of paper and then collect them together in a ring file. This is more flexible than a scrapbook, but it is less tidy and is probably not so suitable for younger learners. If students have a project book, encourage them to personalize their book with some decoration on the cover.

Do remember that the value of project work is greatly increased if students display their work. Public display gives students an added incentive to do their best work. Both books and posters can be displayed.

Be prepared

Preparation, then, is the key to making project work a success. Prepare your classroom by providing some basic materials. Prepare your students by practising the language, skills, and techniques they will need. Most important of all, prepare yourself for a new way of working that is challenging but very satisfying.



Assessment of project work is a difficult issue to tackle. This is not because project work is difficult to assess, but because assessment criteria and procedures vary from country to country. In this section I will give some guidelines for assessing projects, but, of course, you know best what is possible in your own system.

There are two basic principles for assessing project work:

a Not just the language!

The most obvious point to note about project work is that language is only a part of the total project. Consequently, it is not very appropriate to assess a project only on the basis of linguistic accuracy. Credit must be given for the overall impact of the project, the level of creativity it displays, the neatness and clarity of presentation, and most of all the effort that has gone into its production. There is nothing particularly unusual in this. It is normal practice in assessing creative writing to give marks for style and content, etc. Many education systems also require similar factors to be taken into account in the assessment of students' oral performance in class.

So a wide-ranging 'profile' kind of assessment that evaluates the whole project is needed.

b Not just mistakes!

If at all possible, don't correct mistakes on the final project itself, or at least not in ink. It goes against the whole spirit of project work. A project usually represents a lot of effort and is something that the students will probably want to keep. It is a shame to put red marks all over it. This draws attention to the things that are wrong about the project over the things that are good. On the other hand, students are more likely to take note of errors pointed out to them in project work because the project means much more to them than an ordinary piece of class work.

So what do you do about errors? There are two useful techniques:

- Encourage the students to do a rough draft of their project first. Correct this in your normal way. The students can then incorporate corrections in the final product.
- If errors occur in the final product, correct in pencil or on a separate sheet of paper attached to the project. A good idea suggested to me by a teacher in Spain is to get students to provide a photocopy of their project. Corrections can then be put on the photocopy.

But fundamentally, the most important thing to do about errors is to stop worrying about them. Projects are real communication. When we communicate, we do the best we can with what we know, and because we usually concentrate on getting the meaning right, errors in form will naturally occur. It's a normal part of using and learning a language.

Students invest a lot of themselves in a project and so they will usually make every effort to do their best work. Remember, too, that any project will only form part of the total amount of work that the students produce in the language course. There will be plenty of opportunities to evaluate accuracy in other parts of the language programme. There is much more to language learning and education than just accuracy and it is a pity to make project work a hostage to accuracy-orientated assessment systems. Project work provides an opportunity to develop creativity, imagination, enquiry, and self-expression, and the assessment of the project should allow for this.

In this booklet I have concentrated on small-scale written projects, primarily for young learners and teenagers, but project work is an extremely adaptable methodology:

- a There are many examples around the world of the use of projects with adult learners, in ESP classes, and in teacher training, too.
- b Project work can also be expanded into more ambitious activities. Here are some examples of some more advanced projects.

PROJECT 4

Tell the story of your country.

- 1 Find some information in your books or on the Internet. Or you can talk to your History teacher.
 - How and when did it become a united country?
 - Have its borders changed?
- 2 Write about your country. Illustrate your project with maps.

Write and act a play about 'friends'.

- 1 Decide these things.
 - What message do you want your play to have?
 - Who are the characters?
 - What happens?
- 2 Write your play.
- 3 Act out your play. You can record it too.

Make a project about teenage health.

- 1 Choose some topics to write about, e.g. food, exercise, drugs.
- 2 Make some rules for living a healthy life.
- 3 Find some pictures to illustrate your ideas.
- 4 Present your ideas as an information leaflet or as a short TV programme.

- c As the last two projects suggest, other media can be used, too. Projects using audio-recordings or even video-recordings require a lot of planning, but they can be highly motivating. Students can make mini radio or TV programmes.

Project work must rank as one of the most exciting teaching methodologies a teacher can use. It truly combines in practical form both the fundamental principles of a communicative approach to language teaching and the values of good education. It has the added virtue in this era of rapid change of being a long-established and well-tried method of teaching.

In this booklet I have tried to answer the main questions that teachers have about project work. I hope that it will encourage you to try it in your own classroom. Once you have tried it I am sure that you will find it a rich and rewarding experience both for your students and for yourself. In talking to many teachers about project work, I have met some who have never tried it and I have met some who have tried it and now use it regularly, but I have never met a teacher who has tried project work and then given it up. So try it yourself. You'll wonder how you ever managed without it!

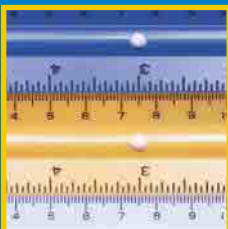
I'll leave the last word to a teacher in Italy:

As far as the teacher is concerned, it was certainly hard work to organize the students' writing and everything, but it was very rewarding to go into the classroom and hear 'Oh, good. Today it's our project lesson. I love English!' (Mavi Marino Greco, Italy)

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Project work is not a new methodology. Its benefits have been widely recognized for many years in the teaching of subjects like Science, Geography, and History. Some teachers have also been doing project work in their language lessons for a long time, but for others it is a new way of working.



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