

PROJECT-BASED LEARNING IN THE 21ST CENTURY: ON THE EXPERIENCE OF DOING A GERMAN-ISRAELI LITERATURE-BASED ENGLISH PROJECT IN HIGH SCHOOL

A. TROITSKI

Katzenelson High School, Kfar Saba, Israel

The article presents a description of the cross-cultural project which took place in 2018/2019. Detailed explanation of each project stage is provided. Correlation between the activities used in the project and the 21st century skills that are crucial for successful student integration in the real world is shown. The author explains how teaching different disciplines could be combined in one project, making it a meaningful learning experience.

Key words: *meaningful learning, Project-Based Learning, English projects, social interaction, cross-cultural communication, intercultural dialogue, teaching about the Holocaust in the 21st century*

Background

Project-based learning (PBL), a widely used instructional method aimed at problem solving through research and collaboration [5], is critical for success in the 21st century. Since projects transform classroom instruction from the theoretical, teacher-centered approach into a more practical and student-centered experience involving real-life activities which incorporate those 21st century skills and integrate technology [3], students find more personal meaning in learning (proven that the material chosen is relevant and the task given is well-designed) and teachers are more successful in achievement of their educational goals [1]. Project-based learning fits the new educational framework which requires critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, and various forms of communication. Students do not need to learn and remember information like they used to in the past (i.e., the purpose of formal education is not “to give knowledge”); rather, they need to acquire and use higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) and learn to work as a team [6].

Projects are built in the English Curriculum in the Israeli system of twelve-year secondary education. Language Department for English Language Education of the Ministry of Education has recently revised and updated the Curriculum, which adheres to four main goals the students are expected to achieve on completion of the 12th grade:

- interact effectively in a variety of situations;
- access and make use of information from a variety of sources and media;
- present information in an organized manner;
- appreciate literature and other cultures, and develop linguistic awareness.

In accordance with the Principles underlying meaningful learning and meaningful teaching [4, p. 8], English teachers are supposed to engage students in activities that the latter feel are useful in their lives. Therefore, language tasks must be active, constructive, authentic, and cooperative. English projects provide an opportunity to meet these requirements and make students’ learning experience more meaningful.

How It All Started

The English staff of Katzenelson High School (Kfar Saba, Israel) are free to choose a project to do as part of the curriculum in the 12th grade: it could be a literature-based project or any other project a teacher finds meaningful. Last year (academic year 2018/2019) I was contacted by a retired vice-principal of our school who suggested a pilot project related to *Stolpersteine* [8] – a German project commemorating the Holocaust victims. She introduced me to a German school teacher willing to cooperate and do an international project with his high school students. As I had already planned a project for my 12th grade as part of the curriculum for that school year, I decided to try a pilot with my 11th graders.

Initially, the German-Israeli Project was called “Stumbling Stones” (the English for *Stolpersteine*) and was meant to engage high school students in authentic communication through establishing rapport with their peers from abroad in order to contribute to commemoration of Jews murdered during the Holocaust. So the topic was defined as follows:

Topic:

Commemoration of German Jews who fell victim to the Nazi regime.

Project participants:

The German class consisted of 30 10th grade students of Gunetzrhainer-Schule – Staatliche Realschule in Miesbach, Bavaria, Germany. Teacher: Markus Freundorfer, History and English teacher. The group was composed of intermediate level students, who had sufficient speaking and writing skills in English, had 4 English lessons and 2 History lessons out of 30 lessons per week.

The Israeli class consisted of 33 11th grade students of Katzenelson High School in Kfar Saba, Israel. Teacher: Anastasia Troitski, English teacher. The group was composed of students having different majors: biotechnology, music, chemistry, basketball, and other. The students had 5 English lessons per week, their language level ranging from intermediate to upper-intermediate.

Rationale:

The project was planned to serve several objectives:

- Students will interact effectively in English in different social contexts with people from varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds, using appropriate register.
- Students will develop and use research skills through the selection of the Internet sources on the subject.
- Students will express ideas and opinions, providing in-depth explanations.
- Students will create, collaborate and respond to a variety of written texts in print or online, showing awareness of context, audience and purpose.

Preparation Stage and Pre-Requisite Knowledge and Skills

Before we actually started planning the project stages, I thought of the students getting to know one another. Markus and I collected and shared the data needed to introduce the Project to the students and start bringing them together. Engaging the students in cross-cultural communication was one of the essential goals of our

project, so I included the cultural component for my students, emphasizing: 1) sensitivity and respect for representatives of other communities that have different cultural conventions, language being an integral part of those; 2) political correctness in cross-cultural communication; 3) respect for privacy, which may be different across cultures and countries.

Process: Project Stages and Adjustments

By the time of the planned beginning of the project, my school schedule had undergone certain changes which caused the shift in the literature program dates for teaching a short story I had chosen for the 11th grade. As a result, I had to begin reading the story (*Address Unknown* by Kathrine Kressmann Taylor [11]) in class before the planned dates and redesign the project stages adjusting them to the literature piece, thus making it a literature-based project having the objectives related to the domain of Appreciation of Literature and Culture [2, p. 22], informing Markus about the changes:

- Students will be able to discuss themes and conflicts in literature and to express personal ideas and opinions.
- Students will be able to interpret and analyze literary texts.
- Students will be able to integrate their personal ideas with historical, literary, and other themes.

The materials chosen for teaching about the Holocaust Remembrance had been used for other purposes before the actual project started. For instance, on January, 27, 2019 we studied the article about the International Holocaust Remembrance Day [7] and discussed it in class. Then I gave my students a writing assignment related to the topic of the article read: “In a short composition, answer the following questions: What should we remember? Why is it important to remember?” In a sense, it was a pre-reading activity for the story.

Taking into account the fact that Markus teaches both History and English, he was studying other materials with his students at that time; for we agreed beforehand on that we would not do exactly the same things at every stage, having different objectives. However, we shared certain articles and the materials we both decided to use in the project and did use them after reading the literature piece [see 13; 14].

Stage I. Reading the literature piece.

The story *Address Unknown*, which takes place in 1932-1934, is about two friends – a German and a Jew, who both grew up in Germany and then moved to the USA and established an art gallery there. The German friend goes back to Germany to have his young children educated in his homeland, while the Jewish friend stays in the USA. The story is told through letters – the correspondence between the two friends. The plot unfolds very quickly: the readers learn about the dramatic change in Martin, the German friend, who becomes a national socialist swept by the Nazi propaganda. He doesn't help save the Jew's sister – a young actress who he used to have an affair with and who comes to his house in search for shelter. As a result, the Jewess disappears and is presumably killed, and Max, the Jewish friend living in the USA, receives a letter stamped “Adressat unbekannt”. In the end, the Jew takes revenge on his former German friend.

Reading the story was of a multifold interest: from the historical perspective, from the literature perspective – the themes addressed, the literary devices and language used by the author, and from the cultural perspective – it was especially interesting to find out the attitudes of representatives of contemporary German and Israeli cultures to the issues raised in the literary piece.

I read and discussed the story with my students in class and they did while-reading oral and written tasks related to basic understanding, analysis and interpretation, which required the use of HOTS; then they did post reading assignments individually and in pairs. For example, after reading the letter dated August 18, 1933, I asked my students to write their thoughts about the following: “What do you think: does being a patriot prevent one from being a liberal?” They had to state and explain their opinion, providing reasons and relating to the story. Not all of them succeeded, but those who did take it seriously and referred to the dictionary to look up the definitions, wrote nice answers with in-depth explanations and good reasoning.

Stage II. Students get to know each other.

When we finished reading the story in class (February 25th, 2019), I told my students they would get in touch with real German students their age. I explained that was the beginning of a German-Israeli project in which they would learn through correspondence, thus making a connection to the correspondence between the main characters in the story.

At this stage, the students began getting to know each other: they worked in groups of four – two from the German side, and two from the Israeli side. On February 26th, 2019 the German students arranged themselves in groups of two. They received e-mail addresses of their Israeli counterparts and sent their first letters, introducing themselves. My students replied and exchanged their cell phone numbers with the Germans, after which they continued their correspondence via the WhatsApp. They introduced themselves and wrote about their daily life, their school and school life, their hobbies and pastimes, their city, and their country. The students on both sides were encouraged to share pictures of their school and city.

It should be noted that before the students started the correspondence, I reminded them that they must be aware of and prepared for the cultural differences between the German students and themselves and keep in mind universal values such as respect and tolerance.

I prepared charts for my students which would reflect the process of their correspondence (see Appendix, Stage II chart). The students had to fill in the charts during the English lessons, whereas they could chat with their German pen pals at any time convenient for both sides.

Stage III. Discussing the story and connecting it to the historical events.

I used a chart to encourage the students initiate the discussion of the story. As I had expected, some students felt uncomfortable asking certain questions which they considered embarrassing. The solution was the agreement about the tone which had to be neutral and respectful. Moreover, I prepared appropriate basic questions about the story that my students were supposed to ask their German pen pals (see Appendix, Stage III chart). Since our mutual goal was cross-cultural communication,

the students had to overcome their difficulties, be it a language barrier or difference in culture. (This was later included in the students' feedback on the reflection sheet they filled out after finishing the project work.)

After the discussion of the story, I focused on the following:

- introducing the *Stolpersteine* (Stumbling Stones or Blocks) through the video clip [11] and the official site [10];
- reading an article about the Stumbling Stones [14], discussing it and teaching the students to summarize;
- reading about The Righteous Among the Nations [13] and making a connection to the story, contrasting the fictional character of Martin and what he did to bravery and courage of the real people who rescued the persecuted Jews during the Holocaust out of moral choice;
- reading the biography of a Righteous Among the Nations Karl Schörghofer [8] – a German who worked as administrator at the Jewish cemetery in Munich and, together with his family, was hiding the Jews during WWII.

At this stage, the students engaged in discussions related to the articles. They asked their German pen pals questions to find out facts and details about the history of Germany and its present day situation, information about life of the Germans and how it has changed since WWII, and about the content of the sources the students on both sides studied. Here are some questions I gave my students so they could ask their pen pals:

- Which materials (articles, online sources) did your pen pal study? Describe.
- Which of the materials (articles, online sources) did he/she find the most interesting and why?
- Ask your pen pal questions about Germany relating to its political situation in general and its stand on the matter of the Holocaust.
- Ask about his / her personal opinion about those matters.

At the same time, the replied to various questions from their German pen pals regarding the history of Israel: what they knew about the country, what they learned with their History teacher Markus, and whether their perspective about Israel changed after studying the material.

The final stage.

At this stage, Markus and I suggested the controversial topic hotly discussed in the media: a Holocaust diary on Instagram – an imaginary character's fake Instagram account as a powerful way to convey what happened during the Holocaust. I showed my students a video clip and then we read an article covering the topic [9], after which I asked them to discuss with their pen pals:

- their personal opinion about the Instagram Holocaust Story;
- whether they think it is appropriate to use such way to teach about the Holocaust in the 21st century.

For the final activity, I assigned the following writing task to my students and shared it with Markus so he could use it in his class, too: *"Was the Holocaust a single time event or it might happen again? State and explain your opinion, giving reasons and providing supporting information."*

At the end of the academic year 2018/2019, my students filled out the reflection sheet on which they shared their feelings and thoughts about the project. The sheet contained the following questions:

- Was it your first experience of correspondence with a foreign teenager? YES / NO (Circle)
- What is your overall impression about the correspondence with a student living abroad?
- Did you have any language barrier expressing yourself? Specify.
- Did you have any difficulty understanding your pen pal? Specify.
- Did you feel cultural difference interference when corresponding with your pen pal?

In what way? Explain.

- Did you feel embarrassed asking your pen pal certain questions? Describe / give examples. If yes, how did you overcome your embarrassment?
- Was the material under discussion an obstacle to the correspondence? How? Explain. Describe your feelings.
- What did you learn about yourself while corresponding with a teenager from Germany?
- What, in your opinion, could have been done differently in terms of the organization and process of correspondence with students from Germany?

The students' responses revealed a wide range of personal feelings (from "they are weird" to "they are very nice" and "we are just ordinary teenagers from different countries"), uncovered certain difficulties and left an overall positive impression about the learning process the students went through while doing the project. Most students had no difficulty corresponding with the teenagers from Germany, even though some used a dictionary. They used simple English and overlooked mistakes. However, occasional situations of misunderstanding took place, since some German students used contractions my students said they were unfamiliar with.

Other respondents wrote it had been hard to communicate due to different cultural backgrounds, the study material (both the subject of the Holocaust and the story Address Unknown required deep understanding and analysis). So they suggested talking about everyday life and lighter and more relevant present-day subjects most teenagers might be interested in. Moreover, some students admitted they felt uncomfortable asking their pen pals the questions prepared by the teacher and suggested allowing them to formulate questions on their own instead, for future projects.

To sum up, the pilot German-Israeli project was an unusual, challenging, constantly changing process of cooperation between students and their teachers from different cultures. Despite the above mentioned difficulties, the students had a meaningful learning experience in which their knowledge of English allowed them to connect to the real world. They learned new facts about the culture, the place the German teenagers live, their way of life, and the holidays they celebrate. Besides, the students were exposed to different perspectives on historical events through studying literature and other materials. Being engaged in a real-life activity proved to be a meaningful and enjoyable experience for most of my students.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Larmer, J., Mergendoller, J.R. Seven Essentials For Project Based Learning // Giving Students Meaningful Work. September, 2010. Vol. 68. № 1. Pp. 34-37. URL: http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/sept10/vol68/num01/Seven_Essentials_for_Project-Based_Learning.aspx (Retrieved on 22.02.2020)

2. Mann, G., Shemesh, R., Shlayer, J. Projects at Work. // English Teachers' Journal. June, 2002. Pp. 18-39. URL: http://meyda.education.gov.il/files/Mazkirut_Pedagogit/English/projectsatwork.pdf (Retrieved on 01.02.2020)
3. Relajo-Howell, D. (October 09, 2017) 5 Ways To Make Learning More Meaningful To Students. URL: <http://psychlearningcurve.org/learning-more-meaningful/> (Retrieved on 22.02.2020)
4. Revised English Curriculum: Principles and Standards for Learning English as an International Language for All Grades (January, 2018). URL: http://meyda.education.gov.il/files/Mazkirut_Pedagogit/English/Curriculum2018July.pdf (Retrieved on 29.02.2020)
5. Schuetz, R. (June 01, 2018) Project-Based Learning: Benefits, Examples, and Resources. URL: <https://www.schoolology.com/blog/project-based-learning-pbl-benefits-examples-and-resources> (Retrieved on 29.02.2020)
6. What Is PBL? URL: <https://www.pblworks.org/what-is-pbl> (Retrieved on 15.02.2020)
7. Materials used in the project
8. International Holocaust Remembrance Day. URL: <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/international-holocaust-remembrance-day>
9. Karl Schörghofer. URL: <http://www.raoulwallenberg.net/saviors/german2/karl-schorghofer-924/>
10. Liebermann, O. A Holocaust Diary is Reborn on Instagram. (May 02, 2019) URL: <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/05/02/europe/evas-story-holocaust-instagram-intl/index.html>
11. Stolpersteine in Berlin. URL: <https://www.stolpersteine-berlin.de/en/node/1>
12. Stumbling Blocks – Commemorate Nazi Victims: Video File: URL: <https://www.deutschland.de/en/videos/stumbling-blocks-commemorate-nazi-victims>
13. Taylor, K. K. Address Unknown (the story): URL: <http://www.acobas.net/teaching/textbook/address/addressunknown.pdf>
14. The Righteous Among The Nations. URL: <https://www.yadvashem.org/righteous/about-the-righteous.html>
15. Westervelt, E. (May 31, 2012) Stumbling Upon Mini Memorials To Holocaust Victims. URL: <https://www.npr.org/2012/05/31/153943491/stumbling-upon-miniature-memorials-to-nazi-victims>

APPENDIX

Stage II Chart – Getting to know your pen pals

Fill in the chart with the details from the correspondence.

There are ____ students in my group:	
Name of the student who contacted you:	
His/her age:	
He/she was born in:	
His/her hobby(-s):	
Three interesting facts you learned about the student and his daily life:	<div style="display: flex; flex-direction: column; align-items: flex-start;"> <div>1.</div> <div>2.</div> <div>3.</div> </div>
What is the student learning in English at school?	
What is the student	

currently learning in History lessons?	
Write two questions you will ask him/her in the next message.	1. 2.
Write two things you want to share with him/her.	1. 2.

Stage III Chart – Discussing the literature piece / article(s)

Fill in the chart with the details from the correspondence.

Name of your pen pal	
Did your pen pal like the story <i>Address Unknown</i> ? Why? Why not?	
What does he/she think the message of the story is?	
What does your pen pal think about how the historical events are reflected in the story?	
Write the questions you asked your pen pal about the <i>Stumbling Stones</i> .	1. 2.
What did she/he reply to the above questions of yours?	1. 2.