

Teaching and Learning EFL Through PBL

Pilar Couto-Cantero^a

Abstract

This paper aims to share teachers' experiences of English as a foreign language (EFL) in a multicultural context through project based learning (PBL) in a subject in which students are coming from different degrees such as: Biology, Architecture, Physical Education, Communication Sciences, etc. Teachers of EFL know for sure that their students' feedbacks are completely different but their learning outcomes are supposed to be the same in the end. How can we prepare teaching and learning materials in such a difficult context? Does exist a useful methodology to fulfill our final targets? Based on a PBL experience, interesting conclusions about the teaching and learning foreign languages process will be offered through this article.

Keywords

Teaching, learning, languages, EFL (English foreign language), PBL (project based learning)

As each student's group is totally different from the other, teaching and learning English as a foreign language requires the effort of trying to put innovative techniques into practice to develop in the classroom on the part of the teacher trainer. EFL teachers must be able to develop their own materials and activities in the foreign languages classroom. They can carry out this mission through different learning possibilities in order to reach a common final target even though students are coming from different backgrounds. In the end, their proposal is devoted to make themselves be understood in a foreign language, that is to say, to be ready for communicating among different cultures.

This article is based on a PBL experience which has been successfully developed during the last three years for third course teacher training students in the Faculty of Education in La Coruña (NW Spain). Lessons take place in a four-hour-a-week format for a four-month period of time. They usually start in the middle of February, when our pre-teachers come back to university from their teaching practices or placements at school centres, and end in the middle of

June.

The framework of this experience can be placed in an optional subject for primary school teacher trainees entitled: "Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages". As it is considered both an "optional subject" and/or a "free election subject" for any student coming from any Degree at this University, the most challenging peculiarity of a subject like this is, not only trying to find the way to motivate, but also to keep all the students attention and make them feel involved in the teaching and learning foreign languages process.

DEVELOPMENT

According to a PBL action research, the author started to ask: "how could I solve the problems above

^aUniversity of La Coruña (UDC), Spain

Correspondent Author:

Pilar Couto-Cantero, Teaching and Learning Languages Department, Faculty of Education Sciences, University of La Coruña (UDC), Campus de Elviña. Spain, 15071
E-mail: pilar.couto@udc.es

mentioned?”. As we all know, a research of this kind begins with a question about classroom experiences. It is a reflective process which helps teachers to explore and examine aspects of his or her own teaching and learning knowledge and to take action to change and improve them.

The term “action research” was first coined by Lewin in 1944 and it was used to describe a process of planning, finding and execution of facts. But in order to set clear this phrase the author will reproduce Kemmis’ definition:

Action research is a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social (including educational) situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of: (1) their own social or educational practices; (2) their understanding of these practices; and (3) the situations in which the practices are carried out. (Kemmis 2007: 168)

A classroom-action research is aimed at any teacher who wants to understand more about teaching and learning, to any teacher who wants to develop teaching skills and knowledge, or to any teacher who wants to take action to improve their students learning. It provides a framework for trying out different approaches and ideas, improves students’ learning, enables teachers to make choices and decisions about their teaching styles and helps both teachers and students to develop reflective practice and confidence.

It is generally accepted that teachers of foreign languages (FL) are always arguing that their students know more English than they think and it is also generally accepted that our Spanish students are usually afraid or shy to start speaking in a foreign language. This phenomenon is produced because they have been studying English for years, specially written skills, but they have had not many opportunities to put into practice their oral skills far away from the English classroom. In addition, our Spanish students have developed a very strong sense of ridiculous so they feel unable to say a word in English language.

In this above mentioned context, one of the main questions that a teacher of FL usually asks him/herself

is: “How can I help my students to be confident when using their English spoken skills?”. Once the research question has been written, the next step will be planning how all the research will be organized in order to find answers to that question.

But let the author first, before planning, try to establish the objectives of the author’s proposal and establish the necessary connections to the contents to be taken into account to develop this experience according to the National Curriculum in Spain.

AIMS

As the author set before, from a pragmatic approach, the main and final target for a student of any language should be make him/herself to be understood, which means trying to start an effective act of verbal communication between a sender and a receiver following the Jakobson’s model of communication¹ terminology (Jakobson 1963). Apart from the main target above mentioned, which is devoted to help the author’s learners to understand the central aim of language learning, the author think it is very interesting and relevant for this research to observe step by step some other objectives.

One of the first things the author want to reach in the end is trying to help the author’s learners to overcome their fear of speaking in a foreign language and demonstrate the author’s students who can put into practice their oral and writing English skills without feeling ridiculous. Another interesting target would be to support the learners’ thinking about their language learning and help them to develop their own learning capabilities. It is also necessary, because we are at this side of the planet, to use European standards of proficiency following the Council of Europe’s Common Reference Levels².

CONTENTS

To develop this project it has been necessary to take into account the four groups of contents described by the National Curriculum³. According to this, the

Table 1. Contents in Foreign Languages for Primary School

Table of contents in the teaching and learning process in a FL according to the National Curriculum for Primary School	
1. Oral speaking (Listen, speak and talk)	2. Reading and writing (Read and write)
Listening. Speaking. Talking, chatting, dialogue. Oral communication.	Reading. Writing.
3. Knowledge of the language	4. Socio-cultural matters and intercultural conscience
Linguistic knowledge. Use of the language. Rules of the language.	Different cultures, traditions. Social relationships. Intercultural communication.

contents have been ordered into four different elements attending to the specific needs required in the teaching and learning process: oral language, written language, use of the language and the socio-cultural dimension of the foreign language to be learnt (see Table 1).

It is necessary to make clear that oral language and written language are two different expressions of the same capability, and we use both indiscriminately in the learning process and in the use of the language process. The reason why these contents have been split and studied separately is because their study requires the use of different abilities and knowledge.

According to the new competency-based teacher education model, the school curriculum is configured around the concept of competence⁴. The study of a FL enriches directly to the development of one of the main key competencies which is the “competency in linguistic communication”. It cannot be denied that this contribution of the foreign language learning fulfils this communicative competency with new comprehensive and expressive slight differences. As a matter of fact, the learning of a foreign language based on the development of communicative abilities will also contribute to the development of this basic competency in the same way that the mother tongue does.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used to reinforce this study has been

based on the “communicative language teaching” or what we simply call the “Communicative Approach” (Richards 1989: 46-47). The Communicative Approach constitutes a methodological tendency born in Great Britain in the early 1960s in the teaching and learning modern languages context in order to react against the methods used by the structuralists. From its first moment it is developed thanks to the research studies produced in the teaching and learning of foreign languages area, but in a graded mood it has also been incorporated to the teaching and learning of the mother tongue. This is because both first and foreign languages depart from the same theoretical presuppositions and their teaching and learning proposals are very similar.

Traditional methods used to teach languages lacked of a study based on the intention or purpose searched by the speaker through the use of the language. At the same time, it was observed that this intention or purpose determined its functionality. The most interesting fact of this new dimension of the language is the way the language itself is presented. The way in which this is organized through the concepts expressed by the speaker in a very specific moment and the study of the purpose in each case are also important factors to take into account. This new formula of teaching and organizing the linguistic materials into notions and functions for the teaching and learning foreign languages gave place to the notional-functional approach, which nowadays is also

known as the Communicative Approach.

Since the late 1960s, however, when proposals for communicative approaches to language teaching were first advocated, methodologists associated with this philosophy have followed through the original proposal to elaborate principles for syllabus design, design of teaching activities, instructional materials and actual classroom procedures themselves. Such proposals can no longer hide under the theoretically safer umbrella of approach but meet the full criteria of a method, since they offer prescriptions that cover every phase in the organization of an instructional system. They can be referred to as examples of method proposals which draw on the approach spelt out under the more general term “communicative language teaching” or simply “communicative approach”. (Richards 1989: 46-47)

Using the Communicative Approach combined with the benefits of a project based learning made it possible to reach the final target of this experience. A project based learning could be defined as a systematic teaching method which engages students in learning knowledge and skills through an extended inquiry process structured around complex, authentic questions and carefully designed products and tasks (Markham et al. 2003). This definition includes a wide spectrum ranging from brief projects based on a single subject in one classroom to year-long interdisciplinary projects.

The need of a new teaching and learning method called project based learning was the result of two important developments. On the one hand, the fact is that there has been a revolution in the learning theories. Thus, cognitive and behavioral models of learning have proved that knowledge, thinking, doing and the contexts needed for a “significant learning” are strongly tied. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that the process of learning is a social activity which takes place within the context of a specific culture, in a specific community and according to personal experiences.

Project based learning offers all students the opportunity to investigate authentic topics of interest to them, and they are involved in the learning process

in a different way that traditional learning could not offer. As in this classroom experience, the author selected the project topics for some groups of students and allowed room for the eager and prepared ones who wanted to select their own topics and define their learning outcomes.

A paragraph must be devoted to the student-centered curriculum in this article as the third of the approaches developed during this classroom experience into the teaching and learning foreign languages process to explain their positive benefits. As Chall stated: “Probably the oldest references are to the distinction between ‘classic’ education and ‘new’ education, also referred to as the traditional, old education versus the new, progressive education. More recently, the terms have become more specific, such as teacher-centered versus student-centered education” (Chall 2002).

Although it is not the object of this research, the author would like to shortly mention that the student-centered curriculum not always constitutes the right approach to achieve knowledge in the learning process. Moreover, the author would say that the perfect combination for success strikes upon the Aristotelian “just act”, that is, the use of both the teacher-centered and the student-centered approaches depend on many other factors such as: the student needs, the socio-cultural level, the age, values, attitudes of the students, etc.

It is for a long time that teachers have been using the so-called Cooperative Learning (CL) in order to promote more interaction among students and to allow more avenues for the development of inter-personal and social skills. This learning environment focused on students has become the trend in our classrooms. They are the right place to make possible the interchange of ideas and offer a lot of opportunities for oral and written, but especially oral communication. Most teachers introduce student autonomy in different stages depending upon students’ age and experience.

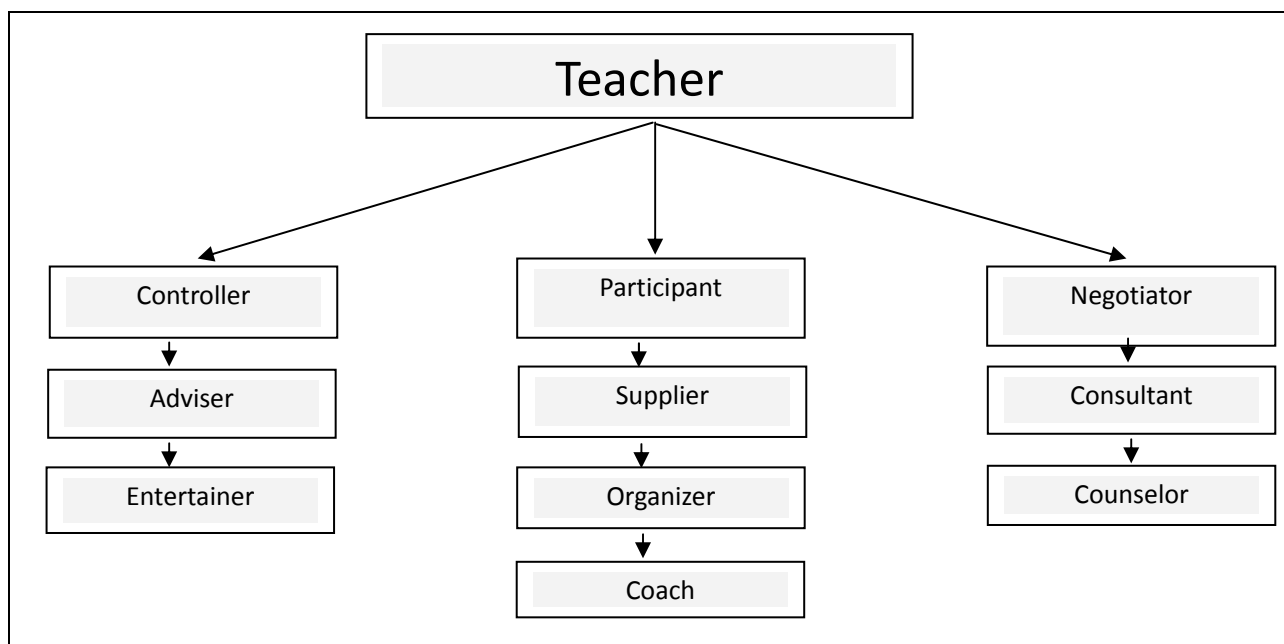


Figure 1. EFL Teacher Assumed Roles in the Classroom.

Based on experience and knowledge, starting with the Communicative Approach of the languages, and following the steps of the project based learning it can be noticed that students are capable of defending their own projects in a foreign language. Therefore, student autonomy, which is one of the main elements of the PBL foundations, can be demonstrated as a real fact through this article.

PLANNING

Before planning this project the author first thought about how much the author wanted the author's students to be involved in its design and how much autonomy they would have in it. So in that sense, the role of the teacher became that of a coach or facilitator helping students to give shape to their own project. Taking this into account, the author offered a diagram in which the EFL teachers assumed roles in the classroom can be appreciated.

These possibilities mentioned below are, in the author's opinion, a certain amount of roles that a

teacher could assume at a particular moment of his/her teaching practices and hopefully they will help to the eager reader of this article. Of course, one can agree or disagree about this ten EFL assumed roles diagram (see Figure 1), so that it could be altered either clearing or adding items depending on each teacher's needs, opinion, age, level of the students, etc.

This research was planned dividing second-term lessons into two main parts. Before starting to carry out project activities with the students, some lessons were compulsory to train our students in such skills as: collaboration, research, project management, and oral presentations. Several documents⁵ were offered and discussed in the classroom in order to give students the necessary tools to start with. Complementary activities were also developed during these lessons focusing on communicative interaction and role playing activities. Most of them were centered on the acquisition and development of oral skills in a foreign language, although written skills were also arranged as it would be shown later on.

To reinforce this paragraph devoted to the

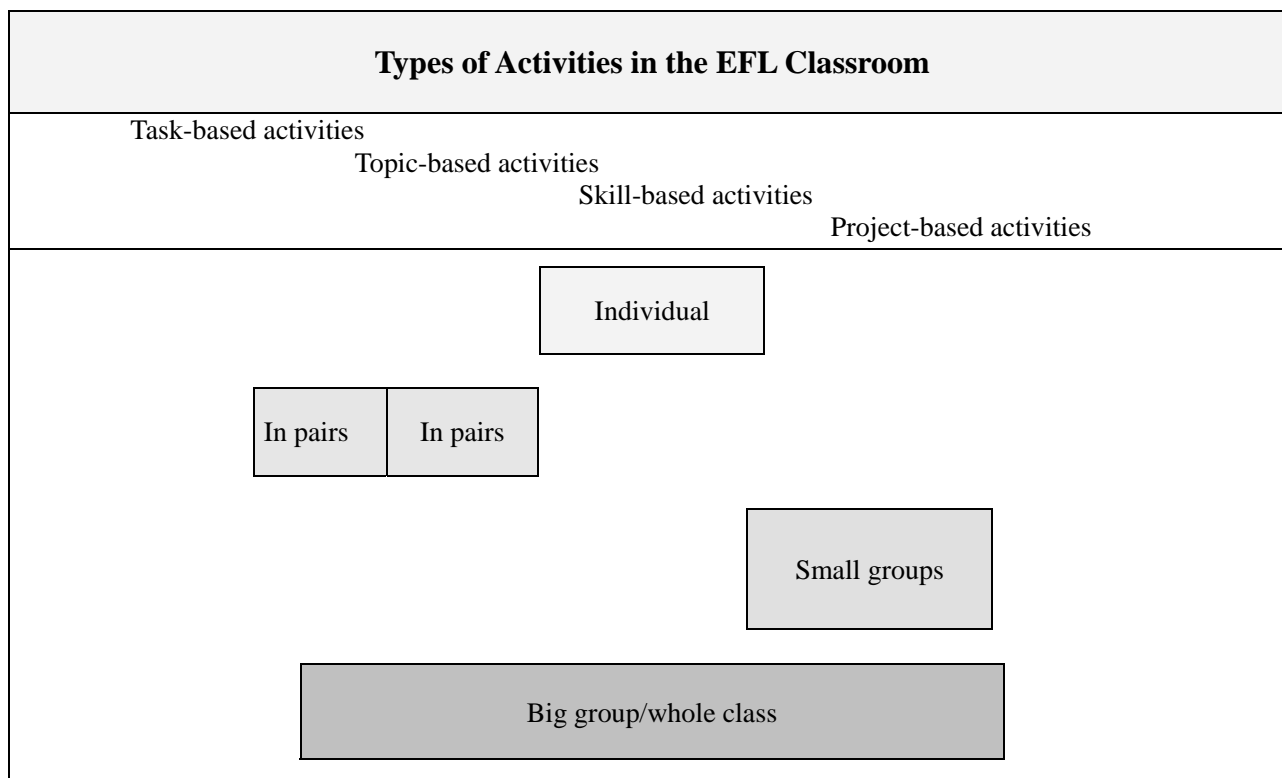


Figure 2. Types of Activities in the EFL Classroom.

previous activities needed to reach the final target, the next figure (see Figure 2) in which different kinds of activities can be determined has been included. It contains a short list about different activities which can be prepared to be used in the EFL classroom. They are based on tasks, topics, skills or projects (from minor to major elements involved) depending on many other factors of the teaching and learning foreign languages process. As this is not the object of our research the author will not go into deep with those matters even if it seems an interesting research topic to be discussed.

The second part of this figure is about the number of students involved to complete those activities above mentioned. As it can be seen in a very clear and visual way, activities can be developed individually, splitting students in small groups of about four or five partners or in pairs. In the author's opinion, more than five

people (the author would even say four), is a waste of time and effort because it is clearly demonstrated that in a context like that our students start using their mother tongue language and talk about things which have nothing to do with the activity itself.

The second part of the author's research was centered on the designing, planning, programming and final presentation of an international conference in which the author's students would be the participants. It could be stated that the fact of using an international conference as a framework to obtain a final target is not a new proposal but a regular convention of scientists researching and discussing the same topics and areas of knowledge. But the brand-new application of this research is the idea of extracting using a scientific framework out of its natural context and translating it into the EFL classroom in order to convey the required results.

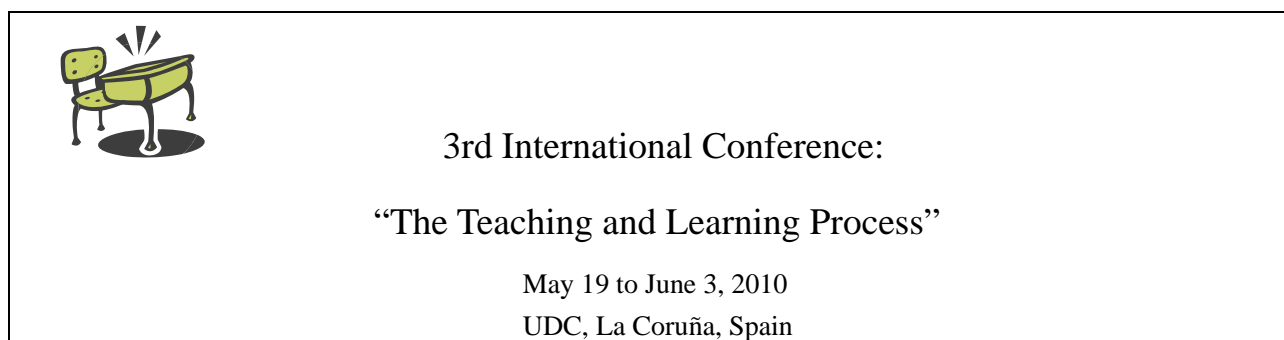


Figure 3. Logo and Title of the Conference.

To make the proposal as real as possible the author invented a logo and a title for the conference and prepared some documents including the typical sections described in a scientific event as the ones of this kind. The author included “international” because it was very common nowadays to have students from abroad in our classrooms. The title and logo can be seen in Figure 3.

The examples brought to illustrate this article belong to last year’s experience. But, as the author mentioned before, the author could include all data achieved during the two previous years, and in a very close future, this year’s results could also be added to this research as complementary information.

Owing to the author’s firm conviction that a visual aid is absolutely necessary to the perfect understanding and quick comprehension, the author made a planning form, a timetable and a brochure in which all the necessary information to apply for a conference of the kind can be easily appreciated. In order to make a short version of this descriptive part of the research, the author will only mention the headings which are described below:

- (1) Call for Proposals;
- (2) Deadline for Abstracts Submission;
- (3) Conference Goals;
- (4) Publications of Papers;
- (5) Organization;
- (6) Topics;

- (7) Important Dates;
- (8) Contacts;
- (9) Registration Form;
- (10) Conference Fees;
- (11) Cancellation Policy;
- (12) Program;
- (13) Guidelines for Presenters.

The reason why the author prepares all these materials for the students is because they can get used to this kind of events in case they want to start their research in the future. The positive effects of this experience are clearly demonstrated in the end of the course as students are 100% motivated to participate in such a creative experience which is one of the key words for success. Apart from the also interesting fact that they can initiate a research about topics they are interested in a much more comfortable environment provided to them.

At the moment of oral presentations they feel as if they are very important persons because a rather big group of people is paying full attention to them, asking questions and following their discourse so their self-esteem is highly upgraded. Through this public speaking experience our students increase their oral skills not only in the teaching and learning of a foreign language but also in the teaching and learning of their main language. A long list of benefits could be added to this paragraph but let the author just mention some of them: they learn how to communicate



Figure 4. Logo and Title of the Literary Contest.

effectively to others, how to persuade their audience using clear and simple language, to use visual aids to reinforce their words, to make use of non-verbal communication, to overcome their nerves and to feel more confident when speaking.

Another previously established aim at the beginning of this article consisted of trying to develop our students' written skills. To give full attendance to this objective the author decided to organize a "domestic" literary contest in which a short-story based on a picture must be written by the participants. This optional activity was first born as a pilot experience in order to develop written skills as well as it constitutes one of the varied procedures to measure the extent to which students have achieved their objectives. It is now that the author can assert that each year more and more students decide to participate in this literary contest. The logo and title of this activity can be seen in Figure 4.

One of the reasons why the author prepared this as an optional activity is timing. There is not enough time to organize a guided literary workshop within the classroom timetable. Therefore, students freely decide whether they want to participate or not according to the rules and guidelines of the contest. The teacher offers his/her help, in case it is demanded, acting as a counselor or adviser and they can put into practice not only their written skills but also their creative skills, which are no less interesting. The winner of the contest (it can be only one) will reach an extra-point in

the final assessment of the subject and his/her short story remains linked to the official web page of the Faculty for a semester, so that friends and family can also participate of this student's achievement.

ASSESSMENT

To evaluate the accomplishment of the targets established at the beginning of this article, different items of evaluation have been used. This is due to the fact that a big amount of elements are involved in the teaching and learning process. Assessment is one of the main parts of this process and it must be taken into account as a relevant moment through the students' learning.

As students are also central elements in this living process, the author decides to make use of the good benefits of the formative assessment because it implies students' involvement and helps the author to find out if the author is achieving goals in the former stages of the project instead of waiting until the author have finished the experience. According to Garrison and Ehringhaus (2007), "If students are not involved in the assessment process, formative assessment is not practiced or implemented to its full effectiveness. Students need to be involved both as assessors of their own learning and as resources to other students".

To elaborate the final assessment, teachers need to collect oral and written evidence of student learning as much as possible. That means including all materials

produced by students, any kind of activities, peer observation notes, and reflections on the teacher-student or student-student interaction in the classroom. Therefore, oral skills are evaluated by listening to the students during the oral presentations organized in the program of the conference. Through peer-observation⁶ the teacher can take notes about student's presentations, but peer-observation is also required to the rest of the students to evaluate their partner's papers so that they can see each other as a resource for understanding and checking the previously established criteria.

The use and knowledge of written skills is evaluated by means of the student's camera-ready written contributions (usually PowerPoint presentations) and those who decided to participate with a short-story based on a picture in the literary contest. There is a lot of data collected by the teacher to give a final score in the end of the course. The following step in the learning process to be fulfilled would be self-assessment but there is not enough room in this article to develop this last component.

To go into deep with types of assessment and evaluation matters in particular, but any other reference or information related to the teaching and learning languages process in general (within the European community context), it would be strongly recommended to make use of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and the European Profile for Language Teacher Education. They present a number of features which are designed to help and move quickly and easily from one part of the document to another and to find out any required information about the object of study.

CONCLUSIONS

There are many strategies which can be put into practice by teachers to engage students in the learning languages process. Research studies show that the more they get involved in their own work, the more students' motivation is increased. This does not mean

the absence of teacher involvement. On the contrary, teachers are double involved not only by being critical in identifying learning goals, setting clear criteria for success, and designing assessment tasks which provide evidence of student learning, but also in being reflective in order to find different paths to convey their previously established objectives.

Through this project we have demonstrated that it is possible to achieve such difficult goals and that this is the right path to continue in the future. Thanks to this project, oral skills are clearly developed by students and written skills are also put into practice, although these practices and experiences should be reinforced in the future with new research studies devoted to develop new strategies and techniques.

Notes

1. Jacobson's model has six main factors: sender, receiver, message, context, channel and code.
2. Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.
3. Royal Decree 1513/2006 for Primary Education.
4. Nowadays, the term "competence" is used as a synonym of "competency" although the latter is much more centered on the individual.
5. A list of documents based on project based learning (PBL), public speaking presentations, teaching and learning units (TLU's), grids and planning forms were explained and discussed during the first sessions.
6. Peer-observation forms are also available.

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Bio

Pilar Couto-Cantero, Ph.D., full-time senior lecturer, Teaching and Learning Languages Department, Faculty of Education Sciences, University of La Coruña (UDC), North-Western Spain; research fields: teaching and learning main language and literature, teaching and learning foreign languages and cultures (English) (Early childhood, Primary and Secondary School pre-teachers), comparative research on fictional texts and its teaching and learning possibilities, teaching and learning languages through fictional texts (Fictional texts = Novels, Short-stories, Picture books, Poetry, Music, Films).