Promoting Learner Autonomy Through Project Work

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In a traditional teacher-centered language classroom, the teacher was the absolute transmitter of knowledge, controlling the what, the how, and the when of every language lesson. Recently, however, with increased use of communicative language teaching methods, the teacher's role has shifted from that of controller to that of facilitator, resulting in corresponding changes in student roles as well. In particular, students have the opportunity to use the target language in communicative tasks. Teachers who are committed to creating a communicative learning environment have at their disposal a wide array of curricular options, one of which is project work. A project is a series of activities undertaken over a period of time, which focus more on content (such as solving a problem or exploring an idea) than on a particular language skill.

Teachers who have adopted projects as a means of encouraging group work and fostering target language use find that completing projects requires students to engage in purposeful communication, utilize a variety of skills, and explore alternative routes for reaching their goals. Through working together on projects, students also become actively engaged in learning, sharpen their cognitive skills, and develop a greater sense of responsibility for their own learning. In other words, they develop greater learner autonomy.

This article describes a multifaceted project undertaken at Stambouli Mustapha University that resulted in all of the benefits described above and which could serve as an example for projects in other settings. The primary aim of this project was to create a collection of proverbs from several linguistic and cultural traditions in Africa. Secondary aims included helping students explore customs, language, and values in other countries and developing an attitude of tolerance and peace toward the peoples of those countries.

Developing the Project

To help us get started, we surveyed the literature on using projects. [We found Fredricka Stoller's 1997 article in the *English Teaching Forum* to be particularly helpful. It can be found at http://exchanges.state.gov/forum/vols/vol35/no4/p2.htm.] Projects are typically described as a sequence of steps. The steps that we followed in carrying out our project may be best described as follows.

1. Preparing and planning. Teachers and students worked together from the very beginning. We identified the theme of the project—proverbs—and considered our goals. We decided to compile a set of proverbs from a variety of ethnic and

inguistic traditions throughout Africa. Part of planning is considering what resources students need to carry out a project. Our students needed books, the internet, and reference materials like encyclopedias, but parents and other elders were also important sources of information.

At this stage, we also organized students into three working groups and planned a series of lessons in which each group had a particular responsibility. For example, one group was responsible for doing research on the significance of proverbs and their importance in the oral tradition. They collected a set of proverbs from several different African ethnic and linguistic groups. Students in the second group tried to find similar proverbs in English, French, and Arabic focusing on similarities in meaning. The third group compiled all the proverbs and classified them under themes or topics. They also chose one proverb and illustrated it, either with drawings or by writing a story.

2. Gathering information. At this stage, students collected proverbs from a variety of sources—online, in print, and in person.
3. Compiling. After collecting their information, students examined it, organized it, and considered various ways of sharing it with others. Two examples of how students compiled their work are shown here, one in prose format, the other in a table. A third means of displaying their findings was to draw a sequence of pictures illustrating a particular proverb or a story in which the proverb would fit.

Example 1

Proverb: *Two ants do not fail to pull one grasshopper.*
Origin: Haya, Tanzania
Explanation:

Unity is an important value in many cultures. This Western Tanzania proverb is used to teach children how one could learn morality from ordinary things like insects. The Haya people believe that collective strength is always powerful however little it may be and that when two or more people decide upon something they cannot be mistaken or go astray.

Related English proverbs:

Unity is strength. United we stand, divided we fall. One good turn deserves another.

Related French proverb:

L'union fait la force.

Example 2

African Proverb	Origin	English	French	Arabic
Two ants do not fail to pull one grasshopper.	Haya (Tanzania)	Unity is strength United we stand, divided we fall	L'union fait la force	وفي التفرق ضعف والاتحاد قوة
An eye that you treat is the one that turns against you.	Luo (Kenya)			
Words are like bullets; if they escape, you can't catch them again.	Wolof (Senegal)			

4. Presenting. Students presented their work orally using PowerPoint presentations or reports supported with pictures, posters, and other forms of media. To reach a wider audience, projects could also be posted to an internet site or collected and bound as a book.
5. Reflecting and evaluating. Students reflected on their work, identifying strengths and weaknesses. Teachers assessed parameters such as individual effort, creativity sources, and delivery.

Variations and Extensions

Once begun, a project such as this can grow in many directions.

1. Proverbs are often used as the closing line in fables. Students can look for fables that illustrate the proverbs that they are collecting. For example, this fable illustrates the proverb "One good turn deserves another" mentioned above.

The Ant and the Pigeon

An ant dropped unluckily in to the water as she was drinking at the side of a brook. A wood pigeon took pity on her and threw her a little bough to lay hold on. The ant saved herself by means of that bough, thanked the pigeon and left. As she was leaving, she spied a hunter making a shot at the pigeon. Upon seeing this, she ran as fast as she could and pinched him. The hunter cried with pain and missed his shot. And away flew the pigeon.

2. Students can look for ways to use the proverbs they have collected in retelling new or familiar tales. For example:

Mariama and the Apprentice

The story goes that a Wolof man named Omar was an apprentice to a mechanic. He fell in love with Mariama and asked her to marry him, but her father refused, saying that he didn't want a "blue-collar" worker as a husband for her. He wanted someone that had gone to school like Mariama had and who at least had a diploma of some sort. Five years passed. Omar went to France during that time and came back as a fully qualified mechanic and opened a mechanic's shop. The father of Mariama, seeing that Omar's business was prospering, sent a friend to tell Omar that Mariama still loved him and that he could now marry her. Omar, quite vexed, responded that he had never gone to school and that he was still a blue-collar worker. He then added a proverb. What proverb do you think he used?

3. Students can do additional research on the ethnic and cultural traditions from which the proverbs are collected. They might examine the origin, history, social structure, and way of life of the various groups of people whose proverbs are collected. This research might be done through books, the internet, and face-to-face with oral interviews or invited guests. They can discuss ways in which proverbs from various cultures seem to illustrate similar or different values. Other topics for research include oral traditions, storytelling, and transmission of moral knowledge in various cultures.

Conclusion

The project described above was met with great enthusiasm on the part of the students. Not only did it require students of different linguistic and ethnic backgrounds to work together, but it also lifted a cultural barrier that had sometimes divided them. It raised learners' awareness of similarities between cultures, especially when it comes to teaching values through proverbs.

A project can be a useful means of promoting language use and increasing learner autonomy. It takes time, commitment, careful planning, and patience on the part of the teacher who should see the change of roles and distribution of power not as a threat but as a sine qua non condition for a more secure and democratic classroom. Project work constitutes a respite from traditional instruction and helps learners try their wings even at the price of losing a few feathers for a basic characteristic of autonomy is being willing to take risks.

About the Author

Appendix

The table below may help readers develop their own multilingual proverbs project.

African Proverbs	Origin	English Equivalent
1. Slowly, slowly, porridge fills the gourd.	Kuria (Kenya, Tanzania)	Patience can cook a stone.
2 A person who doesn't cultivate well his farm always says it has been bewitched.	Shona (Zimbabee)	A bad workman blames his tools.
3. Those who walk together warn each other.	Ganda (Uganda)	Unity is strength.
4. No matter how long a log stays in water, it doesn't become a crocodile.	(Tanzania)	A leopard can't change its spots.
5. No matter how hard it may get, an eventual comfort will be provided.	Gikuya (Kenya)	Every cloud has a silver lining.
6. One who relates with the corrupt gets corrupted.	Hausa (Nigeria)	Lie down with dogs and you wake up with fleas
7. The pants of today are better than the breeches of tomorrow.	Kongo (DRC)	A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush
8. Suffering comes prior to attaining success.	Chagga (Tanzania)	There is no rose without a thorn. No pain, no gain.
9. It is the calm and silent water that drowns a man.	Ashanti (The Gambia)	The calm comes before a storm.
10. What is bad luck for one man is good luck for another.	Ashanti	One man's meat is another man's poison.