

THE ENHANCEMENT OF CONTENT AND LANGUAGE LEARNING THROUGH PROJECT WORK: INTEGRATING STORYTELLING AND POLIMEDIA

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One of the main problems learners experience in the L2 learning process is the anxiety caused by oral production situations. This could turn into a serious obstacle to future EFL teachers' professional development. Diverting students' attention towards an interesting task helps decrease that emotional state. To that effect, project-based learning offers the possibility to create motivating, real-life tasks which promote the development of linguistic and professional competences in TESOL students. In this article, the authors show how the creation of stories with Polimedia provides students with a relaxing, engaging environment which enhances meaningful learning. Learners work on storytelling using Polimedia in order to achieve three main aims: to strengthen oral skills in L2, to identify the pedagogical potentials of the tools involved and to develop ICT competences. Teachers' observation and students' feedback reveal the benefits of incorporating those resources in teacher education.

Keywords: Polimedia, storytelling, teacher education, content and language learning, project-work.

1. Introduction

Higher education curriculum has changed significantly since the introduction of the Bologna Plan. Traditional lessons where the teacher was the main source of information have been replaced by classes where students are the center of the learning process. This new perspective has provoked an important challenge: new ways of teaching which cater for new styles of learning. In this actual paradigm, professors have a relevant role, to guide students towards the achievement of a wide number of competences in order to be prepared for their future job. In this vein, Gil et al. (2004) enumerate a series of parameters professors should keep in mind: concentration on professional competences useful for students' future jobs; offering different opportunities in the learning process, not only classroom or laboratory work; reduction of contents and compulsory attendance; evaluation through different instruments; and objective estimation of student work time to acquire the aimed competences.

2. Developing competences in prospective foreign language teachers

In the case of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) courses, students have to become competent teachers and competent speakers in a foreign language,

taking into consideration the development of the four skills. Regarding language learning, Skehan (1989) announced that *language aptitude* is essential to succeed when learning a foreign language. This construct comprises three main elements: auditory ability, linguistic ability and memory. All of them are crucial; however, good auditory skills and memory are key. Should one of these components fail, new concepts and structures will not be properly stored for their future retrieval, so language will not be well established. Consequently, improving auditory and memory skills is essential in language learning. As far as professional competences are concerned, these are crucial in this new paradigm and, especially, for prospective language teachers. Professors should promote a reflective learning environment, fostering learning opportunities for all students and introducing appropriate research-based methodologies.

However, it is complex to incorporate all the competences and contents in the daily lessons. A wide number of studies (Fried-Booth 2002; Stoller 2002; Barron et al. 1998; Hernández et al. 1995) defend project work to combine knowledge, skills and resources to be implemented in the lessons. Project work is more than group work, as it facilitates the integration of language and content, and offers students an activity that can be transferred to their future teaching practice (Stoller 2002).

This study aims to show a teaching practice based on project work and the incorporation of storytelling and Polimedia in TEFL classes. The main objectives of this study are: to make students reflect about the adequacy of the tools they choose to implement in their classes, helping them to identify the didactic potential of the resources; to reinforce oral skills in English; and to develop their technological competences.

2.1. The use of storytelling in EFL teaching and learning

The learning of a foreign language is an arduous task and, although everyone is able to acquire their mother tongue, not all of us can learn a second language (L2) properly. From professors' perspective, it is difficult to teach a L2 due to the fact that we have to provide the adequate environment to cater for students' individual differences, in a limited number of sessions per week, without the appropriate auditory input—in most cases reduced to the English lessons, and with plenty of learners with different language levels. This situation is also anxiety-provoking for many learners. In that respect, storytelling could be a practical and powerful tool for English as a foreign language (EFL) learners because they can improve their language skills; the sensitivity to the sounds of language (Isbell 2002); their memory skills, body language and communicative competence; students' motivation and group cohesion. Besides, this technique promotes skills such as identifying key messages, communicating to an audience, attentive listening and group participation, which underpin attitudes such as respect and a sense of being part of a team (Abma 2003).

Apart from improving all the above-mentioned skills and knowledge, storytelling enhances students' professional competence as they can learn the strategies, advantages and disadvantages of including this technique in their future teaching practice. Nevertheless, as Abma (2003) suggests storytelling techniques only really work if student motivation and willingness to participate is high; he also warns that an informal setting and approach is essential to guarantee success.

2.2. Integrating new technologies in TEFL: Polimedia

New technologies should not be left behind in the learning process as, according to Porter (2006: 28), "for students to be effective communicators in the 21st century,

they need to be sophisticated in expressing ideas with multiple communication technologies, not just the written word". The main problem is that while students are considered digital natives, teachers are digital immigrants (Prensky 2001), what implies that we have to change the traditional lessons where stories were read or performed orally into lessons where stories incorporate the use of new technologies. With the use of Polimedia this gap can be reduced.

Polimedia is a system that creates multimedia educational contents and material where the speaker and the presentation interact. It was developed by the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia in 2008. Diverse studies report on the advantages of using Polimedia as a teacher support program that enhances students' learning and attracts their attention (Maceiras, et al. 2010; Turró et al. 2010). Infante et al. (2010) report benefits for both teachers and students: it is an excellent tool in class and for e-learning, it is easy to use and efficient since students have access to the information and explanations at any moment. Unlike online texts, Polimedia prevents from on-line barriers because teacher-student interaction is somehow kept, enhancing clarity and closeness. As auditory and visual perceptions are integrated, it favors different learning styles.

3. The project

In order to accomplish the objectives above-mentioned, students were asked to create and tell a story in Polimedia. The story had to be original and adapted to their future teaching level, that is, primary or secondary education. Besides, some activities based on their stories had to be designed. This project is a preliminary study with a twofold dimension; on the one hand, it aimed to collect students' perceptions about learning outcomes after participating in the project; thus they play their current role of learners. On the other hand, in designing didactic material they act as teachers, too. In this vein, their opinions about storytelling in polimedia as a teaching/learning tool are also analyzed, which allows professors to assess their ability to apply theory into practice, as well as to get an idea of the level of pedagogical awareness they might have achieved.

3.1. Participants

Two groups of English Philology and English Teacher Education participated in a ten-lesson program. Both groups were enrolled in a subject related to TEFL. The English Philology group was in the fifth year; their level of English, according to their self-evaluation, ranged between B2+ and C1. Despite being enrolled in a TEFL course some of them were not very sure of their professional career yet. The English Teacher Education group was in the second year, their level of English was B1-B1+. All the students wanted to become primary teachers.

3.2. Instruments

In order to collect students' perceptions and opinions about the accomplishment of the goals and the usefulness of the tools, a 1-5 scale questionnaire was administered. It consisted of 23 items about the advantages previous studies have acknowledged to the tools. Each item was scored from 1 (minimum) to 5 (maximum) according to the level of accomplishment estimated by the student. Participants were assigned a digital code to keep anonymity. Professors filled in an observation sheet based on Egbert's (2003) study about the flow state in the foreign language classroom. At the end of the project, group interviews were carried out.

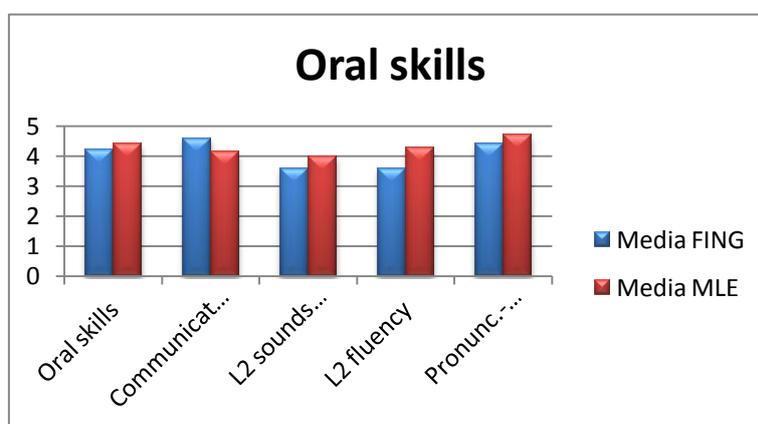
3.3. Stages

The project was divided into several stages based on the model proposed by Stoller (2002), as Table 1 indicates:

Table 1: Stages of the project

Introduction	Introduction to the project, tools and final objective; discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of incorporating storytelling and new technologies in EFL teaching.
Writing the story	Storytelling analysis and preparation of students for language demands; creation of stories.
Designing visual aids	PowerPoint design: reflection about the creation of multimodal resources; process of turning words into images.
Polimedia	Polimedia. Presentation of the tool. Preparation of students for communicative and technological demands of Polimedia. Practical sessions: voice modulation and non-verbal communication sessions, elaboration of Polimedia videos with their PowerPoint presentations and scripts.
Evaluation	Presentation and evaluation of Polimedia videos. Conclusions and suggestions for future projects.

Figure 1: Students' perception of oral skills development



4. Results

Data have been collected from the questionnaires, teachers' observations and group interviews. However, due to the scope of this work, only data from questionnaires and, partially, teachers' observation will be presented here. Results have been analyzed and categorized around the three main objectives of the project. In general, students of both degrees valued positively the project and the improvements. However, data analysis revealed interesting differences between degrees.

Regarding oral skills, both groups valued positively the development of those skills. Figure 1 shows that Education students perceived a higher improvement in their L2 sound sensibility, fluency and pronunciation. However, philology students

considered they had developed their general communicative competence. This difference may be due to the levels of mastery in the L2; Philology students probably think they don't need to improve specific sub-skills; they see the project improved their general communicative abilities, though.

As far as professional competence is concerned, both degrees agreed on the development of their pedagogical awareness. However, Education students seemed to be more sensitive towards the didactic potential of the tools for their future job. Scores among Philology students show high dispersion when asked about relevance of the project for their future. In fact, Philology studies prepare students for a wide variety of professional careers and some students said they were not very interested in being teachers.

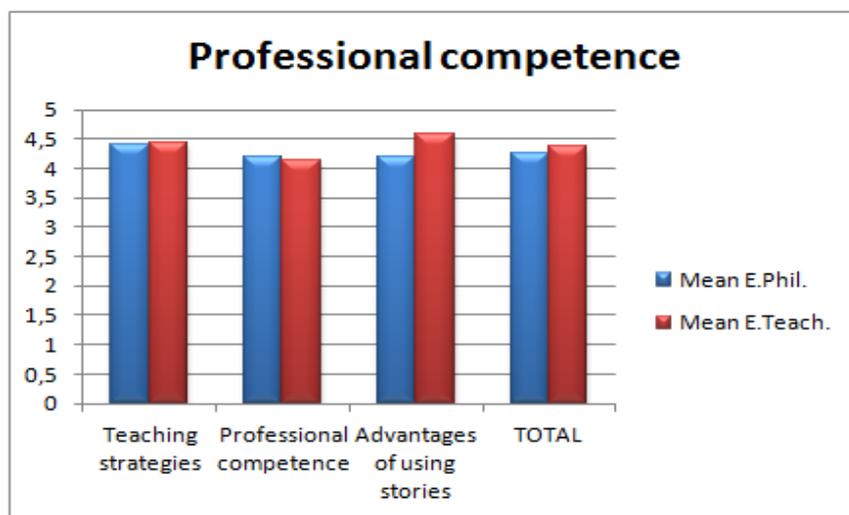


Figure 2: Students' assessment of professional competence development

As for technological competence, figure 3 shows that Teacher Education students appear to be again more sensitive towards the advantages of new technologies, in fact, they value more positively all the items related to this issue.

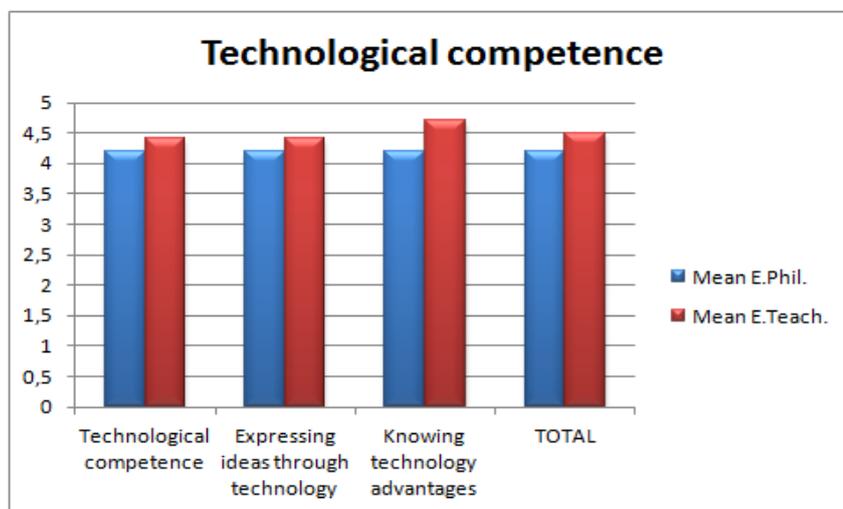


Figure 3: Assessment of technological competence

Some other items were included in the questionnaire in order to check their capacity to pedagogically value the advantages and usefulness of the tools in their professional future. Attractiveness for students and usefulness for L2 learning were positively valued (4.65 and 4.45 respectively). The possibility of using the tools for autonomous learning was less valued by Teacher Education students (3.85), what seems to show the awareness of the particular features of primary students, who need more guidance in the learning process. Items about motivation, interest and involvement in the task were included as well. These were not explicit objectives of the project. Nevertheless, their inclusion made it possible to compare students' and professors' opinions. All items were positively valued by both groups, English Philology (4.3) and Teacher Education (4.5).

In line with those results, teachers' observation reveals that a relaxing environment, where students were highly motivated, was achieved. Students felt that their oral fluency seemed to have improved, what made them more secure and less anxious. Spontaneous use of the L2 was also observed, as well as an increase in participation and collaboration. This improvement was more obvious in the Teacher Education group. Professors and students also agreed about the areas to be improved, i.e. time management and technological issues.

5. Conclusions

In order to accomplish the demands of The Bologna Plan approach professors are searching for new ways to introduce the competences they are expected to work on. In this regard, project work has proven to be an appropriate methodology for promoting knowledge and skills integrated learning. In this preliminary study the researchers aimed to gather information about the suitability of introducing the tools already presented. The main objectives of this study should help assess the efficiency of the project in order to check whether our students developed their oral language skills, and their professional and technological competences. In this vein, students' feedback was enriching.

Taking into account the main objectives, results show an excellent assessment of the three aspects. Regarding oral skills, there were some differences between degrees, since English Teacher Education students perceived an improvement in their oral skills whereas the English Philology group put more emphasis on the communicative competence, this is probably due to their higher level in the L2. The ICT competence has been positively evaluated by both groups. Moreover, students affirmed the tool stimulated their awareness with respect to pronunciation, sentence intonation and language melody because they made a bigger effort to get a gratifying final outcome. Nevertheless, English Teacher Education students seemed to be more aware of the didactic potential of the tools for their future primary lessons. Regarding Philology students, not all kind of stories are appropriate for secondary students, so topics of their interest should be identified in order to be performed in Polimedia. In general terms, Education students appear to be more aware of and sensitive towards the pedagogic potential of the tools. This is not surprising, though, as they are being trained to do so. On the other hand, it appears to be more difficult for Philology students to identify didactic uses of the tools. Probably this is also due to the specific properties of the degree. However, there is just a slight difference between the two groups; therefore, results are not conclusive.

According to professors' observation and students perception, the project helped creating an informal and relaxed environment, beneficial for students' learning. The use

of the language in a meaningful context reduced anxiety problem and reinforce motivation and students' implication. Besides, it seems a flow state (Csikszentmihalyi 1990), characterized by a pleasant state and the lost of time conscience, was created in the lessons. According to previous research (Toscano and Fernández 2010; Rubio 2009; Egbert 2003) flow state favors the learning process and the development of language skills; what appears to be consistent with the results.

However, due to the reduced number of participants, results are not statistically significant. It is necessary to carry out further studies with larger population to confirm the results presented here. Besides, future research should account for the differences found in the degrees. It could be helpful to include this project in the planning of didactic units since they would make it more meaningful; and to use rubrics to evaluate learning outcomes. Despite the shortcomings, results show that the project seems to facilitate the learning process, to stimulate creativity, participation and a deep understanding of contents. The creation of stories with Polimedia can be a powerful tool which enhances the learning of content and language, as well as knowledge construction and transference.

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