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Merging EFL methodology, intercultural teaching, and project-based learning in an attempt to push the envelope of EFL college level instruction

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Abstract

The article focuses on interdisciplinarity in (college level) EFL instruction which appears to be gaining popularity in modern teaching techniques. The idea presented here serves as an example of an interdisciplinary approach to EFL instruction where intercultural teaching merges with EFL methodology in a project-based-learning-oriented environment. I will offer a discussion of an experimental run of 24 projects prepared by 74 EFL college level Polish students under my supervision; the projects were team work assignments where students' task was to create/compile a unit for an EFL coursebook consisting of a series of (2 or 3) classes (lesson plans) with ready-made materials for learners and 'teachers' book-like' methodological guidelines for instructors. The lesson plans were supposed to revolve around an intercultural topic, to which the practice of all language skills and a computer-assisted element were to be added. All the procedural details and outcome of the projects will be described in the presentation and the core of the discussion will focus on both rewarding and disappointing aspects of this mode of instruction from students' as well as the instructor's perspectives.

1. Introduction

Project-based learning (PjBL) seems to have been gaining popularity as an instruction mode at the primary and secondary levels of education all over the world for the last two decades. Especially the American K-12 education shows extensive use of PjBL in all subjects, with emphasis on sciences. There are, however, no reasons why this type of instruction would not work efficiently with university students; even if it is not widespread at colleges and universities, studies show that it can be used with considerable success (Donnelly and Fitzmaurice 2005). After all, the beginnings of PjBL are tied to *tertiary* medial training (Ryan and Koschmann 1994).

This article attempts to show the benefits and downsides of implementing PjBL instruction in an undergraduate EFL teacher training programs at two Polish higher education institutions, namely State University of Applied Sciences in Konin and Adam Mickiewicz University in Kalisz. The general aim is to provide an account of an attempt at introducing an alternative to regular, or traditional, university instruction. The intent here is to show that what is so eagerly utilized in K-12 education might as well work effectively with university students, even if it is challenging and difficult on the part of both participants and the instructor.

The first part of the article is a short literature review of the fundamental ideas behind PjBL, which serves as a way of showing the essential elements of project-based instruction. Next, the case of implementing collaborative, interdisciplinary projects in two EFL undergraduate programs at the above-mentioned colleges is described. Here, the entire process is carefully detailed and the results are presented and discussed. The main focus of this part of the article is on the perception of PjBL in a university education context by: (1) students participating in the study and (2) the instructor/projects' supervisor. The general reactions, attitudes, strong and weak points of this type of instruction will be presented from both these angles and followed by a number of concluding remarks and pedagogical implications for all those who consider pushing the envelope of traditional college level instruction.

2. Project-based learning as a model of instruction

Before proceeding to the description of the study, it appears only reasonable to take a brief look at the very concept of PjBL and the principles that guide it. Interestingly, PjBL is becoming increasingly more difficult to be defined since many different modes of instruction and classroom practices are often placed within the category of PjBL, as noted by Tretten and Zachariou (1997). On a very general level, PjBL "is a model that organizes learning around projects" (Thomas 2000: 2)

or, as Bell (2010: 39) puts is, it is an approach to learning that is student-driven and teacher-facilitated, where "students learn in a social environment, work hand-in-hand with their teachers to discover ideas through careful scaffolding, document their journey of learning, and finally present their learning through projects".

What seems, however, of greater importance than a concise, one-sentence definition are the guiding principles of PjBL, as they are often called, which researchers deem necessary for an educational task to claim the title of a PjBL endeavor. The assortment of these principles that can be found in PjBL-related articles and books is rather wide and there is no clear and definitive set that might function as an agreed-upon guide for tackling project-based learning. There are, however, certain consistent features of PjBL which seem to reverberate in both research summaries (e.g. Thomas 2000; Grant 2002; Boss and Krauss 2008; David 2008; Larmer and Mergendoller 2010; Bell 2010), as well as in research studies pertaining to project-based instruction (e.g. Tretten and Zachariou 1997; Filippatou and Kaldi 2010; Kilinc 2010). These include: *centrality*, *driving question*, *autonomous character of project work*, *constructive investigation in a collaborative environment*, *realism*, *21st century skills promotion*, *final artifact*, and the *use of technology*.

One of the most frequently reiterating principles is the idea of *centrality*, which is understood as a prerequisite in attempting PjBL instruction design. A project, and the entire process of working on one, for that matter, is to be a central part of a curriculum, "not a supplementary activity to support learning" (Bell 2010: 39). Therefore, project work should be designed in order that students immerse in the task and "learn the central concepts of the discipline via the project" (Thomas 2000).

Further, it is commonly agreed upon that the project needs what Larmer and Mergendoller (2010) have termed a *driving question*. This inquiry, as Bell (2010) calls it, should be a genesis of any PjBL task. The idea behind the *driving question* is that students engage in trying to respond to an authentic research question, solve a problem, investigate a real phenomenon, design a model, or make a decision related to a particular discipline (David 2008). Preferably, *the driving question* should be student-generated or, at least, negotiated with the project supervisor. This is because PjBL should, at its very core, have an *autonomous character*. If the work on the project is to reflect a real investigation (see the discussion of the principle of *realism* below), students should be given the necessary freedom in their decision-making processes while working on the projects. Moursund (2003) suggests that project work is intrinsically motivating because it is student-centered and student-driven. Bell (2010) takes the idea of autonomy a step further and claims that project work is a valuable tool for catering to students' individual differences. With students' *voice and choice*, a

term used by Larmer and Mergendoller (2010), they can, for example, "use resources that are appropriate for their individual reading levels and compatible with their technology knowledge" (Bell 2010: 41).

Next, PjBL should not be considered a simple gathering of information and pasting it into a project. It needs to be at *constructive investigation in a collaborative environment*. In other words, working on a project is to lead to a construction of understanding and/or skills formation. This obviously places PjBL among the various approaches to learning/teaching that fall under the umbrella-term of constructivism. Thomas (2000), in his extensive review of research into project-based learning, very effectively explains what differentiates a regular exercise from a PjBL design: "If the central activities of the project represent no difficulty to the student or can be carried out with the application of already-learned information or skills, the project is an exercise, not a PBL project" (Thomas 2000: 4). Not without significance here is the element of cooperation, so frequently tied to constructivism. In order for a PjBL task to reflect a true inquiry, collaboration is of essence. Not only do students need to cooperate among each other, but they also need to consult outside-the-classroom sources, the instructor, or anybody/anything that their project may require. Thus, it may safely be stated that the premises of constructivism: construction of knowledge, collaboration, and negotiation of meaning, lie at the very nature of project-based learning (Moursund 2003).

A principle somewhat related to the above is *realism*, a concept that also stems from the epistemology of constructivism. Through project work, students are supposed to "engage in real-world activities and practice the strategies of authentic disciplines" (Boss and Krauss 2008: 12). Many observe that PjBL instruction, if designed to reflect the real-world connection, is beneficial to students who acquire new skills and new knowledge, become better researchers, problem solvers, or higher-order thinkers, just as they would if they were expose to a similar challenge in, say, workplace Also, students have the opportunity to apply the already-existing talents and skills in their project investigations (Boss and Krauss 2008; Bell 2010; Larmer and Mergendoller 2010). Thomas (2000: 4) suggests that the feeling of authenticity is of great importance to students and, consequently, the design phase of the project should ensure its "realistic, not school-like" character.

In their "7 essentials of project-based learning", Larmer and Mergendoller (2010) unequivocally refer to the idea that project work promotes the *21st Century skills* "which will serve them well in the workplace and life". These include "collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and the use of technology", but this list is far from being definitive, as other researchers highlight other skills, such as "creativity, information fluency, critical thinking, and digital citizenship"

(Boss and Kraus 2008) or "responsibility, independence, and discipline" (Bell 2010: 40). Nevertheless, PjBL allows for equipping our students with "valuable skills that will build a strong foundation for their future in our global economy" (Bell 2010: 39).

One of the features which differentiates project-based learning from problem-based learning is the concept of a *final artifact*, that, in the case of PjBL, needs to be produced as an ultimate outcome of the investigation process. The word 'project' can be understood in a myriad of ways but may be, broadly, put under the categories of a product, presentation, or performance (Moursund 2003). Grant (2002) adds that the final artifact(s) must be shareable, which suggest that the artifact is to be shown to an audience. This is of great importance as not only does it make project work more engaging, since "schoolwork is more meaningful when it's not done only for the teacher or the test" (Larmer and Mergendoller 2010), but it also gives students a sense of achievement incomparable to a test score.

Lastly, the *use of technology* is more and more frequently mentioned as one of the essential features of PjBL (Krajcik et al. 1994; Boss and Krauss 2008; Brush and Saye 2008; Bell 2010), sometimes being mentioned as part of the *21st century skills* principle, sometimes on its own. A closer look at a number of sources that touch upon modern technology and PjBL, there seems to be a general agreement that the use of technology, especially the Internet, perfectly complements other, already-mentioned principles of PjBL, such as *realism*, *21st century skills* promotion, or *constructive investigation in a collaborative environment*, all conducive the use of it. Boss and Krauss (2008) go as far as to postulate a reinvention of project-based learning by means of extensive use of technology. As they explicitly state, technology serves as a tool for "discovery, collaboration, and communication, taking learners places they couldn't otherwise go and helping teachers achieve essential learning goals in new ways" (Boss and Krauss 2008: 12). Further, they are of the opinion, and rightly so, that technology may be a gateway to taking PjBL further into a global, collaborative context: "Increasingly, teachers collaborate to design and implement projects that cross geographic boundaries or even jump time zones" (Boss and Krauss 2008: 12). With today's omnipresent broadband Internet connections and Web-enabled mobile devices, it only seems natural that the use of technology is taken for granted by students and "an authentic use of technology is highly engaging (…)" to them, "because it taps into their fluency with computer" (Bell 2010: 42).

In conclusion, it seems that project-based instruction is one of the approaches which go well beyond narrowly-focused didactics. Its principles, as described above, stem from a number of disciplines, from psychology of learning and sociology to the use of modern technologies. Besides, the use of PjBL, as suggested by the above-mentioned principles, is an all-embracing teaching

mode that may work perfectly with the hard sciences as well as the humanities. Interestingly, and importantly for the study delineated below, project-based instruction is a natural fosterer of merging of different disciplines. As Bell (2010: 42) observes, "even though a project may be based in one curricular area, it crosses over into all areas of traditional academic studies". In fact, PjBL's natural inclination towards interdisciplinarity was one of the reasons to tackle the task shown in the next section of this paper.

3. Design of the study

The study presented here was conducted in the first semester of the 2012-2013 academic year. The subjects in the study were 74 sophomore college students – participants of English as a foreign language teacher training programs (English philology programs) at two Polish tertiary educational institutions: State University of Applied Sciences in Konin, Poland (http://www.pwsz.konin.edu.pl/en) and Adam Mickiewicz University at Kalisz, Poland (http://www.zfawpa.amu.edu.pl/). The students, before proceeding with the projects described here, had already had courses in intercultural learning, American and British studies, and EFL methodology. Their proficiency in English could be described as "upper-intermediate".

The projects described and discussed below were prepared under my supervision as part of my *Modern American society* course, which was offered to second year students at both of the previously mentioned institutions. During the first semester of this course students were familiarized with a selection of American Studies-related issues in the form of what might be called "traditional instruction". The second semester was entirely devoted to project work.

As previously mentioned, the idea behind this study was to get insights into the benefits and drawbacks of a collaborative PjBL situation where a number of disciplines converge. Additionally, it was assumed that merging social studies (American Studies, intercultural learning) and EFL methodology instruction in a PjBL environment adds to the realworldness of students' education. Similarly, the task laid out below had, at its very conception, the aim of offering realistic practice for future teachers and giving them a chance to use (and perhaps form) skills, which they would not have been able to do if it were not for project-based instruction. Finally, it was to be hoped that this type of design would 'unleash' students' creativity and engagement.

With this in mind, a project idea was developed in which students, in groups of 2-4, were asked to prepare a 2-3 lesson unit for a hypothetical EFL coursebook, centered around a(n) (inter)cultural topic, preferably American Studies, as if working for a publishing house. In other words, students were asked to put themselves in the position of instruction designers/coursebook

creators/lesson planners and design a series of lessons for a selected age/level group. The aim was to prepare *ready-made* material to be used in a real EFL classroom. Each project was supposed to include:

- 2-3 EFL lessons prepared in the form of a coursebook unit at the level chosen by students;
- a cultural basis/frame/heading (e.g. three lessons centered around a topic of national holidays in the US);
- teachers' manual (exercise keys, methodological guidelines, procedures, photocopiables, transcripts, etc.);
- student-generated material (e.g. grammar or vocabulary exercises, texts);
- practice of all language skills;
- grammar and vocabulary practice;
- an element of ICT (e.g. a YouTube video as part of a lesson, an exercise requiring the use of the Internet, etc.);
- a graphic layout of a typical coursebook (not obligatory).

The underlying assumption behind this particular project was the thought of these students being potential future teachers who, sooner or later, will face the challenge of creating (or at least compiling) their own classroom material. Furthermore, inviting them to do a project that merges a number of disciplines was intended to create a real-world connection that mirrors authentic (e.g. workplace) contexts in which (constructive) investigations, multidisciplinary approach, and the use of information technology coexist and are far from being extraordinary.

The project idea was presented to students at the beginning of the semester together with a detailed guide where consecutive stages of the project were carefully described. It is important to point out that in order to comply with the idea of *centrality*, which is essential in PjBL, the entire semester was devoted to project work and no additional instruction was delivered to students. As Table 1 shows, there are 6 stages in the procedural scheme, which constitutes a general frame for carrying out the project. The scheme begins with two whole-class meetings (Stage 1 and 2) where the idea of the project is presented to students and groups are formed. Simultaneously, during the first meeting, students are asked to "sleep on it" so that they can reflect on the idea, ask questions, comment and negotiate deadlines, and other details of the projects in the second meeting.

These two meetings are followed by Stage 3, a series of instructor-group consultation meetings. This stage is essential as during these meetings the actual projects are planned, prepared, drafted, corrected, and finally submitted. It needs to be emphasized here that the way each project is handled may be different as its pace or scope hugely depends on the idea a particular group of students has as well as on a particular group's dynamic. Typically, each group would need to meet with the instructor 5 to 6 times; yet, as my experience

shows, there are students who are able to complete the project earlier, after 2 or 3 meetings. A great deal of work in Stage 3 is done autonomously by students and the meetings, largely, consist in discussing students' ideas, drafts, samples they worked on outside the classroom. Also, worth mentioning is the fact that the role of the instructor at this stage is restricted to assisting and (re)routing students onto the right paths by asking questions, giving feedback, and making observations on the progress of each group.

The last 2 classes of the semester are devoted to students' presenting their projects to the rest of the class in a show-and-tell session (Stage 4). Also, at this point, the completed projects are submitted (usually electronically) to the instructor for evaluation. Further, in Stages 5 and 6 mutual feedback is given by students and instructor. Also, the instructor gives his final written assessment of each project.[1]

Project stage	**What/How/Who**	**When**
Stage 1: Orientation meeting/Task presentation	instructor presents the idea to students together with the Project Guide (a written procedural document describing each phase of the project) examples of projects are shown to students time is given to students to have the opportunity to reflect on the task given	Beginning of semester (1st class)
Stage 2: Group formation/ Q and A session	students ask any questions they might have after the orientation meeting students comment on the task and negotiate deadlines students put themselves in groups (2-4 students in a group) time is given to students to think about their driving questions	Beginning of semester (2nd class)
Stage 3: Consultation meetings	6-7 consultation meetings per group groups present their driving questions/project ideas to be discussed with and accepted by instructor instructor oversees project preparation by reflecting on students' progress as they submit consecutive parts of the project instructor makes observations, takes notes and interviews students for subsequent assessment purposes	Throughout the rest of semester
Stage 4: Artifact submission/show-and-tell session	students submit their projects students present their project to the rest of the group	End of semester (last 2-3 classes of the semester)
Stage 5: Students' feedback	a questionnaire is given to students to reflect on the project	End of semester
Stage 6: Evaluation	students are provided with written feedback	End of semester

Table 1: Project procedures.

[1] It needs to be stated here that the issue of assessment in PjBL will not be discussed here as it is beyond the scope of this paper.

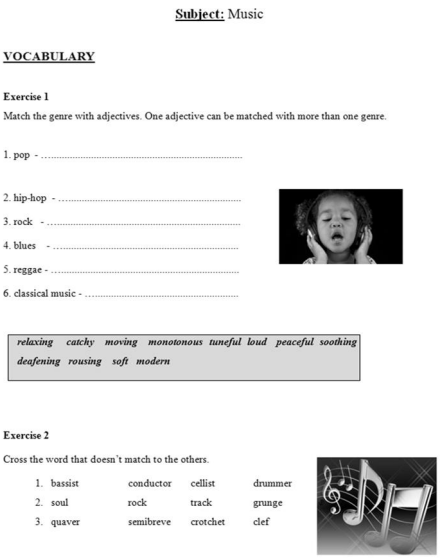
4. Data collection

Data was collected during the work on the project (Stage 3) and after the artifacts were complete (Stage 5). In Stage 3, observations were made by the instructor in the form of notes in order to: (1) assess the process of project preparation by each group and (2) make general observations on the procedures, group dynamic, students' reactions, limitations and advantages of the PjBL instruction in the context described here. These will be used to discuss the advantages and limitation of the PjBL situation from the perspective of an instructor later on in the article.

In Stage 5 a two part questionnaire was administered to the students (see Appendix 1). Part 1 of the questionnaire is unstructured and requires from participants to give feedback under the following categories: (1) *General comments* (their overall reactions to the project and its procedures), (2) *Positive aspects/benefits the project brings* to them and their learning, and (3) *Negative aspects/weaknesses* of the projects. The second part of the questionnaire is structured and consists of 11 Likert-scale questions. Altogether, 52 questionnaires were returned and they will be the basis for the discussion of students' perspective on the issue of PjBL in the next part of this paper.

5. Examples of projects

At the end of the semester, 24 projects were handed in, varying in length, format, and quality. All of them, however, conform to the essential guidelines presented to students at the beginning (see 3. Design of the Study). The following figures (1-4) present snippets of students' work.



Subject: Music

VOCABULARY

Exercise 1

Match the genre with adjectives. One adjective can be matched with more than one genre.

1. pop - .....
2. hip-hop - .....
3. rock - .....
4. blues - .....
5. reggae - .....
6. classical music - .....

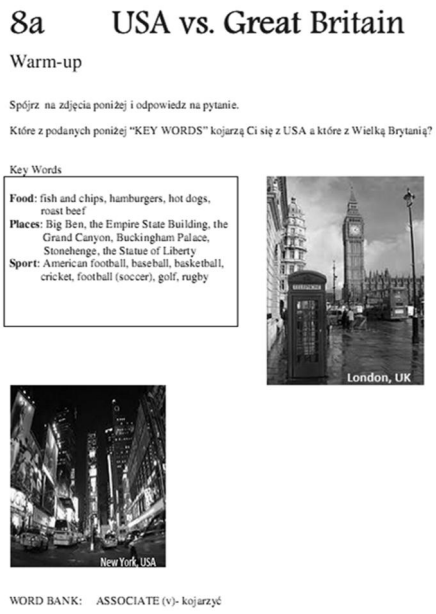
relaxing catchy moving monotonous tuneful loud peaceful soothing deafening rousing soft modern

Exercise 2

Cross the word that doesn't match to the others.

1.	bassist	conductor	cellist	drummer
2.	soul	rock	track	grunge
3.	quaver	semibreve	crotchet	clef

Figure 1: An example of a student-generated vocabulary exercise for the project on American music.



8a USA vs. Great Britain

Warm-up

Spójrz na zdjęcia poniżej i odpowiedz na pytanie.

Które z podanych poniżej "KEY WORDS" kojarzą Ci się z USA a które z Wielką Brytanią?

Key Words

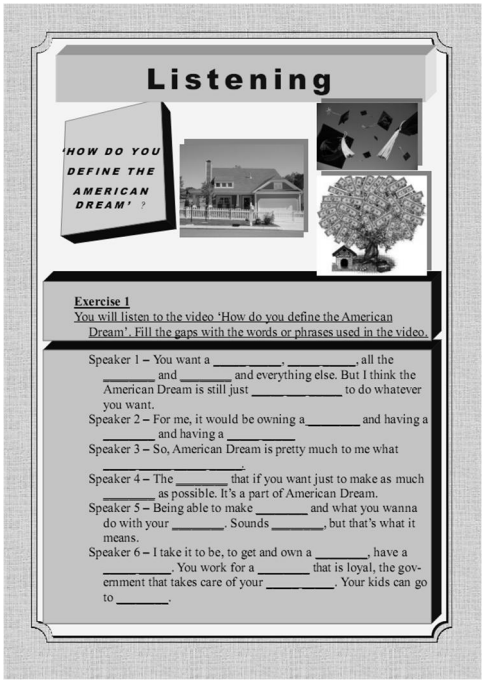
Food: fish and chips, hamburgers, hot dogs, roast beef
Places: Big Ben, the Empire State Building, the Grand Canyon, Buckingham Palace, Stonehenge, the Statue of Liberty
Sport: American football, baseball, basketball, cricket, football (soccer), golf, rugby

London, UK

New York, USA

WORD BANK: ASSOCIATE (v)- kojarzyć

Figure 2: An example of a student-generated warm-up activity from a lesson for junior high school students.



Listening

'HOW DO YOU DEFINE THE AMERICAN DREAM' ?

Exercise 1

You will listen to the video 'How do you define the American Dream'. Fill the gaps with the words or phrases used in the video.

Speaker 1 – You want a _____ _____, _____ _____, all the _____ and _____ and everything else. But I think the American Dream is still just _____ _____ _____ to do whatever you want.

Speaker 2 – For me, it would be owning a _____ and having a _____ and having a _____ _____.

Speaker 3 – So, American Dream is pretty much to me what _____ _____ _____.

Speaker 4 – The _____ that if you want just to make as much _____ as possible. It's a part of American Dream.

Speaker 5 – Being able to make _____ and what you wanna do with your _____. Sounds _____, but that's what it means.

Speaker 6 – I take it to be, to get and own a _____, have a _____ _____. You work for a _____ that is loyal, the government that takes care of your _____ _____. Your kids can go to _____.

Figure 3: An example of a student-generated listening exercise based on a *You Tube* video.

Lesson 1

American film industry

1. Speak with your friend and then discuss the following questions with class.

a) What famous film directors do you know?

b) What are the characteristics of a good film director?

2. Read the sentences and working in pairs, try to guess what the highlighted words mean.

a) Many people **objected** to the new law proposed by the government by organizing a protest.

b) The company is going to **launch** a new product next year.

c) In last year's elections this party **garnered** 43% of the vote.

d) In the opening **shot** of this film you could see gangsters playing cards in a casino.

e) When making a film, there is always one person responsible for costumes and **props** such as furniture, guns, toys, etc. that actors will use in particular scenes.

LISTENING and READING

Listen to the recording and find answers to the following questions.

a) Who is the recording about?

b) Did he receive many awards? Can you remember any names of the awards?

c) Do people in the recording admire or criticise him?

Steven Spielberg in a nutshell

Steven Allan Spielberg was born on December 18, 1946, in Cincinnati, Ohio. As a young filmmaker, Spielberg made his first feature entitled *Firelight* when he was still in high school.

Susan Goldman Rubin, author of *Steven Spielberg: Crazy for movies:* "When he was 10 years old he **objected to** the way his dad was taking family movies. Steven said it was very boring watching family movies. So he **took over** and became the family photographer."

He attended CSU Long Beach after failing several times to get into film school. But Spielberg **dropped out** of college after his short film *Amblin* got him signed as a TV director for Universal.

Susan Goldman Rubin: "Spielberg's first show was a programme called *Night Gallery*, and the episode he was told to **direct** starred the great Hollywood actress Joan Crawfort, and when Spielberg **turned up**, they said they couldn't believe that this kid was directing Joan Crawfort."

In 1977 Spielberg wrote and directed *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and **garnered** six Academy Award nominations. He followed up with the string of hits, including *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*, and *The Color Purple*.

In 1994 Spielberg earned his first Best Director Academy Award for *Schindler's List*, and used profits from the film to **set up** the Survivals of the Shoah Visual History Foundation.

With two partners Spielberg **launched** DreamWorks in 1994, producing both live action and animation. In 1998 the studio made *Saving Private Ryan*, winning Spielberg his second best Director Academy Award.

Dale Dye (actor & military advisor): "*Saving Private Ryan* was epic, and the amount of things and people, sets, **props**, and weapons. It was really difficult for me to offer and keep track of all of that. Steven doesn't think in those terms though; he thinks of what he needs to tell the story because he's seen the **shots** and seen the sequences long before we've ever got to them."

As a writer, producer and the most commercially successful director of all time, Steven Spielberg was named by Life Magazine as the most **influential** person of his generation.

Roger Corman (director/producer): "I think Steven stands as one of the most important American filmmakers. He is one of very few filmmakers to do serious work to function brilliantly as an artist, yet, at the same time, have the knowledge of what the **audience** wants. So his films are both commercially and artistically successful."

Adapted from: www.biography.com/steven-spielberg

Figure 4: An example of a reading exercise from a lesson on American movies.

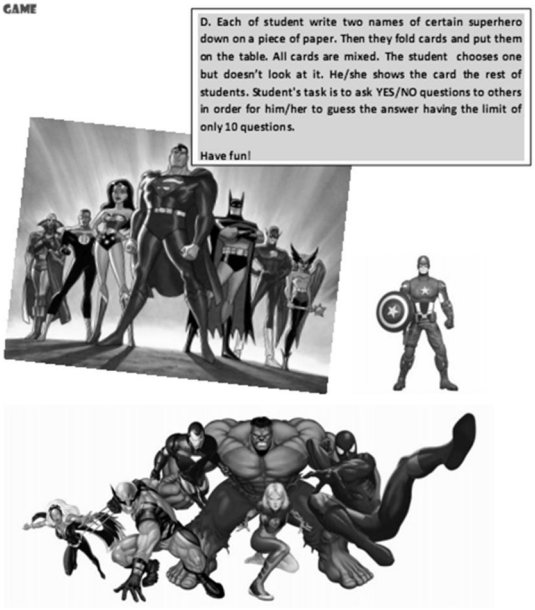


Figure 5: An example of a student-generated speaking exercise - a game from a lesson on American comic book heroes.

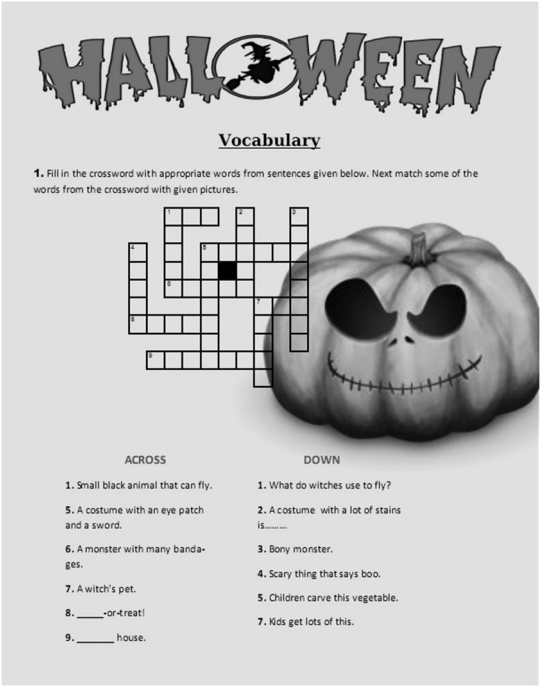


Figure 6: An example of a student-generated Halloween crossword from a project on American holidays.

6. Results and discussion

The following section describes the results of the study from two angles. Firstly, on the basis of the questionnaire responses, the reactions, comments, and observations of students will be presented. These will be followed by a number of observations from the instructor, focusing especially on the difficulties and advantages of working in a PjBL context. It also needs to be stressed at this point that the entire discussion included in this section as well as the conclusion that follows lie within the framework of interpretive research design and, as a result, guidelines and implications rather than generalizations will be offered.

6.1. Students' perspective

After a careful analysis of the responses from the *General comments* section of the questionnaire, a generally positive attitude of students towards this particular project can be traced. As many as 49 (out of 52) students termed the project experience as "a good idea", "positive", "nice", or "useful". Interestingly, there were no straightforwardly negative comments and, in fact, only two critical comments of the project work were found. One of the students reported that they were not fond of the idea of a project as they "thought it hard to be done" and yet they continued by saying "but then I changed my mind". Another student commented on the time-consuming aspect of project work by saying that "It took too much time that we could sacrifice [devote?] to study more important things. On the other hand, it was useful(…)".

The next most often occurring idea in students' general reactions (12 respondents) is perceiving the project as a way of getting used to the typical teacher's tasks or roles. Admittedly, because of the fact that the project involved a great deal of creative work and/or material compilation, Internet research, and document authoring, it did resemble the work of a (creative) teacher who refuses to follow a single coursebook. A typical comment here would focus on the preparation aspect as reflecting a real-life situation of a teacher. One of the students reported that the project allowed them "to see the job of a teacher preparing classes". Also, an interesting role was assigned to the project by a student who observed that the PjBL experience gives one an opportunity to "check yourself before you become a teacher".

Other comments that the students delivered in this part of the questionnaire could be grouped into 4 different categories. First, five students reflected on the idea that this type of instruction helps one learn to cooperate. Secondly, three of the respondents pointed out that project work was a novelty to them. Thirdly, two students referred to the idea of creativity development in the context

of project-based instruction and, finally, one respondent termed the project experience as "very stressful".

As an extension of the *General comments* section of the questionnaire the students were to make more specific observations on the *Positive aspects/benefits the project brings*. Here, two of the aspects mentioned above are clearly repeated by respondents. The first is the way the project is viewed by students as an opportunity to take a peek into the duties and tasks of real teachers, with as many as 29 students altogether referring to this idea. As one respondent pointed out, "students can feel like teachers and become familiar with the way teachers are trying to prepare lessons". By the same token, another student emphasized the practicality of the project experience by stating that "it's not only theory (like during lectures), it's more practical view on teachers' work". This particular comment, and many other with similar overtones, is of great significance to this study in that it shows how PjBL is capable of bridging the gap between theory and practice in EFL teacher training. One of the respondents offered a straightforward observation in this context by saying that "we could finally use knowledge from our [EFL] methodology class".

The second most frequently raised positive aspect of the project experience, mentioned by 29 out of 52 respondents, is the benefit of group work. Here, the students, for the most part, emphasized two particular advantages of team cooperation. Some referred to the advantages of collaboration as a break in the routine of individual tasks, such as research papers, so typical of university education in Poland. Others, on the other hand, pointed out to the benefits of group work as a mode which allows sharing work, either equally or according to skills and competences particular group members possess. Interestingly, the same aspect of group work, as I will show later, is often viewed as a source of difficulty in group project endeavors, if not a straightforward disadvantage.

Other frequently mentioned positive aspects of the project experience were creativity and opportunity to learn something new. Eleven students, which is approximately one fifth of all respondents, reported on the advantageous character of the project as a "creative piece of work". Even though this was not reported by the majority of respondents, it is of special importance to the study and its author, as it reflects one of the underlying ideas of the study, i.e. an attempt to give students an opportunity to become imaginative creators rather than passive recipients of knowledge. Equally important in this context is that as many as 9 respondents pointed to the benefits the project work had on their learning. From the instructor's perspective, it is an interesting and encouraging find to see students report obtaining new knowledge, "both culture and language". Obviously, one needs to be aware that it was not intended to check what language or intercultural learning took place while working on the projects and

so, students' observations refer solely to their own perception of what they have learned and, therefore, acquisition of any knew knowledge cannot be confirmed.

The next section of the questionnaire, i.e. the weaknesses, problematic aspects and disadvantages of the project experience, seems especially significant from the instruction design standpoint. The responses found here are extremely helpful in improving project guidelines, dealing with problematic situations, or finding instructional solutions which do not compromise educational aims and yet help students feel comfortable in the PjBL environment. In other words, students' comments on difficulties and weaknesses of the project serve as a good source for changes in the general PjBL model for university students.

Out of all 52 students 22 reported problems with cooperation in groups. As mentioned above, it is interesting to have found that group cooperation is by many viewed as a great benefit and, at the same time, a source of potential problems and conflicts. Here, the responses usually revolved around the difficulty of the logistics of group work. In an extensive comment on problematic aspects of the projects, one students summarized, in a way, what many others reported: "it is quite difficult when it comes to cooperation with people who live miles away from each other, thus some differences in the style of project can be seen". What draws attention is the second part of the comment, suggesting that each group member was responsible for a particular fragment of the project, which, from the instructor's perspective, is alarming as it shows that with such an in-group work arrangement students may not have the grasp of the whole project and its contents; rather, they only focus on a limited element of it. Also, other aspects of group cooperation were reported as problematic. Five comments (out of all 22) referred strictly to the problems with work share. A typical complaint would be that "sometimes sharing work in group wasn't equal (unfortunately)" or "there's always one person who doesn't work at all". An overall impression is that many students do have a feeling of injustice where work could not have been shared equally; it is interesting to observe that some of the comments on this particular issue were quite strong and emotional, sometimes even sarcastic, such as: "team work – 2 ppl only, not 3 because the third one didn't care".

Another problematic aspect of the project, in the eyes of the participants themselves, was the time consumption. Sixteen respondents offered their comments on this issue, being quite unanimous in their complaints about the amount of time it took them to complete the projects. It can only be speculated why so many reflected on the time consumption aspect but, most probably, there are two main reasons for it. First, group-work projects do not necessarily require more time to complete than individual tasks but the necessity of getting together within the group to discuss the project and make strategic decisions

requires better organization skills and willingness of others to cooperate at a particular place and time. A group member counts on others within the group but is, at the same time, dependent on them. The other reason might be the lack of experience of working in a PjBL setting. Indeed, one student directly said that "it consumes lots of time – maybe because of my inexperience in doing such projects". A group PjBL task requires a different time management than individual tasks, not only because there are others involved; it calls for a greater assortment of actions and skills to be used than a typical research paper that all students are familiar with, just to mention producing material from scratch, presenting it in a computerized, aesthetically acceptable form, and meeting many deadlines, which makes it difficult for students to put things off for the last minute.

Apart from cooperation problems and time-consuming character of the projects, the disadvantages suggested by the students include the general difficulty of the task (6 comments), technical difficulty, most probably related to computerizing the projects (3 comments), and, surprisingly, the impracticality of the projects (2 comments). Even though only two students reported such a disadvantage, it needs to be carefully approached as it may, indeed, be, in some circumstances, considered a serious weakness. As one of the students stated, suggesting the impracticality of the entire endeavor, "we cannot present our ideas to pupils". It needs to be admitted that it is a powerful criticism of the design I offered to students. Undoubtedly, the projects would obtain a new level of realism if they had been put to the test at schools and then verified and assessed; yet, practically it seems an impossible task in terms of time and logistics unless the project took 2 semesters. The other comment, similar in its suggestion of impracticality, said that "[the project] might be useless as teachers ought to conduct their lessons according to the given book and curriculum". There is no denying the fact that the educational system (in Poland) is quite strict with the way it approaches syllabi coverage. With a limited number of teaching hours and extensive material to cover as well as a considerable amount of paper work, it may indeed be the case that many teachers, no matter how imaginative and energetic, do not take the opportunity to prepare their own classroom material, as they are pushed by school authority to make every effort to cover a coursebook. This notwithstanding, I am of the opinion that being able to create teaching material or, at least, being capable of compiling it in an informed manner, is a skill of great importance to future teachers of English.

Question	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
I like the idea of the project.	20	32				52
It makes sense to spend a full semester working on a project.	16	26	8	2		52
I like the idea of doing the project in a group.	24	20	6	2		52
I would be better to have an individual Project.	2	6	16	24	4	52
I found it very hard to do this Project.	1	6	23	19	3	52
Doing the project was a waste of time.			3	32	17	52
It is rewarding to see the final outcome of the Project.	12	32	8			52
It was problematic to share work within the group.	4	15	6	21	6	52
The teacher should be more active and should control our work more.		2	12	24	14	52
There should be more project based classes in our program.	6	14	26	4	2	52
I like the idea of mixing methodology of teaching and social/cultural studies in the form of a Project.	16	24	12			52

Table 2: Students' responses to questions in the structured part of the questionnaire (see Appendix 1).

The unstructured part of the questionnaire, the results of which have been discussed above, was followed by a set of 11 Likert-scale questions addressing a number of issues, such as the general attitude towards this type of instruction, group work arrangement, in-group dynamic, and the teacher's role (see Appendix 1 for details). The results are presented in Table 2. Even a brief and general look at the results shows that they confirm what students offered in the form of comments in the previous part of the questionnaire. All the respondents expressed their approval of the project as such (Question 1) and the great majority denied the project being a waste of time, with only 3 remaining neutral (Question 6). Furthermore, there is a positive evaluation of the interdisciplinary aspect of the project, with 40 students agreeing or strongly agreeing that mixing methodology of teaching, cultural studies and project work appeals to them (Question 11). Interestingly, however, when asked whether there should be more project-based classes in their BA teacher training program (Question 9), twenty six students neither agreed nor disagreed, 4 disagreed, and

2 disagreed strongly, which amounts to 32 students (over 60% of the total number of respondents) not directly approving of more classes being PjBL-driven. This obviously remains in certain contrast to the previously mentioned students' overall positive attitude towards the idea of a project but it is not, in my opinion, particularly surprising. Most probably, the causes of this discrepancy in opinions have to do with the number of difficulties and challenges the students faced while working on the projects even if only 7 of them directly referred to the project as very hard to do (Question 5). This would be confirmed partly by their comments discussed before (such as time consumption, work share issues, etc.) and also by some of my own observations and other research studies I have conducted (cf. Wolski 2011; Wolski 2012). First, there is an amount of frustration involved at certain stages of the project, which is, in fact, discouraging to many individuals or even groups. The other reason for students not to be particularly enthusiastic about doing projects more often is not the difficulty of the task itself but, rather, the length of the project or, to put it differently, the difficulty of having to deal with a lengthy task that requires constant attention and systematic work, in-group conflict resolutions, meeting deadlines, or dealing with one's own frustration, all of which may make it a burdensome experience. Fortunately, as responses to Question 7 show, the majority of students (44) find their work, or the artifact, to be precise, rewarding, which implies a motivating character to PjBL (cf. Wolski 2012).

What is also worth pointing out is how the students responded to the question concerning group work arrangement and the involvement of the teacher in groups' internal struggles. Looking at responses to Questions 3 and 4, it seems that there is a general preference for group as opposed to individual project work, which is a confirmation of the previously discussed students' comments on the benefits of group work. Likewise, the biggest problem in the context of group work arrangement that the students reported in their comments remains the same. In responses to Question 8, nearly 20 students agreed that the process of sharing work among group members was a problematic issue. At the same time, however, the majority of students (38) clearly take issue with the idea of the teacher adopting a more interventionist role in in-group conflict resolution while working on the projects (Question 9). There seems to be a clear message from students that even though conflicts and challenges appear and work flow may not be as smooth as expected, solutions should be looked for by group members themselves without the involvement of the instructor.

6.2. Instructor's perspective

In this section, it is my aim to offer a number of general observations on different aspects of project-based instruction from the perspective of a teacher/instruction-designer. The main areas of interest discussed in the paragraphs to follow are the challenges of PjBL from the teacher's standpoint, with potential troubleshooting solutions, the rewarding quality of PjBL for the instructor, and the general overview of the changes of students' engagement and enthusiasm in the projects. The comments offered here range from random personal feelings to deliberate observations based on notes taken in Stage 3, as described in project procedures (see Table 1).

First and foremost, it needs to be emphasized that the entire experience, the difficulties notwithstanding, is highly gratifying in that there is a great deal of satisfaction from students' feeling of achievement and their pride in the artifacts they have produced (Stage 4, as described in Project Procedures, see Table 1). Additionally, the analysis of the actual 24 projects from this study reveals results indicative of the (relative) success of merging EFL methodology, intercultural teaching, and project-based learning from the instruction design perspective. All projects' authors managed to follow the guidelines and come up with a well-structured series of EFL lesson plans/materials with a cultural theme running through them. Even if projects varied in language correctness and design quality, the general aim of maintaining their interdisciplinary character proved practicable.

As can be expected, however, the process, for the instructor, was not free from difficulty, especially taking into the account the number of project involved in this study. As research indicates (cf. So and Kim 2009), working in a PjBL setting may be time- and energy-consuming for instructors who not only have to deal with tasks untypical of regular classroom but also be flexible in the way they approach each student/group. Since project work is process-based, one cannot expect exactly the same levels of conscientiousness, responsiveness, enthusiasm, or pace on the part of each project participant, be it a group or an individual. In view of this and in regard to the particular projects described here, it seems that there are 2 important considerations to be taken into account at the planning stage of the projects. First, it cannot be overestimated how important planning is for this type of project. It seems that the shorter the stages within the project and the more frequent the (sub)deadlines for parts of the projects, the easier it is for the instructor to manage the entire process. Yet, secondly, my experience with project work shows that (too) rigid deadline treatment and not allowing a degree of flexibility within the procedures may cause more harm than good with certain groups of students. There is no denying that

individual differences among learners, the level of their creativity, their personalities and in-group dynamics play an extremely important role in the way they proceed with their work. Therefore, different paths on the way to the final artifact might have to be taken by some of them, which requires quite an amount of flexibility on the part of the instructor.

Perhaps the most significant of all results gathered through observation in Stage 3 of the project is a certain consistency in students' general emotional reaction to the project. Nearly all the groups (22 out of 24) appear to have displayed three phases of engagement throughout the process. At the very outset (Stage 1, Stage 2, and beginning of Stage 3), students projected their positive attitude towards the task, which I call the *initial enthusiasm phase*. It was clearly seen by their willingness to accept the project idea and the guidelines and, later, by a problem-free group formation process and the abundance of ideas put forward as potential project themes. This enthusiasm continued until the 2nd or 3rd consultation meeting with the instructor, by which time the students had handed in samples of exercises for verification. At this point, as a result of: (1) the necessity to redraft, reformulate, or remake many of their submissions, (2) the realization that an array of issues needs to be taken into account while producing EFL/cultural teaching material, and (3) the challenges the project process brought with itself (as discussed in 6.1. Students' perspective), a change in students' attitude could easily be observed. This brought about what I would like to term a *reality-check/frustration phase*. After the next 1-3 meetings (depending on a group), students showed the tendency to come to terms with their previous disillusionments and redirected their efforts onto a more steady path towards the final stages of the project. This last phase – the *well-balanced output phase* – was characteristic of: (1) a more considered and sensible approach to project preparation, (2) a greater focus on details, and (3) tackling problems (rather than becoming disheartened). Interestingly, there were two groups which did not display the above-mentioned changes. For them the process proved exceptionally smooth and not only did they not experience frustration but they also completed their projects considerably earlier than the majority of groups.

7. Conclusion and implications

First and foremost, it is safe to say that the convergence of EFL methodology, intercultural teaching/learning, and project-based learning with college level teacher trainees is a viable instructional mode that brings both enthusiasm and real-worldness to the classroom. Even though the study presented here did not set out to give any numerical measures of increased motivation nor did it plan to discover tangible effects PjBL has on acquisition of language/cultural content,

the instructor's observations and students' responses clearly indicate that setting instruction in a constructivist, multidisciplinary, project-oriented, and collaborative context is highly appreciated by students and has a motivational force to it.

In regard to particulars, the results indicate that students are especially appreciative of the autonomous character of project work and the group work setting even if complications and disagreements occur. Similarly, what they claim valuable is the authenticity of the task, since it gives them a try at a first-hand experience of a teacher producing his/her own teaching material. This by itself is a sufficient reason to introduce this type of instruction on a greater scale with EFL teacher trainees. Yet, as mentioned before, the study participants also reported some weaknesses or problematic aspects of this instruction design. The most frequently mentioned difficulties include the amount of time project work takes and certain work share/collaboration problems. The former may (and should) be alleviated, at least to an extent, by explicitly raising students' awareness on the idea that PjBL requires a different approach to time management than traditional tasks. The latter, on the other hand, seems inevitable, yet, again, awareness raising may be the key to toning down in-group conflicts.

What the study and its results seems to suggest to instructors wanting to get engaged in PjBL is that, apart from the advantage of unleashing students' engagement and motivation, designing and administering PjBL tasks is perfectly practicable and manageable on condition that sufficient planning is undertaken. For example, preparing a detailed and thought-over document with project guidelines is helpful not only to students but also to instructors themselves as they get a clearer view of the process and are able to predict potential delays and technical/logistic pitfalls. Likewise, an awareness of the fact that a project is a time-extended process, during which students' attitudes may, and will, fluctuate from enthusiasm to frustration and disillusionment, is an asset that allows for adjusting project supervision. Also, as discussed earlier, an amount of flexibility is of necessity on the part of the instructor owing to the differences among groups in terms of their level of interest in doing the project, conflict resolution skills, emotional attitudes, language proficiency, etc.

It seems reasonable to believe that experimenting with PjBL at the college level is more than reasonable. It is, doubtlessly, worth implementing even if only for the sole purpose of change in regular university tasks. But, as I have attempted to show, there is considerably more to this mode of instruction, as it perfectly fits the constructivist paradigm by allowing for interdisciplinarity, context-rich tasks, real-life experience of working in a team, situated cognition, and, perhaps, more significantly, giving students a chance to act as experts in the field would. If all the above are there for the taking, it is, I believe, teachers' duty to grasp the opportunity and push the envelope of what is known as traditional university teaching.

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Appendix 1.
The questionnaire given to students at Stage 5 of the project
(see Table 1 in 3.Design of the study)

Please respond to the questions as widely as you wish. All your comments are highly appreciated. **The responses WILL NOT BE REVEALED TO OTHER MEMBERS OF THE GROUP but names are necessary as responses need to be grouped**.
I was in the project group with the following students (please write their names below):
……
……
……
……
……
……

1. Please describe your reaction to the idea of doing such a project. Then list some positive and negative aspects of it (from all possible perspectives).
   GENERAL COMMENTS:
   ……
   ……
   ……
   ……
   POSITIVE ASPECTS/BENEFITS IT BRINGS:
   ……
   ……
   ……
   ……
   NEGATIVE ASPECTS/WEAKNESSES:
   ……
   ……
   ……
   ……

Circle 1, 2, 3, 4

1. I like the idea of the project

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

2. It makes sense to spend a semester working on a project

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

3. I like the idea of doing the project in a group

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

4. I would be better to have an individual project

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

5. I found it very hard to do this project

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

6. Doing the project was a waste of time

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

7. It is rewarding to see the final outcome of the project

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

8. It was problematic to share work within the group

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

9. The teacher should be more active and should control our work more

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

10. There should be more project based classes in our program

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

11. I like the idea of mixing methodology of teaching and social/cultural studies in the form of a project

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree