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IN THIS EDITION

ELT Ireland features (Pages 2-3)

Welcome to our Seventh Bulletin by Laura O'Grady

ELT Events by Gabriela Pozza

Keeping you up to date by Dimitra Gkotosopoulou

Letter from the Editor by Laura O'Grady

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Mini Projects Online

By Chris Richards (Teacher Mentor, Madrid)

Cliché has already set in when we talk about the challenges of remote teaching and learning, and the importance of taking advantage of this abrupt change in our practice to learn and develop as professionals. I'm afraid this article won't present much challenge to such clichéd thinking. After the initial shock and disruption of suddenly switching to teaching online, I decided that I wanted to wring as much learning and opportunity from this situation as I could. Indeed, I'm taking a break from researching hybrid teaching to write this article. In the following paragraphs, I describe my online teaching context and explain how I set up and used lessons to prepare students to regularly produce mini projects. Then I share the lessons I learned from the experience, how the situation lent itself to project based-learning while promoting learner autonomy and taking advantage of the potentials of 'translanguaging'.

When the state of emergency was declared here in March, I had three groups of 9-11-year-olds. They normally had two one-hour lessons a week, but we decided to give them a daily half-hour Monday to Thursday. Spain's "confinement" has regularly been referred to as one of the strictest in the world and, for six weeks, children under 14 were not allowed to leave their homes. While their older siblings and cousins appeared to be drowning in work set by their school teachers, my younger students were actually asking for me to give them homework to do! Unlike their older family members, they didn't seem to have that much to do for school, and they weren't getting virtual face-to-face lessons with their regular education. My guess is that we provided some sort of stability and my students wanted to engage with that.

Since I began teaching, I've been a fan of bringing a sequence of lessons together with an outcome like a poster that gets my younger students to practise the language we have been studying. It also unleashes their creativity and producing something visual that can decorate my classroom. I always enjoy the moment when the first student asks me if they get out of their desk-chair and make their poster while lying on the floor. Within a few minutes, they're all on the floor! However, with no physical walls to decorate, and no common floor to lie on, how could I adapt this part of my practice and give them the homework they apparently desired?

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Lesson Structure

The first aspect that I considered was the structure of our lessons. As I noted earlier, we changed our timetable to give shorter, daily contact with English. I looked at our thematic syllabus and planned eight-lesson units that would last a fortnight. Each of these units combined vocabulary elicitation and instruction, working with relevant grammar structures, games and interactive activities, before some writing practice. Then, when the target language had been covered and practised, I'd share a model of the desired outcome and set the homework to be done over the weekend.

For example, with the topic of 'Animals, Habitats and the Environment', we began by looking at vocabulary for different habitats (the rainforest, the desert, and so on). Then, I used British Council materials about habitats. At the end of week one, I shared a model paragraph about the rainforest and students chose one habitat to write about in class, which we checked together and one to write about for homework (with the model and their corrected writing to help them).

In week two, we revised and learned vocabulary for wild animals, types of animals (reptiles, mammals) and the body parts of different animals. The students followed another model paragraph this time to produce a text about two animals of their choice, describing their bodies and habitats. I returned to the British Council for some materials about the threats facing these different habitats and the animals that inhabit them. The students already knew a tremendous amount about these issues, but their knowledge was in Spanish and these lessons helped them express that knowledge in English. We played vocabulary and guessing games throughout the unit, and after showing them an example of the desired outcome, we played some more.

Homework Submission

The second aspect that I needed to think through was how to display the finished products. Without classroom walls to decorate, we made our group on the virtual learning environment (VLE) my academy chose to use into our classroom walls. For each project, I posted a thread and the students replied, attaching their work in whatever format they wanted. Freed from classroom confinements and with plenty of time to produce the final product, my students got creative. Some preferred to work by hand and used home art supplies to make A4 or A3 posters and took photos of them. Others used their IT skills and created projects in Word or PowerPoint. Regardless of the format of the work they produced, all projects were uploaded to our class space on the VLE so everyone could see everyone else's efforts. In Monday's lesson, we would begin

by reviewing and evaluating the projects. Some students would have already looked at, and commented on, their peers work. Using screen-sharing, we'd systematically look at each project, and I'd invite praise and language corrections from the group. We may not have had physical classroom walls, but we made use of a worthy substitute.

VLE – Virtual Learning Environment

Virtual Learning Environment

Pic by ELT Ireland
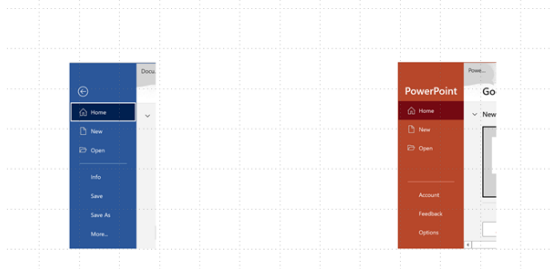
Lessons Learned

I certainly want to do more project-based learning in the future. In terms of qualitative outcomes, my learners were very enthusiastic, and with some of the topics we covered, most notably the environment and the effects of climate change, they were already knowledgeable. On reflection, this was a great example of 'translanguaging': my students were bringing existing knowledge acquired in Spanish to their English lesson and using it to produce work in the target language. In addition, they were very keen to flex their creative muscles and display their projects and research in different ways.

As a teacher, I've (re)learned a valuable lesson about learner autonomy: these projects gave students more independence than I would normally allow, and this yielded excellent results. I was amazed by the creative surprises which lay in store for me when I let my learners free on a project. I've also learned a surprising amount about the Iberian Lynx, it can be immensely rewarding for students to feel like the expert in the classroom. Giving them the freedom to choose the specific topic within a broader theme and share their knowledge was a great motivational tool. This conclusion about motivation and independence is perhaps not that surprising, but what did surprise me is how easily promoting and permitting learner autonomy can be forgotten. I know that I'm more motivated when I've chosen something that interests me, and yet, in wanting my students to achieve their language goals, maybe I'm sometimes too prescriptive. Perhaps I make decisions for my students about how they can practise and then demonstrate their language learning when they could be making it themselves.
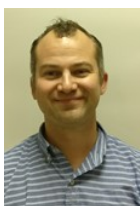
As I write, it's the beginning of what we can expect to be another challenging year in many aspects, not least for us as teachers. Unlike last September, we are starting this academic year knowing with certainty that we can't predict how these three terms will unfold or where we will be physically teaching in six weeks! Hopefully, the summer break left you as rested as me, and you're curious rather than anxious. I'm curious about how the new paradigm will develop my mini projects idea even more!

References

https://learnenglishkids.britishcouncil.org/songs/the-ballad-lisa-the-lemur
https://learnenglishkids.britishcouncil.org/songs/its-up-me-and-you
https://learnenglishkids.britishcouncil.org/short-stories/planet-earth

Originally from Cardiff, Chris taught English language and literature in the UK before moving into the field of ELT. He holds MEd in Applied Linguistics and researches representation of diversity in ELT materials. Now working as a Teacher Mentor in Madrid, he is particularly interested in inclusivity and diversity, teaching writing skills, literature in the ELT classroom, and the use of L1.

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