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Conference skills in practice

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Conference skills comprise a wide range of activities and tasks students should master to be professional and informed conference participants. The first chapter of the paper introduces the theoretical background of the project called a “mock scientific conference”, which may be seen as an instance of project-based learning. This methodology builds on the concepts of social constructivism, deeper learning, critical thinking, collaboration and learner-independence, which advocate for a student-centred and experiential approach to education through exploring real-world situations and problems. The second and third parts of the paper discuss individual tasks and activities designed for the students at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, ranging from poster presentation practice to delivering expert talks, writing abstracts and bionotes, chairing sessions and leading discussions. The students find the conference simulation to be highly motivating because it gives them the opportunity to show their expert knowledge and erudition as well as the ability to collaborate and interact with their peers. Therefore, they enhance their speaking and writing skills in a context relevant for their future careers and acquire a range of transferable skills such as organizing an event and communicating effectively.

Keywords: *conference simulation, poster presentation, project-based learning, social constructivism, student-autonomy*

Introduction

Conference skills are currently included in the standard language courses for undergraduate (Bachelor) and postgraduate (Master) students at the Faculty of Science, where EAP and ESP are combined. The increasing emphasis on the need to publicly present the results of academic work has made us seek methodological innovations which would allow for enhancing the students' ability to participate at conferences successfully. As language teachers, we feel that effective learning benefits from exploring one's broad experience, founding on authentic situations and the individual's dispositions to spontaneous behaviour and creative thinking. We can see a parallel with children, with their playfulness and readiness to improvise without worries of the communication partners noticing any imperfections. When growing older, we gradually lose these abilities, and, when being adult, we very often feel embarrassed and self-conscious when forced to do something we do not know very well, including speaking a foreign language.

Once we acquire adult roles as members of university communities, our early learning strategies tend to be replaced by knowledgeable planning, conscious structuring and careful elimination of possible mistakes. However, if we abandon spontaneity and improvising in the language classroom, then the learning outcomes often lack the creative and authentic dimensions of real-life situations for which we aspire to prepare our learners. Hence, it looks as if by creating conditions for spontaneous and close-to-authentic language use we might provide for increased efficacy of the learning environment. Spontaneity is connected to asking and attempting to answer questions or putting forward and tackling problems one does not know the solution to, in other words, activities that create a communication gap. Such steps are integrated in our undergraduate project of preparing and presenting a poster. Authenticity on the other hand can be obtained by coming to grips with tasks and problems that are universal, up to date and relevant to the learner.

Our learners, the students of Science work in various specialized research teams and see the conference participation as a realistic task. For these reasons, our method strives to simulate life-like situations and thus equip the students with alternative strategies to the traditional way of learning. In this study, we aim to anchor our approach to the theoretical principles which support student-centred and experiential learning and to provide two instances when working with students at two different levels of both foreign language skills and discipline-specific expertise. First, there is the discussion of the poster presentation project for undergraduate students, and second, the scientific conference simulation for postgraduate students. The respective language levels are B1 and B2. We also include students' reactions and a few thoughts on the possible drawbacks of our method.

Theoretical background

From the methodological point of view, the above characteristics coincide largely with the elements of project-based learning (PBL). The principles that gave rise to the PBL approach were heralded as early as the first decades of the twentieth century by an American scholar, psychologist and pedagogue, John Dewey. In his *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to Philosophy of Education* (1916) Dewey wrote: "*There is the standing danger that the material of formal instruction will be merely the subject matter of the schools, isolated from the subject matter of life-experience.*" (Dewey, 1916:10). Further on in the book he claims that what needs to be taken into account in learning is the social environment, and adds that:

“Setting up conditions which stimulate certain visible and tangible ways of acting is the first step. Making the individual a sharer or partner in the associated activity so that he feels its success as his success, its failure as his failure, is the completing step.” (Dewey, 1916:16-17)

Seeing collaborative work and metacognitive processes as elements forming the foundations for language learning were also claimed by social constructivists (Piaget, 1926; Vygotskij, 1934), as only when interacting with others is one able to assess how successful their communication strategies are and whether their communication goal has been achieved.

Project-based learning (PBL), as we know it today, means working for a longer period of time on finding a solution to a given (real) problem, or becoming prepared to perform an action aimed at fulfilling some (real) task (Parker et al, 2013; Thomas, 2000; Blumenfeld et al, 1991). Under a teacher's guidance, students, step by step, gather the information and skills needed to be able to perform the task fully independently from the teacher.

PBL thus teaches the students how to discover information by themselves rather than rely on being spoon-fed by the teacher. And at tertiary level, it should be a priority to develop autonomy in the students. At the threshold of their professional careers, they need to become independent and responsible for their own learning process. The psychological aspect of this attitude is that succeeding in a difficult task by being guided rather than being told exactly how and what to do increases one's motivation and the feeling of being successful (positive reinforcement – Skinner, 1953). The students very often feel more at ease and better prepared to deal with real-life linguistic tasks after having experienced those situations or having been acquainted with their nature in a project work (like in the one described further, leading to a simulated scientific conference event).

In its concept of preparation for future actions, project based learning's philosophy coincides also with that of Moreno's psychodrama (1934, 1953), whose goals are *“to gain new insights, resolve problems, and practice new life skills and behaviors”* through drama and roleplaying (<https://www.crchealth.com/types-of-therapy/what-is-psychodrama/>). Since simulations and roleplaying are commonly an integral part of a language project (as in the cases described further on in this article) it could be claimed that PBL also has a significant psychological aspect. Among the psychodrama benefits that are relevant for language learning here are: improved relationships and communication skills, restoring confidence, enhancing learning and life skills, and last but not least, experimenting with new ways of thinking and behaving (ibid). Thus, all in all, a language project in tertiary education is not only about practicing language itself, it is about higher rank cognitive processes that each participant goes through.

Poster presentation

At the undergraduate level, the conference skills focus on two main aspects, namely being an active audience member and being an effective presenter. We start working with first year students who do not have many models or strategies for the necessary skills. In such cases, some models should be provided to facilitate a progress. The course content therefore includes several mini-lessons which deal with such topics as evaluating the relevance of sources, constructing a team presentation, engaging in a discussion, handling questions, or designing a conference poster. Since the public displays of student research often take the form of conference posters, many students perceive the importance of becoming familiar with this format. Eventually, the simulation of a real poster session appears to be a suitable method to embrace many of the competences required at this level where the learners may have encountered the need to publicize research but have not developed the effective strategies yet.

The process of producing a poster requires the awareness of specific principles. Students should understand the basics of the poster layout and content creation so as to produce not only visually attractive but also a clear and informative poster with well-adapted textual and visual elements. Besides, presenting a poster at a conference means deviating from the typical presentation speech and reacting flexibly to the need of a particular situation. Here may be a possible gap in an EAP classroom as the specifics of the poster presentation delivery seem to be of peripheral interest compared to the complex attention to the traditional academic presentation. Typically, conference speeches are built around a predictable structure, attracting the audience in the opening, guiding them systematically through several logical stages, summarizing, and leaving the final inspiring thought. Presenting a poster, on the other hand lacks this universal appeal and feels more individualized. There is no opportunity to go through the topic systematically, although some attendees might ask for a brief overview. It is crucial for the presenter to listen attentively in order not to speak about one's view only but to respond to the enquirer's particular need. This role is new to undergraduate students and it is worth offering some instruction, for instance a micro-task such as a video with examples of different ways of responding followed by an evaluation of the strategies shown.

The individual phases of the poster presentation project can be stretched over the semester, starting with setting up teams who focus on selected topics and specify their project questions. To enhance the motivation of the whole group, it seems best to formulate the project questions in the context of a specific problem to which the team would try to find and evaluate

solutions. This usually means conducting secondary research although some students select a topic which they deal with in their primary research activities. During the middle part of the semester, the students report on selected parts of the process. First, they briefly present their choice of sources, then, having done some parts of the preparation, they present the main information about the topic and suggest questions that arise from this information. Later, they report about the types of solutions to the problem and briefly evaluate them. Finally, yet another mini-presentation deals with the choice of visual material for the poster. These continuous mini-presentations or oral reports enable the teams to sort out their material and receive feedback from both the teacher and their peers, and besides, enable the teacher to monitor the students' progress. Individual written reports on these stages might also be collected in student portfolios. These samples of students' oral and written work are subject to continuous assessment and serve the teacher as sources for formative feedback to the students.

The final outcome of the project is the poster presentation session. Depending on the level of language and academic skills in the particular group, this can be done as a simulation of a real event with real posters on the classroom walls or, at a lower level, as a series of overviews of the problems and solutions pointing to specific parts of the posters projected in electronic form. In each case, there is the important part of the interaction between the presenters and the audience adding to the authenticity of the session. Following the poster presentations, enough time should be allowed for individualized feedback from the teacher to the students and for the students' reflection on the process. Usually, students express the appreciation for the teamwork and collaboration, the freedom to choose the topic and the degree of autonomy. Many of them report that the poster presentation project is useful for their future careers.

Conference simulation

At the postgraduate (Master) level, students are expected to build on their previous (undergraduate) experience gained in the course of poster presentation and conference skills lessons, as all these activities and tasks are then integrated into a complex whole semester project. Bearing in mind the relevance and authenticity principle linked to a successful project learning (Parker at al., 2013), we devised a course leading to the "mock conference" session organized and developed by students themselves.

In this part of our paper, we are going to discuss the aims, structure, organization and outcomes of the project. This one semester (13 weeks) course was designed for the master students at B2 – B2+ level, since these

students demonstrate a sufficient command of English language and expertise in their fields; both of these are needed for successful project implementation.

At the beginning of the semester, the students brainstorm what conference skills entail. Most of them immediately come up with the idea of a paper or poster presentation as an obvious example. However, there are many more roles to consider, not only from the perspective of a paper presenter, but also related to the event organization. During the early discussions about the project, students realize that there are pre-, during and post- arrangements to be made, depending on whether a person is a conference attendee or also a conference organizer.

The students are expected to be both. Therefore, the first stages of the project work are dedicated to the preparation of paper presentations. We discuss the usual components of a successful presentation, such as relevant content, structure, body language, design of visuals, and reactions to questions. The most challenging problem for the students is how to prepare a subject-specific talk that contains expert knowledge and attitude but, at the same time, is understandable and beneficial for all the students in the group. Quite often our students decide to present the topic of their Bachelor's or Master's theses, which is highly desirable, because then they present their own research, ideas and findings, which makes their talk original and authentic. However, that poses many problems, as they tend to go into much detail and use expert terminology and concepts which other students might find difficult to comprehend. This well-illustrates the importance of audience awareness as a key skill that successful presenters should master. Consequently, we stress the necessity to simplify and abridge their talk, include explanations of key terms, and concentrate on the visual aspect of papers.

As the students think about the topics and structure of their presentations, they also compile abstracts of papers and bionotes. To motivate them and provide useful scaffolding models, we use authentic sample abstracts and bionotes from real scientific conferences and analyse their content, structure and language. The final drafts of abstracts and bionotes are then double peer-reviewed and uploaded into a shared online document. This is a rather convenient tool as all the students can see comments and amendments made by all their peers in the group and learn from them.

At this stage, activities related to conference organization start. Students need to create a call for papers, which is a team and largely autonomous work with very little teacher intervention. To make it as authentic as possible, students search the Internet for examples from calls for papers from areas related to their specializations to see which parts are included in these documents. They usually agree on the content of the call for papers

comprising the name of the event, date and venue, and procedure of submitting abstracts and bionotes. The actual call for papers' creation is carried out using an online document, which all the students can access and edit. This can be done as a class task in real time or assigned as homework. What students like most about this activity is the creativity involved in thinking about an attractive conference name, sometimes also in defining event objectives. As soon as this team-work is completed, a distribution of roles related to conference organization begins.

Depending on the number of students in the group, which is usually around 10, we appoint one or two of them who prepare a conference programme and compile a book of abstracts; also speakers who give opening and closing speeches plus session chairs who introduce speakers and organize discussions for individual presentations. Formal opening and closing speeches and chairing should be prepared and rehearsed by all the students in the group. Students are reminded of the fact that welcoming the audience is by its nature a fairly formal speech event. However, there are degrees of formality to be distinguished. Chairs of small-scale events will tend to use less formal language than they might at larger events. To practise this, students prepare welcoming and closing speeches for a range of situations, such as:

- A workshop session in which you know most of the 20 participants.
- A formal plenary session with an audience of 200 academics.
- A professional interest meeting at your home university; the audience is made up of colleagues.

Session chairs choose the most effective ways of introducing speakers to the audience by comparing video examples from real conferences. They decide which parts should be included in these introductions and which language structures may be used. Then they read the bionotes of their fellow presenters and try to introduce them formally.

We believe that this practice is very useful for students as it makes them aware of the context dependence of language, thus enhancing their communicative competence. The students of science usually possess superb analytical skills gained through the rigorous study of their disciplines, so they are able to recognize and differentiate between formal and informal structures. However, they sometimes do not quite understand that language is primarily a social phenomenon that does not function per se, but is heavily dependent on the surrounding context. Allan Bell argued that no language occurs isolated from its users and their purposes, the temporal and spatial setting, and conventions of social communities (Bell, 2014). What is

important for each language user is the ability to adapt their speech or writing to a specific situation and understand that a linguistic material that is appropriate in one situation would not work well in a different context. Therefore, our methodology concentrates on providing that experience by showing how to modify language to fit in the given context through applying this functional syllabus.

The role of section chairs comprises not only introducing speakers with their presentations and time management during the talks, but also inviting the audience to ask questions and leading the discussion. Apart from language aspects of the task, such as polite forms of indirect questions, we remind the students of the social and psychological relevance of their role. By a sensitive and tactful introduction of the presenters, they may not only inform the audience, but also partly relieve the stage fright of the speakers. After the presentation, they should acknowledge and thank the speakers by saying something positive about their paper. To initiate a successful discussion, audience members need encouragement and a good example, which chairs should provide as well.

Last but not least, students obtain feedback and assessment for their performance, which forms an essential part of the whole project. This assessment is carried out continuously throughout the course both by the students and the teacher. Students receive comments through the online platform on their writing, i.e. abstracts and bionotes, and an assessment form for their presentations, activity during discussions and tasks related to chairing and organization. This contains both formative and summative feedback; formative when students submit the second drafts of abstracts and bionotes, incorporating the suggestions of the teacher and their peers, and summative in the final comment on their work provided by the teacher.

It is reflected by the questionnaires collected at the end of the semester that most students appreciate this project-based course. The positive aspects they mention are mainly the authenticity and practicality of the task, obtained guidelines and experience with writing abstracts and bionotes, and also the practice of delivering presentations to an expert audience. They are attracted to the collaborative nature of the course, as they understand that most projects they will develop and implement in their future careers will be based on teamwork and interdisciplinarity. Some students like the chairing experience and the use of fairly formal language register, which empowers them and makes them more competent language users. Most of them also realize that organizing such an event, i.e. a conference or professional meeting, requires a lot of organization and preparation.

That is closely related to possible drawbacks resulting from the implementation of this project. First, careful planning and time management

are necessary prerequisites, because all the tasks are logically connected and must be completed at a specified time; therefore, a rigorous observance of deadlines is vital. Students are expected to work actively and autonomously throughout the project; they are involved in the decision-making, organization and assessment stages, which may pose certain difficulties for students used to a more traditional teacher-oriented approach. Students are accustomed to their expert environment and solving highly complex problems within their disciplines. However, in their abstracts and conference presentations, they should demonstrate sufficient audience awareness and adjust their writing and speaking so that other students in the group are able to participate in and benefit from their work. To sum up, students have to realize that this is the course whose success depends on their flexibility and enthusiasm, since in such a collaborative project, they need to be responsible and dedicated team members.

Conclusion

The paper discussed one concrete implementation of the methodology of project-based learning in the form of conference skills practice tasks designed for the undergraduate and postgraduate students of Science. Building on well-established theoretical principles, such as social constructivism, learner autonomy or psychodrama, we tried to provide our students with useful strategies and knowledge they could employ in their future careers and solving real-life situations. At the undergraduate level, the emphasis was placed on practicing effective presentation skills and collaborative tasks such as conference poster design and presentation, which were later, at the postgraduate level, integrated into a complex project of conference simulations.

We believe that this innovative methodology may provide useful insights and inspire other educators striving to develop a similar course incorporating spontaneous and authentic learning environment.

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Internet resources

What Is Psychodrama Therapy? <https://www.crchealth.com/types-of-therapy/what-is-psychodrama/> [Accessed on 29/12/2019]