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STUDENTS' PROJECTS AS HOME ASSIGNMENT**N. Kovalska, N. Prisyazhnyuk***National Technical University of Ukraine —KPI*

У статті розглядається специфіка домашніх завдань при вивченні іноземної мови у вигляді студентських проектів як забезпечення автономії.

Ключові слова: домашнє завдання, мотивація, самооцінка, автономія, проект.

Most members of the language teaching profession realize that their students' learning potential increases when attitudes to home assignment are positive and motivation to do it runs high. To explore the topic, we examine the characteristics of projects as home assignment. We conclude with recommendations how to implement project-based learning into university curriculum.

This article aims at presenting a rationale for incorporating projects as a kind of home assignment into language teaching and to describe some activities in the form of a single organizing framework that EFL lecturers can use to integrate the projects method into language learning in the classroom and outside it giving more autonomy to students.

In the field of language learning, evidence of increasing interest in the autonomy is shown by a growing number of articles that use reports for language learning (Allen, 2004; Beckett, 2002; Gray, 1994; Morris, 1994; Mitrofanova, 2005; Reznik, 2004). Other signs of interest include teachers education workshops based on content based teaching techniques and courses encouraging to use projects.

We cannot deny or ignore the significance of home assignment in the process of teaching and learning. In our experience, there never seems to be enough time to cover all the language work that is necessary or obligatory within course contact hours. Thus we consider that one of the most challenging aspects in foreign language teaching/learning is home assignment. A lot of research is devoted mostly to various classroom activities not the extra classroom ones, home assignment in particular. So any task or activity that encourages contemporary students to continue working on their English outside the classroom is to be welcomed.

A new challenge for a foreign language lecturer is the shift in emphasis in language teaching from a teacher-directed approach to a student-oriented one. Language learners must become more involved in managing their own learning. It goes without saying that learning is more effective when learners are active in their learning process, assuming responsibility for their learning and participating in decisions which affect it [1, p.98]. There are different ways for students to actively take part and share his/her knowledge with his/her group mates in class. Moreover, students have to be ready/well- prepared with their home assignment.

Many lecturers often complain that very few students do their home assignment on a regular basis. Some lecturers say that students seem to reject, ignore or forget their assignment. We hope we do not sound too critical of the students. We say that students work hard and under difficult circumstances, they have to cope with all their responsibilities, especially the ones that require concentration. It is perfectly understandable that lecturers have to enhance students' interest in their home assignment.

We gained valuable teaching experience, working with students of different age/level groups in using home assignment as teaching tools/aids that help students enjoy leaning English through them.

To be truly scientific we carried out some studies on the subject of home assignment that interests both lecturers and students at the Linguistic Faculty of the National Technical University of Ukraine —KPI. A question that challenges is how material and the lecturer can be adapted to the

students. After one year of research among 60 colleagues (100 percent) we are ready to present the following data:

- 86 percent (out of 100 percent) consider home assignment to be as important as the other class activities.
- 92 percent (out of 100 percent) give home assignment every class.
- 15 percent (out of 100 percent) give home assignment at the end of the class.
- 81 percent (out of 100 percent) correct home assignment at the beginning of the class.
- 72 percent (out of 100 percent) have a systematic manner of giving the amount of home assignment after each portion of planned class activity.

Based on the observations we made collecting such information, we decided to change some of our attitudes towards home assignment. First of all, it was important to us to feel what it is like to be a student in the language classroom nowadays to remind language lecturers how difficult it might be even start doing a home assignment. With this understanding we support students with —know how teaching tips!:

- How to do home assignment.
- How and when to use reference materials.
- How to plan and pace work (timing is really essential in order to be ready to pass exams in the test form).
- How to motivate oneself.
- How to self-assess.

If we mean current teaching, we should bear in mind that fundamental to the success of any home assignment is the motivation of students as far as motivation is regarded as a key component of a model of language learning [2, p.161]. Student's motivation must be engaged and maintained. In order to be as motivating as possible with home assignment lecturers have to clearly state their aims and objectives:

Here are some **suggestions** that you could try out with your students.

1. Keep the home assignment's content as close as possible to the textbook/program/course /class content.

We insist on the relevance of the home assignment to the textbook/program/course content. There should be a link between home assignment and classroom activities. Each student will work over his/her home assignment independently basing on his/her past experiences, knowledge, intellectual capacity, and learning style. We cater for different learning styles in class making the shift in emphasis in language teaching from a lecturer-directed approach to a student oriented one.

In class we can help students with patterning that is considered to be the meaningful categorization and organization of information through the development of problem solving and critical thinking skills i.e. learning in the classroom becomes more like learning in real life [3, p.152].

Home assignment is both a part of and an extension of the class. Lecturers have to find the appropriate time to join it to an activity, especially when correcting it. It can also be used to connect two classes, to start or end a unit review, or to review a specific subject.

2. Explicitly explain the tasks of the home assignment.

We also stress that in class, activities have to be structured in order to start off the students understanding, work and even creativity in relation to a home assignment. In such a way students become actively involved in doing home assignment and encouraged to be active learners. So lecturers have to make sure the students understand the home assignment. It is extremely important that the student is familiar with the exercise/activity he/she is going to do at home. Home assignment should be something that students have already talked about or done in class. Lecturers should give clear instructions or ask students to read them, and check for understanding. Students should know what they are going to do at home. Unclear instructions can be a discouraging factor or a good excuse for not doing the exercise/activity and even home assignment as a whole. Give students a reasonable time limit and advise them how to plan for an assignment.

3. Give just enough home assignment.

Students' classroom learning styles depend on the lecturer's classroom teaching styles.

Remember to give just enough home assignment every class within a reasonable time limit. Students usually have much to do. We do not want to overload them. Stimulate students to set their own learning schedules and goals.

4. Give students the choice.

Sometimes lecturers do accept it when students bring late home assignment. They consider that students should be encouraged to do the tasks even if they are not on time. Such lecturers are aware of the student who is always handing in late home assignment. Students are too generous sometimes, and there are some that like to lean on others all the time. On the other hand, it should not be like that with university students as they are to develop their social competence. There is a need for ability to adapt; it is necessary to focus on their relevant mental, communicative and planning skills. Here a lecturer should be a good example and show the way. He/she can plan more than one kind of home assignment but a range of activities that will appeal to different learner types and tell the students to choose the one they prefer, or you can ask them what they want to do for home assignment so they are free to choose their own home exercises. All the students should be engaged in tasks that enable them to be successful and to ensure their learning.

The same thing is with time limit and deadlines. There can be some flexibility and lecturers can kill two birds with one stone. In fact, we help students become more responsible.

5. Stimulate students to set their own learning schedules and goals.

In order to succeed in doing a home assignment we offer our students to have a diary in which they state /identify the elements of the language, language skills and abilities that they need to develop during the semester to fulfill the independent learning component of their course grade. Diaries give students an opportunity to reflect on the language element/skill that they chose to develop and their actual accomplishment.

Students, as learners, are the most familiar with their weak points. Lecturers need to instruct and assist with the continued students' development helping students to arrange their study time and material to learn so that they can really see that there is always room for improvement. In addition, we can enhance students' motivation by well-presented and well laid out materials.

6. Make the correction learning-centered.

Correction of home assignment should be learning-centered rather than teaching - centered. It should focus on motivating students to develop their own strategies for learning through home assignment [4, p.67]. There is no better way for students to see the value of home assignment as to remember to correct home assignment every time a lecturer gives it. Otherwise, students may think that the lecturer is not responding to their effort, or they might prefer to study another subject next time. If the time a lecturer planned for home assignment has been taken by another activity, he/she has to make sure he/she tells the students that he/she is not going to correct the home assignment during the class, and informs when he/she will do it. A lecturer should not forget to ask for students' participation when correcting it.

Teacher-centered homework correction can be monotonous and disparaging to the students. Home assignment correction can also lead to negative competition. Lecturers should be careful not to praise too much when students get it correct or the less confident students won't share their answers. We should be ready to remind our students that they can learn from their mistakes. We also point out that lecturers have to be flexible when planning the time to correct home assignment. The habit of correcting home assignment the first or last thing in class can perhaps explain some student delays or early departures.

It should be underlined that lecturers have to be able to resist the temptation to over-correct in class or fill every silence. It is necessary for students to get used to speak in front of the audience. You will never learn to swim if you don't take your armbands off.

7. Be democratic with home assignment.

By setting up the criteria for interaction, the innovative lecturer has to guarantee that everyone (we mean a democratic classroom) receives equal opportunities to use the language through his/her home assignment. Both punishment and reward can work as palliatives. Some

lecturers give a lot of homework when the students are not prepared well or give extra marks/points for those who do the assignment. One or the other attitude can make the students think of home assignment as not an important or challenging activity that helps their learning process. So lecturers should be democratic to establish behavioral criteria/parameters and engendering equality.

8. Reinforcement.

Give students feedback on the home assignment enabling them to see their own progress and achievements by providing answer keys and encourage them to evaluate and assess their own home assignments.

9. Balanced approach to the time of giving home assignment.

When designing a home assignment, it is important to strike a balance between content of the material given in class and the time of giving home assignment. From students' school experience they get used that explanation of home assignment is always at the end of the class and it focuses the students' attention on leaving, not on the assignment that is asked to be done. According to students when a lecturer says the words home assignment, students seem to start to get ready to leave. That is the reason why we advise to vary the time of giving the assignment relying on the content of the textbook/program/course/class, so that students can take their time making notes and/or understanding the assignment.

Content-based explanation of the home assignment and content-based home assignment itself provide means for doing home assignment more vibrant environment for learning and interaction in language classrooms of democratic type.

Thus, we changed some of our attitudes to home assignment and it helped us a lot. When we introduce home assignment (task and correction) as part of the classroom routine, and as a systematic activity, students start to make it a habit. We have noticed that students are more comfortable about home assignment, and they do not seem pressured doing it. When they do not do it, instead of hiding it from us, they usually tell us why they did not. We figure out if the reason was a true one, or a good excuse for not doing it. Students need to be aware why they don't do home assignment, and take the responsibility for it. We believe that students' interest in home assignment will depend on the lecturer's credit to it and on the effort in planning, presenting and working with it. Students' habits reflect the lecturer's attitudes. We have highlighted that a well-designed home assignment helps students learn, revise, review, improve, test and assess their knowledge and also encourages students to be autonomous.

We would like to share some ideas that have helped us motivate students to do their home assignment. We are introducing self-directed projects for lecturers and students to pay extra attention to this peculiar kind of home assignment. The presentation itself which is considered to be a key element of any project will not be discussed in this article as we concentrate mainly upon routine preparatory project work outside the classroom.

There are various projects (individual tasks) by means of which lecturers are able to involve their students in real world, interesting activities that will open them the doors to the big world and provide them with the opportunity to interact in the group, to share their ideas, and to help each other deal with specific problems. Besides, such kind of work brings personal satisfaction, self-confidence, gives students a chance to be creative and imaginative through their home assignment in the form of a project.

Individualizing learning through self-directed projects (as an example of rather challenging home assignment) is a motivation factor because it places extra responsibility on the shoulders of the students [5, p.8]. The main component of the course is how to learn in order to learn independently. The autonomy component can be present in studying activities to meet short term educational goals and can be regarded as a complex cyclic process that directs one's own learning/teaching entirely and involves setting goals, thinking, planning, making decisions, reflecting and reviewing. In this case students are constantly taking control of their learning and doing many things outside the classroom. They also actively participate in learning from each other. What is more in self-directed project based learning students work:

- to solve challenging problems that are authentic and often interdisciplinary;

- to learn how to approach a problem;
- to decide what activities to pursue;
- to gather information from a variety of sources;
- to synthesize, analyze and derive knowledge from gathered information;
- to demonstrate and communicate their newly-acquired knowledge.

Moreover the ability to work with little or no external assistance may even become the fifth skill in language learning. It can also be a rewarding process for both lecturer and students especially if we have to work with mixed-ability classes and in most cases we do work with such classes. Finally, the need for developing greater autonomy in language learning can be seen as one facet of lifelong learning, in which each individual effectively makes decisions about which learning path to take. The course of self-directed projects as a kind of very challenging and meaningful home assignment is worth trying even if the lecturers feel uncomfortable relinquishing their traditional roles as language experts and providers of knowledge.

Although some authors insist on voluntary participation of students in such activities, we practice it not being voluntary, that is, every student in the group completes a self-directed project.

Being entrusted with more demanding and stimulating tasks and activities students are encouraged to choose a project for their home assignment that is interesting to them and thus they usually derive more profit. The idea of choosing a project by the student correlates with our suggestions (see suggestion 4). Since students learn to communicate better if they are presented with language learning stimulating activities we propose the ideas for projects related to future professional interest of the students.

Under the program our students draw up contracts with the lecturer to work independently on different language-enhancing activities outside of class and complete over the course of one semester. The type of activity undertaken as well as the amount of time to be expended on the activity is specified in the contract that is kept by the lecturer until the end of the contract period. The guidelines we provide to the students have proved effective in helping them clarify what they want to do and what they can realistically complete within the time limits imposed. In fact, all of the projects prepared by our students involve several skills. Projects do not have to be done by individual students, some pairs or groups of students may complete them.

The range of possible projects is quite broad, and many of the student-developed topics are interesting and even unique. We suggest different project topics to the students, organized by language skills (reading, listening, writing and speaking).

Reading

Reading literature, as well as talking and writing about it is both an effective and a cognitive process. Literary texts are a valuable source of emotional and personal experience. By the cognitive aspect we mean analysis of words, structures, discourse, content and interpretation. To read is to select bits and pieces and put them together in a meaningful whole. Students commit to read and summarize what they have read in writing or in discussion with the lecturer a specified number of times outside the classroom to be able to make a well prepared presentation in the classroom. Keeping a vocabulary notebook in which they enter all the words is a must. This notebook is presented to the lecturer periodically during the semester. Students can choose to read anything they want from books, periodicals, or the Internet.

Writing

For this project the student writes about 350 words in a diary each week, allows the lecturer to read and indicate errors at least every other week, and, finally hands in the correct version of the diary at the end of the semester. The students may write about anything they like, most write about their daily activities and their thoughts, feelings, and problems as the semester progresses, while some include poems or stories. Students' motivation and enthusiasm also increase when they make their contribution and ideas in their written product.

Peer correction under lecturer's guidance as a kind of the group-work technique is also possible to use as it creates good social relationships in the group with more opportunities for

student-student interaction and improvement of their English. Assessment by others provides an external, objective measure of the same knowledge, skills and achievement.

The most convincing argument in favor of the procedure is that most of the students demonstrate marked improvement in later pieces of writing and exams.

Speaking

Students attend the weekly meetings of the debate club. They are expected to participate as part of a debate team several times during the semester, while at other meetings they listen to the debates and join the follow-up discussions. By speaking at the meetings, students lessen their anxiety and develop their communication strategies that can be considered to be essential for successful interaction in real working environment and for the building and development of self confidence. Taking turns are not acceptable but risk taking and initiative taking are encouraged. The challenge that lecturers and students face is how to make the speaking experience an emotionally positive one for students as far as it is proved that feelings and emotions are crucial to the process of learning and to creating a successful learning environment. Sometimes it is difficult for students to start in spite of all their preparation, knowledge, feeling, interests. In order to help students a lecturer can act as a volunteer sharing his/ her opinion first. In this case a lecturer can present a provocative issue. So here we mean usage of not only linguistic factors but also such extra linguistic ones as social roles of the students participating in a debate and the place and the time of the communication act. Thus, communicative behavior is always conditioned by the situation and therefore we should work hard in order to achieve the acceptability or appropriateness of any oral or written message.

Listening

Generally all listening activities can be subdivided into three types at while-listening stage. The first of these helps listeners check the gist or general meaning; the second challenges more detailed understanding; the third deals with extracting specific information.

Working individually over the projects, students try to write down the exact words spoken in 15 minutes of a video. They give the first draft of the script to the lecturer, who indicates errors. Students then prepare a typed copy of the script with gaps for certain words so that it can be used as a cloze listening activity in future classes. Similar projects may be proposed for film scripts.

It is worth mentioning that listening is covered in the projects both individually and as an integrated skill with reading, writing and speaking.

The projects described above are intended to be completed by the students outside of class, but the lecturer support is an important factor in the success of their self-directed learning. The role of a lecturer in promoting autonomous learning becomes that of a guide, organizer, facilitator and resource person.

A lecturer should be prepared to:

- help students at the preparation stage;
- create a partnership;
- identify goals, learning strategies and resources;
- set objectives;
- offer a variety of options for successful performance;
- provide examples of self-projects;
- give students assessment criteria;
- create an atmosphere of openness and trust to promote better performance.

Projects as home assignment enable students to establish social and working relationships in other words they gain communicative competence.

Communicative competence has become the language-learning objective and increasing currency in Ukraine during the last decades. National Curriculum and any language program take into account the cognitive and socio-cultural needs of the students. Nowadays language lecturers have to accept gaining communicative competence as their primary goal of the process of language learning and teaching.

In retrospect, we can see that projects helped greatly to reinforce students' desire to learn the language and to sustain enthusiasm throughout the semester or even the course. Projects were well-suited for our students' needs to practice meaningful communication and to develop language awareness through certain extent of students' autonomy.

It has been proved that most students are unlikely to learn everything they need to succeed in a class that meets for only a limited number of hours weekly. Involving students in preparing self-directed projects as home assignment we provide more opportunities for using and interacting in English and help them gain confidence and become independent language learners. In such a way students are engaged in the process of continued learning that even develops better brains. So we suggest brain-compatible teaching via self-directed projects as a kind of home assignment. Projects have to become one of the main components in any program.

By acknowledging the lack of theory and practice in the field of outside classroom activities and examining the reasons for it, our objective here is to stimulate constructive research to promote project-based method, its design and task sequence. As the final outcome of any project we may recommend presentation as classroom activity at the end of the term.

More research is definitely needed, but we hope that our general framework and some guidelines for working over projects as a kind of home assignment will act as a catalyst to trigger further ideas for lecturers to focus more on creating challenging and meaningful activities for students in the classroom and outside the classroom.

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