

Running head: PROJECT-BASED LEARNING: RESPONDING TO 8TH GRADERS'  
LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL NEEDS

How can the use of Project Based Learning respond to the linguistic and cultural needs in a group  
of 8th graders at the Institucion Educativa San Juan Bosco?

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### **Abstract**

This action research project was conducted taking into account the linguistic and cultural needs of an eighth grade group at I.E San Juan Bosco. Project Based Learning Approach drove all the actions for working on students' needs during two terms. The method used for the analysis was the triangulation of three different sources of information, that is, an interview to the cooperating teacher, a survey to students and, a personal journal in which I kept track of every class during the two terms. This research project evidenced the positive influence Problem Based Learning has on students' performance, as well as its contributions to make teamwork possible for language learning.

*Key words:* Project Based Learning Approach, linguistic and cultural needs.

### **Degree Requirements**

This action research project is a requirement for pursuing a Teaching Degree in the Foreign Languages Teaching Program (English-French) at the School of Language of Universidad de Antioquia, in Medellin, Colombia.

### **Acknowledgment**

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Secondly, I would also like to thank my cooperating teacher, Jerson Avendaño, who was also an important guide for the implementation of the actions inside the classroom. I want to thank all my students too for becoming the central part of the process, for enjoying the class and making this project come true.

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### **Preface**

This action research project was conducted at I.E. San Juan Bosco with a group of 8<sup>th</sup> graders. The observation, the implementation of an action and the reflection upon this action, became an opportunity to understand that Project Based Learning as an alternative approach that could be used to respond to the linguistic and cultural needs of students in secondary education.

During the development of actions, students were given the opportunity to work in groups. They learned to negotiate meaning, respect others opinions, take a role in the team, improve their communication skills and, stand a position in favor of informed decisions. I think this project was not only an opportunity for my students to improve different skills, but also an opportunity to enrich my professional development.

### **School Context**

This action research project took place at I.E. San Juan Bosco which was located in the northeastern area of the city in Campo Valdes neighborhood. The school housed a student population that roughly went up to a thousand girls. The administrative staff consisted of a principal, two coordinators, thirty-four teachers, a psychologist, an assistant teacher and five nuns from the school religious community. The school had two shifts in order to embrace the whole student community. Students from 5<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> grade attended classes in the morning and students from pre-school to 4<sup>th</sup> grade in the afternoon. Physically speaking, the school was a four-story building with twenty-three classrooms, two computer rooms, a small library, a chemistry lab, an office for the psychologist and for the assistant teacher, a small teacher's lounge. It also had a chapel that was used as a meeting hall for school activities, a large patio with two sport courts, one for elementary and the other one for high school. It also had a cafeteria and a snack station.

The classroom where I conducted this research project was located on the second floor just across from the main yard. It was large enough and equipped with enough chairs to shelter a group of 40 students comfortably. There were two big windows, a video projector, and a personal pc for teacher use only with access to internet. The classroom was also equipped with a teacher desk, a bookcase in the back of the classroom, a chalkboard and a white board.

The students involved in this research belonged to 8B group; it consisted of 38 teenagers whose ages ranged from 13 to 15 years old. Most of them lived nearby the school or neighborhoods around the school. They came from strata 1 to 3 and some from 4. In general, they came from middle and low working class families. They frequently had a good attitude toward the English class but sometimes they became restless with a lazy attitude toward classwork. On

top of this, they hardly completed their worksheets or filling in blank exercises. They were interested in music and they wanted to have more connections with English language.

My cooperating teacher holds a degree from the Foreign Languages Teaching Program at Universidad de Antioquia. He has worked as an English teacher for this Institution since 2003. I could observe that his classes were mostly based on grammar explanations, memorization of vocabulary and translation of short texts or sentences. Sometimes they went to the library to complete some exercises from a textbook provided by the Educational School Board of the city called "English please". He speaks English and French. He believes that grammar is important to learn a language.

### **Problem Statement**

Since I started to observe this class, many issues became part of my major concerns, that is to say, students finished class activities in short time, and some students seemed to reject or dislike English as the teacher speaks in class. On the other hand, something that called my attention was the use of Spanish to explain grammar structures. The grammar translation method was still a prevalent methodology in secondary education. Traditional methodologies still permeate language-learning experiences in public schools making English classes monotonous and boring for students. These kinds of teacher-centered classes do not really respond to students' needs and interests. Worksheets and class activities were related to topics and themes hardly connected to students real lives.

Besides the methodology issue, something that also called my attention was the fact that students are not used to work in groups. Most of the work done in class was to be completed individually. Homework and class assignments were given just to collect grades, not to have them



learn or use English language. Students were reluctant to speak English. They always ended up speaking Spanish in class.

### **Theoretical Framework**

After having explored some literature related to my research issue, I decide to come up with the following concepts that would frame the theories upon which I support this project. First, I present the concepts of linguistic and cultural needs; second what they represent in the English language classroom, especially the role they play in the learning of English Language, and finally, I define what the project based learning approach is about.

As for the concept of the linguistic needs, it is necessary to explore what linguistic competence is about. Noam Chomsky quoted by Hamad (2004) defines linguistic competence as the ability “to produce an appropriate sentence on a given occasion” (p.176). Linguistic competence is related to behavior and language use, it means, how grammar, syntax, and vocabulary of a language is used in the correct context. Therefore, in order for students to develop their linguistic competence, they need to work with real social topics that allow them use and learn the language needed to address that topic.

Concerning cultural needs, it is necessary to understand the role culture plays in the process of language learning. Hsin (2008) affirms that there is an interrelationship between language and culture “( ) ... language is used to express people’s cultural thoughts, beliefs and to communicate; on the other hand, culture is embedded in the language” (p. 2). According to Brown quoted by Hsin (2008) “... language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing

the significance of either language or culture.”(p. 2). Then, as culture is part of a language, taking cultural topics for learning it, is an intrinsic part of the process.

For this reason, when working on linguistic and cultural needs in class, it is necessary to bring cultural topics to be study in class. At the same time, they can improve students´ linguistic competences. Students can learn language, about language and through language. Language is used to learn content, that is, to learn about their world, about what they become interested in.

Project Based Learning (PBL) has emerged as an interesting approach to learn language through content. From my perspective, I find it very feasible to help me respond to my high school students´ linguistic and cultural needs. This is an instructional approach has been used to promote cooperative learning. According to Goodman & Stivers (2010) it is focused on a constructivist learning perspective “(...) in which students construct their own knowledge” [through] “( ) ...activities that match as nearly as possible the real-world tasks” (p. 2, 4).

Hallermann & Larmer, (2011) mention some benefits of PBL such as “Students who work on projects show increased motivation and engagement in their studies. Students understand, apply, and retain information. Puts students in a position to use the knowledge that they get.” (p. 2) students increase “critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity and innovation” (p. 3). They show more responsibility and become aware about their own learning process; they have better behavior and become more inquisitive and productive concerning language learning. They also learn that cooperation is crucial for developing group projects.

Students learn to work in teams and “the classroom has an atmosphere that tolerates error and change” (Hallermann & Larmer 2011, p. 4). They reflect on how well they worked in a collaborative group and how well they contributed, negotiated, listened, and welcomed other group members’ ideas. Students also self-evaluate their own projects, efforts, motivations, interests, and productivity levels. According to Bell (2010), students become critical friends by giving constructive feedback to each other, which helps them become aware of their own strengths and improve their interactions with each other (p. 43).

Considering that PBL implementation in school has brought a lot benefits such as the development of responsibility, independence, and discipline in relation to traditional methods (Bell, 2010, p. 40). I have decided to use it to see if it can help me answer the following research question.

### **Research Question**

How can the use of Project Based Learning Approach respond to the linguistic and cultural needs of an 8th grade English class at Institucion Educativa San Juan Bosco?

### **Objectives**

#### **General objective**

- To respond to the cultural and linguistic needs of an 8th grade English class at Institución Educativa San Juan Bosco with the use of Project Based Learning Approach.

#### **Specific objective**

- To identify the stages of the project based learning approach that better respond to students’ cultural and linguistic needs.

- To describe the responding to students' cultural and linguistic needs with the project based learning approach.
- To analyze the advantages project-based learning approach has on developing cultural and linguistic aspects in the English class.

### **Action Plan**

This action research project was mainly composed of two stages: a diagnosis stage, and an acting stage. The diagnosis stage was developed from July to November 2017. In this period, I attended the English classes of a group of seventh graders. I kept track of observations in a personal journal written along the development of this project. These observations were based on the school, the students, the teacher and the interactions given in class. In order to complement the information collected in this journal, I implemented a brief survey, which was answered individually to get to know more about students' perceptions and feelings towards the English class. Based on this, a topic for the action research project was framed and more related information was gathered. This information included conversations with the practicum teachers and the CT as well as the review of related literature.

At the beginning of the first school term, I started to implement my pedagogical strategies such as negotiation of the class rules (like the students' and teacher's role) and designing lessons. I took into account all the information collected in the first stage to design my lesson plans. It was done based on project-based learning that may respond to my students' linguistic and cultural needs as they learn English language.

Regarding the second school term, I implemented the actions focused on students' linguistic and cultural needs. During the process of the project, students worked in groups; I decided to apply some data collecting techniques such as an interview to the cooperating teacher, a survey to the students and, I continued keeping track of my lessons in a journal.

### **Development of Actions**

I began the development of my action plan in late February; it was the second semester of the practicum. I kept track of every lesson in a personal journal to describe my students' reactions to the methodology implemented. This register was crucial not only for the analysis and reflection process, but also for the development of the action plan. In February, I did an icebreaker activity to start my interventions; students missed some classes this month, so I began to implement the first part of the project in March.

My cooperating teacher gave me the topics for the term based on the school curriculum. I structured my project with my practicum advisor. The project was organized in some steps following the PBL approach structure. The first step was about "I do it", as a demonstration or an invitation to work; the second was "we do it", where students and the teacher worked together; the third one was "we do it together" where students worked in groups and finally, "you do it alone", where students work individually at home.

Students decided to place the final product of the project through the design of a nature magazine. The topic they chose was endangered animals. Students were divided in twelve groups with around 4 members per group. I assigned different roles to each student in the groups such as leader, prop-manager and secretaries. They chose the role that they wanted to play based on their

strengths into the group. Then, each group came up with their questions to start searching what they wanted to know about the topic. In addition, I organized the schedule of the process, I gave instructions of the steps for designing the magazine and I brought an example as a guide.

In April, students started to design the cover and the first texts about an endangered animal. Each group had a representative animal and four questions as base for writing four paragraphs. During that month, they had some class where I explained the way to describe an animal and they did additional exercises to use vocabulary, simple present tense, but each exercise moved around the main topic.

In May, the groups wrote the four paragraphs, we edited the paragraphs by correcting some mistakes. They designed the last part of the magazine and made a video to present their project. They had the chance to give their opinions about the project and about the advantages found by developing them. In that month, I implemented a survey with them and an interview to teacher. Despite the missing classes, the project was carried out totally and students successfully worked in teams during both terms.

### **Findings and Interpretations**

After triangulating the information gathered at different times and from different sources (Johnson, 2005, p. 83), I decided to follow a three-step process proposed by Parson and Brown (2002, as cited by Mertler, 2006, p.125) to conduct the analysis of this study: organization, description and interpretation.

The organization step involved a reduction of information through the development of a categorization system, often referred to as coding scheme, which was used to group data that provided similar types of information. I accomplished this by searching for words or phrases that

begin to repeat themselves throughout the scripts. I used different color markers to organize the emerging categories.

After developing the categories, I continued with the second step, which consisted of describing the main features or characteristics of the categories resulting from the coding of data. In this stage, I connected and related the information gathered from the different sources.

The final step was to interpret. During this stage, I examined events, behaviors and other observations for relationships, contradictions and similarities. The idea was to look for aspects of the data that helped me answer my research question. Through this analysis process, I decided to come up with four final categories, which have been identified as follows: Language Learning, Students perceptions of PBL, and Advantages of PBL.

### **Language Learning**

Concerning this category, I surprisingly found that my students preferred to learn the language with translation. Seven of twelve groups answered in the survey that they preferred learning English through translation exercises. They said, “() ...after all, translation helps to understand more...” On the other hand, the teacher affirm during the interview that:

"... The methodology, to which we have them get used to, is the one based on workshops (...) I devote my time to master the classes where I am the one who takes the control (...) students are not used to maintaining roles or being assigned specific roles."

Even though, I wrote in the personal journal, “unfortunately some students were used to work with a behavioral methodology and I found that this is the best system to get them worked in class.” (Journal entry, April 12). It reflects the dominant and traditional methodology implemented in public education where students usually learn the language translating written

texts. It is obvious here that students have not had the chance to be exposed to alternative ways to learn the English language.

I found that TBL challenged my students to expand their vocabulary. They implemented new strategies to comprehend written texts. They also had the chance to increase their phonological awareness as they learned to pronounce new words. For example, group number ten explained: “( )...when you investigate, you see new things.” and group number 1 says: “We have learned the meaning of new words and little by little we are learning to pronounce”. On to my journal notes, I registered, “Now I see how they have improved their linguistic skills through writing, workshop and research.” According to Stoller (1997) “Students improve their listening and note-taking skills, reading proficiency, accuracy and fluency in speaking, writing abilities, study skills, and critical thinking skills.” (p. 2). This means that language learning improves with projects because they work grammar, syntax, and vocabulary based on a cultural topic, thereby, the language is used in a specific context. PBL works directly on their linguistic competences, however, as Stoller states (1997) “Project work focuses on content learning rather than on specific language targets. Real-world subject matter and topics of interest to students can become central to projects.” Therefore, project-based learning works on their linguistic needs, based on real issues related to them, and not on the characteristics of the language.

### **Students' perception of TBL**

I found that some of my students could notice that the Project contributed to their learning of the language. It was amusing for them since they were working on a topic of their interest.



Students expressed many positive opinions about their project, some of the comments were:

“We think it's interesting and very funny because it helps us learn about animals”. “The project is very interactive, because it teaches us about the extinction of animals”. “We think it's interesting and very funny because it helps us learn about animals and is a practical way to learn English.” I registered in my journal on March 8<sup>th</sup>, “The majority of students did the research about the topic and some of them began to ask me more information about the topic (...) “I think when they learned more about the topic, the interest increased.”

All these opinions show how the project managed to motivate students, according to Stoller (1997) this is some of the results when working with this approach: “Project work is potentially motivating, stimulating, empowering, and challenging. It usually results in building student confidence, self-esteem, and autonomy as well as improving students' language skills, content learning, and cognitive abilities”. (p. 2). Sepulveda (2016) states a similar opinion: “Projects can engage students in a way that other types of classroom activities generally do not, which leads to better managed classes and more effective learning”. (p.1). Consequently, as it can be noticed, the purpose for the same class was accomplished with the project: “waking up interest on students about the English class and the cultural topics.”

On the other hand, I also found that some girls were resistant and reluctant to accomplish the commitments of the Project. For example, when I asked them, if they considered that with the development of the project have managed to learn English, one group said, no, and explained: “because we think that this project has nothing to do with English, since it is only talking about

an animal and writing where it lives, what it eats and all that”. In my personal journal, I registered on March 8<sup>th</sup> my opinion about that: “I think that they have a lot of linguistic needs and this rejection for the English language is a reflection of the lack of contact with it”. It seems to be due to their age and a developing attitude to the school. Some prejudices about learning English influenced their way of learning.

### **Advantages of TBL**

I found that the implementation of TBL helped my students developed their skills to work in groups. They learned to share, wait, discuss, outline and persuade. They also developed the ability to think, as they needed to write the text for the magazine edition process.

According to my students, the part of the project they enjoyed the most was the stage where they had to exchange their ideas. They reported, “We have felt good because we can already learn and respect the opinions of others”. Concerning group work and magazine design they said “...very good because we can socialize with the project”, “we know how to distribute tasks for the theme and learn to live in a group”. According to Bell (2010) Students learn the fundamental skills of productive communication, respect for others, and teamwork while generating ideas together. Negotiating how collectively solve a problem is also part of PBL. ( p. 41).

“They reflect on how well they worked in a collaborative group and how well they contributed, negotiated, listened, and welcomed other group members’ ideas. Students also self-evaluate their own projects, efforts, motivations, interests, and productivity levels. Students

become critical friends by giving constructive feedback to each other, which helps them become aware of their own strengths and improve on their interactions with each other” (p. 43).

Sepulveda (2016) expressed something similar about the benefits of working in-groups: “Projects are great learning tools because they challenge students to work together, think in new ways, use a variety of linguistic, content, and social skills, and incorporate creativity.” (p.1). I could infer that the implementation of the project had a success in this aspect because the positive comments and result support it. Students learned to work in groups. They learned to take responsibilities and make decisions in collaboration. They learned how to play an important role in the group by contributing with meaningful ideas

I found that my students learned to work in groups. They learned to take responsibilities and make decisions in collaboration. They learned how to play an important role in the group by contributing with meaningful ideas. Although my CT said that students were not used to have roles: “The work by projects is interesting, in that the problem is that the students are not accustomed to maintain the roles and to work with specific roles”. Indeed, students had some group problems, some of them had a hard time maintaining their role within the team, they managed to overcome those problems and improved their way of working as a team. As mentioned in the following quote: “Students drive their own learning through inquiry, as well as work collaboratively to research and create projects that reflect their knowledge” (Bell, p. 39).

I found that TBL contributed to their learning process in general since they had the change to expand the cultural perspectives of different contexts where animals live. Even, they

express in the survey: “( ) ...we think it is interesting and very funny because it helps us learn about animals and it is a practical way to learn English.” In relation with this point, Stoller (1997) presents an opinion about how Project work is a natural extension of content-based instruction, she claims: “Content-based instruction allows for the natural integration of sound language teaching practices such as alternative means of assessment, apprenticeship learning, cooperative learning, integrated-skills instruction, project work, scaffolding, strategy training, and the use of graphic organizers (p. 2). This is an evidence on how students learn the language using TBL in class.

### **Conclusions**

Considering that, my research question was focused on describing how project based learning can respond to the linguistic and cultural needs of a group of 8th graders at the Institucion Educativa San Juan Bosco, I can say that results of the project proved that students improved their linguistic and cultural needs. This project gradually gave excellent tools to students for learning to research, to work in groups, to be more creative, to improve their vocabulary and other syntactic aspects of language; and their knowledge about a cultural topic increased significantly.

It could be determined that the phase of Project Based Learning that respond to the linguistic needs was the work in-group, because they achieved to improve their social skills while they were working their linguistic needs. They engaged themselves in order accomplished with their roles. They became more tolerant with other people's ideas and learned to solve disagreements. Each member of the group contributed meaningfully with a different part of the project.

Students worked more motivated with the project, presented excellent papers and they look more integrated as friends and as mates. They increased their creativity and expanded their knowledge about cultural topics. The influence of the project was positive for them because they were more interested in culture and obtaining environmental knowledge.

### **Reflections**

My practice was a very enriching experience at a professional level because I learned other practical ways of teaching that can motivate students and teach through other methodologies that can give them more autonomy and I will give more pleasure for teaching.

I worked with a group of 38 students, it was a large group and I think that this type of conditions make the teaching work more complex and it is more difficult to fully meet the needs of the students, but with the correct methodology, they could have more autonomy and in charge of their own knowledge and learning.

I could also say that as teachers, we have to be in constant updating and learning in order to be fed back and doing self-analysis; not to see our work like that, just a simple work, but as our vocation, our means to educate and influence in a significant way the lives of our students.

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## Appendix A

### Students' survey

**1. Como prefieres aprender Inglés:**

- a. Traduciendo
- b. Completando talleres
- c. Ejercicios de gramática
- d. Mediante proyectos

**2. Que piensas del proyecto que están realizando en la clase de Inglés?**

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**3. Consideras que con el desarrollo del proyecto has logrado aprender inglés? Si \_\_\_\_  
No \_\_\_\_ Por qué?**

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**4. Que fase del proyecto ha contribuido más a tu aprendizaje**

- a. Investigación individual
- b. Trabajo en grupo y diseño de la revista
- c. Redacción de los artículos
- d. Presentación del proyecto

**5. Como se han sentido en clase con el proyecto de Inglés?**

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**6. Has observado si tus compañeras de equipo o de la clase han aprendido más ingles con el proyecto?**

Si \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ Por qué?

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**7. Como calificarías el desempeño de tus compañeras en el proyecto:**



Lider \_\_\_\_\_

Utilera \_\_\_\_\_

Secretaria \_\_\_\_\_

8. **Consideras que el proyecto te ha dado la oportunidad de aprender más sobre cultura?**

Si \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_

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## **Appendix B**

### **C.T. Interview**

1. Como considera usted que las estudiantes prefieren aprender inglés? Por qué?
2. Qué piensa de la enseñanza del inglés a través de proyectos?
3. Que ventajas o desventajas le ve?
4. En lo que ha observado, considera que esta forma de aprender Inglés responde a las necesidades lingüísticas y culturales en las estudiantes?
5. Ha implementado alguna vez el trabajo por proyectos en sus clases de inglés? Que dificultades o beneficios encontró con esta tipo de metodología?